

# Q & A About Distance Learning

## **Q. What is "distance learning"?**

A. Broadly speaking, distance learning includes any form of study activity where the learners (students, trainees, or workshop participants) and the instructor (faculty member, trainer, or facilitator) are not in the same physical location at the same time.

## **Q. How is a class conducted when the learners and the teacher are not physically together?**

A. These days much of distance learning takes place in specially designed virtual learning spaces on the World Wide Web. Sometimes these learning spaces are set up to support real-time interaction with audio and video interfaces. Such classes require that all participants log on at the same time and become adept at using some fairly sophisticated technology to complete their connection to the class. However, AACRAO online courses employ asynchronous, text-based conferencing, which means participants may read and contribute to class discussions whenever it is convenient for them, using the same technology they do when they e-mail or browse the Internet. All course materials are available online and can be downloaded by participants as they need them.

## **Q. What is the advantage of asynchronous interaction from a learner's perspective?**

A. Convenience is a major advantage. Asynchronous interaction is ideal for creating learning communities of people who live and work in different time zones and whose schedules do not easily accommodate regularly scheduled meeting times. Although asynchronous learning exchanges are delayed by minutes, hours, or days -- depending on when someone logs on to read or contribute -- the class is always accessible to anyone who has a computer with an Internet connection and an up-to-date browser. People get insights at all odd hours. If someone has an idea or insight to contribute in the middle of the night, they may log on and do so. It's very flexible.

## **Q. Are there other advantages to asynchronous distance learning?**

A. Yes. Discussion tends to be free-flowing and conducive to participation. In real-time classes only one person can "speak" at a time, just as is the case in a traditional classroom. In the asynchronous virtual classroom, everyone can weigh in on a discussion whenever they have something to say.

## **Q. This sounds like it could be chaotic? What makes it a learning experience?**

A. The faculty are there to guide the discussion and ensure that it doesn't get chaotic. This is not like a chat room or newsgroup. The quality of interaction tends to be quite high. Each person participating in an asynchronous discussion can learn from everyone else's contributions. Participants frequently end up in dialogue with one another, exchanging ideas and bringing a variety of perspectives to the discussion. Because the interaction occurs asynchronously, participants have time to reflect on what they want to say and compose it thoughtfully before they post their message. The act of composing a message is an important part of the active learning experience.

**Q. Who is the ideal participant in this type of learning activity?**

A. In the context of online professional development, those who usually benefit most are self-motivated, self-disciplined adults who are committed to being active in the learning experience on a regular basis. Distance learning requires more from participants than traditional forms of in-person classes and workshops, in which the learner's role could be likened to that of a spectator or audience member; all they have to do is show up and listen quietly to a presentation. However, in order for distance learning to be effective, each participant must be willing to take an active role in moving his or her own learning forward with the support of fellow learners and the moderator. This can be a very powerful form of adult education. It respects – even leverages – each person's life experience, their individual goals, and their need to apply new knowledge immediately in ways they will find useful. Many students log on from their offices. They are able to try out some new techniques they read about while the course is going on and process their experience with other participants. It will be a whole new experience for most participants.