What To Do When the Modality Of A Learning Experience is Unclear:

Guidelines for Creating Multidimensional Learning Experiences

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Introduction

One of the most prominent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is the ongoing adoption and desire for technology use in teaching and learning. The mix of technologies used in postsecondary instruction has varied and communication with students about their instructional experience has confused them more often than faculty and administrators like to admit.

This paper builds on a series of WCET works over the past year on digital learning definitions, particularly on the practices and policies surrounding the different types of instructional modalities used. The digital learning definitions series includes:

- Defining Key Terms Related to Digital Learning – a summary report of a survey of agreement on key digital learning terms.
- Defining Different Modes of Learning: Resolving Confusion and Contention Through Consensus – a paper that appeared in the OLC *Online Learning Journal*.
- INFOGRAPHIC – Agreement with Digital Learning Definitions – a summary of the survey results that show the surprising level of agreement on definitions.
- INFOGRAPHIC – Agreement with Digital Learning Definitions, International Comparison – a summary of survey results including Canadian responses.
- Helping Students Prepare for Digital Learning: Providing Information at the Time of Enrollment – a WCET *Frontiers* post highlighting results from a student focus group in which students were less interested in definitions and very interested in being informed at the time of enrollment about where, when, and how the course would be offered.
- Defining 'Distance Education' in Policy: Difference Among Federal, State, and Accreditation Agencies – a sample of the differences in definitions and the challenges those variations can cause for colleges and universities in complying with them.
- Defining Key Terms Related to Digital Learning – Student, Faculty, and Technology Trends – further survey results on the uses of technologies.

Find all of the WCET digital learning definitions resources at: https://wcet.wiche.edu/practice/digital-learning-definitions.

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WCET is pleased to continue its partnership with Nicole Johnson, Executive Director of the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association who authored or co-authored several of the works cited above. WCET contracted with her to craft this paper with opinions and recommendations based on our previous findings. Kathryn Kerensky of SAN and Russ Poulin of WCET guided her on the focus of the paper, suggested practitioners to interview who are tackling the application of definitions, and wrote some of the examples included.

WCET acknowledges and gratefully thanks:

- Kelvin Thompson (Vice Provost for Online Strategy and Teaching Innovation, University of Louisville) and Ilona Hajdu (Senior Associate Director, Office of Online Education, Indiana University) for their guidance and input on digital learning definitions work on behalf of the WCET Steering Committee. Thank you to Kelvin Thompson for also sharing additional thoughts directly with Dr. Johnson.
- Kevin Corcoran (Associate Vice President of Digital Learning, Academic & Student Affairs, Connecticut State Colleges & Universities) and Heather Guevara (Dean of Online Learning, Academic and Student Affairs Technology & Innovation, Portland Community College) for agreeing to be interviewed about their experiences.
- We thank the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association and Bay View Analytics for their contributions to WCET's previous works that helped to inform this paper.

Copyright and Additional Resources

Suggested citation:

Johnson, N. (2023). What to do when the modality of a learning experience is unclear: Guidelines for categorizing multidimensional learning experiences. WCET.

For related resources, see https://wcet.wiche.edu/practice/digital-learning-definitions/

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What To Do When the Modality Of A Learning Experience Is Unclear:

Guidelines for categorizing multidimensional learning experiences.

Categorizing learning experiences by modality continues to be a challenge within the higher education landscape. Technology integration has permeated learning experiences of all types, leaving the dividing lines between modalities blurred. For instance, what differentiates an in-person learning experience that requires heavy internet technology use from a hybrid course? If a program is delivered mostly online but requires an in-person practicum, should it be categorized as an online or hybrid program? Ultimately, the dichotomy between online and in-person learning is only apparent at the extreme ends of a modality spectrum, with a vast array of multidimensional hybrid and technology-supported learning experiences further muddying the waters.

This paper will present several complex cases, based on real-world examples, where the learning modality is unclear. In the discussion section, the author will provide guidance and recommendations for categorizing and naming learning experiences that do not fit neatly into one category or another.

Understanding Learning Modalities

The term *learning modality* itself carries a variety of meanings. When a person is speaking about modalities, they may have one or more of the following attributes in mind:

- HOW: the manner of instructional delivery and task completion (through in-person interactions or via a digital learning environment).
- WHERE: the physical location of the student and instructor during the learning experience (e.g., on campus, at home)'
-
- WHEN: the timing for learning activities and other interactions (e.g., set class times on campus, synchronous online sessions, asynchronous learning).

For this paper, the term **learning modality** is understood to encompass all these elements and refers to how a student accesses and participates in a learning experience. It is also important to acknowledge that there are many possibilities for varied practices within each learning modality, and it is understandably challenging to communicate all possible variations when speaking in broad terms. We must balance the need to establish common meanings for top-level, modality-related terms with allowances for many variations to occur within each category, which is the crux of the problem facing institutional leaders and policymakers.

> The challenge faced by educators is balancing the need for common definitions of instructional modalities vs. the need to allow for the endless variations faculty will implement within each modality.

In 2022, WCET partnered with Bay View Analytics and the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association to investigate the meanings of commonly used terms related to learning modalities (e.g., online learning, hybrid learning, and in-person learning). The study (Johnson et al., 2022) found that there was widespread consensus on the meaning of these terms, and they put forth a framework for modality categorization (shown below) called the Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum that built upon earlier work by Johnson (2021).

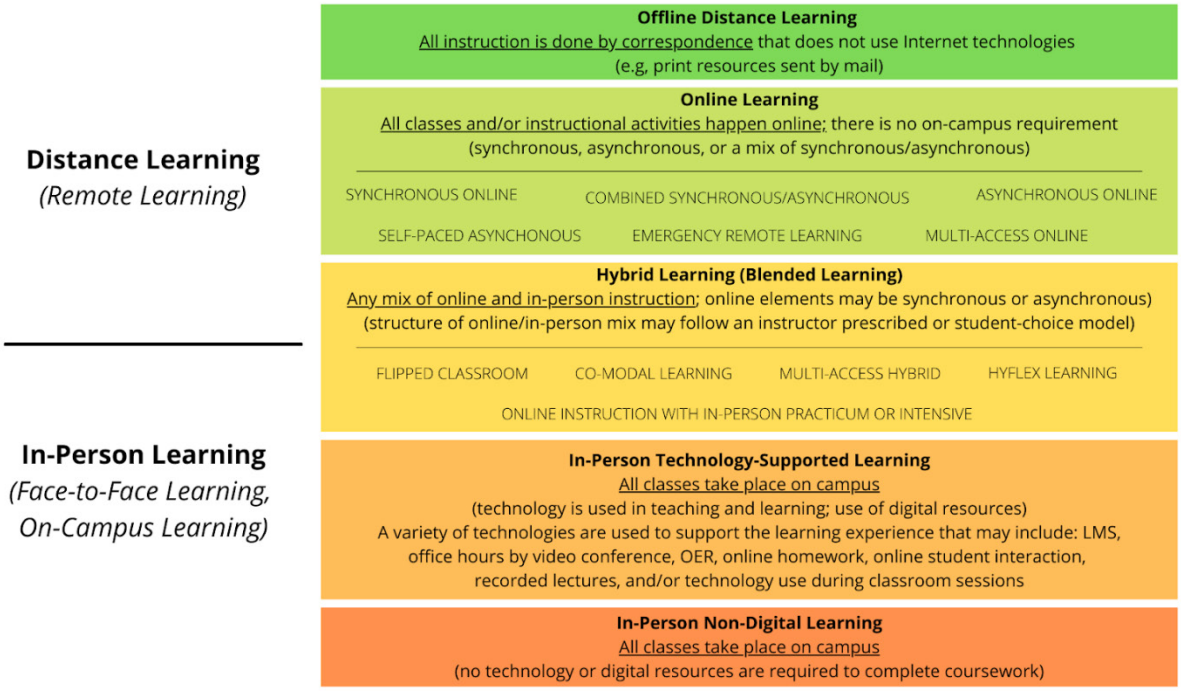

Figure 1: Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum (Johnson et al., 2022)

Johnson (2021) designed the Modes of Learning Spectrum to be non-prescriptive with "big bucket" categories (in-person non-digital learning, in-person technology-supported learning, hybrid learning, online learning, and offline distance learning) that capture the variety of ways that online, hybrid, and in-person learning may manifest in practice. Within each of the big buckets are variations of that modality determined by factors such as synchrony (synchronous, asynchronous, or mixed), student choice (e.g., hyflex learning), teaching methods (e.g., flipped classroom), and technologies used. The following discussion of learning modalities uses the naming conventions and meanings listed in the Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum. The discussion builds upon the Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum and describes how others can apply this framework in practice.

A Post-Dichotomous Learning Landscape

Over the years, online and in-person learning have been positioned as binaries, implying that a fully online learning experience contains no in-person requirements and vice versa. Although a hybrid learning experience describes a mixture of the two binaries, the term still carries the connotation of a quantifiable separation between online and in-person learning elements. Similarly, many perceive the synchrony of learning experiences (asynchronous or synchronous) as being one or the other, with a clear delineation between the two.

In reality, a learning experience often includes a complex interplay of location and timing elements, which is where the contention lies between what constitutes the categorization of a learning experience into one modality instead of another.

This paper aims to support policymakers and institutional leaders in establishing a framework for consistently categorizing learning experiences across institutions. Common approaches to categorization when the lines between modalities are blurred, and their potential pitfalls will be highlighted. The following section presents several complex cases where the learning mode is unclear. The cases represent recurrent modality classification challenges that have emerged in discussions with administrators, faculty, teaching and learning leaders, and policymakers over several years. Following the description of the cases, the paper points out the typical debates related to the classification of complex modalities, using the cases to anchor the discussion. The Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum framework will be applied to the cases to establish guidelines and a common language. The paper concludes with a discussion of challenges, considerations, and recommendations for policymakers.

Complex Cases: Applying the Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum

A key characteristic of hard-to-define learning experiences is their multidimensionality. Although overwhelming agreement exists about what constitutes an online or in-person learning experience at the extreme ends of the spectrum, many learning experiences are not so cut and dry in practice. The cases described in this section illustrate how one modality can bleed into the surrounding modalities on the spectrum, making it challenging, if not impossible, to definitively develop clear lines between them.

Although the scenarios are very different, the underlying challenges are the same: determining what distinguishes one modality from another and creating clarity instead of confusion. One of the primary issues at hand is a lack of consistent standards for classifying learning experiences by modality. For example, there is widespread agreement on what the term hybrid learning means broadly (a mix of online and in-person components); however, contention still arises when trying to consistently name the various experiences that fall under the umbrella of hybrid learning. Different institutions have set nomenclature or branded experiences that they may be reluctant to change.

State, federal, and accreditation policies may also require adherence to set definitions for certain modalities, impacting how a learning experience is coded and named at the institution level. There also may be varying and conflicting definitions for certain types of learning experiences, adding an extra layer of complexity when figuring out the dividing lines between modalities. For example, Kerensky (2023) discussed the differing policy-level definitions for “distance education” in the US from a compliance management perspective. She stated that “institutions risk misreporting data related to distance education due to confusing or conflicting definitions and an increase in expense due to tracking and reporting on different definitions” (p. 3). Student funding or student notification requirements may also be tied to modality, and if the learning experience does not match the funding definition, their funding may be compromised. Considering these institutional idiosyncrasies and reporting requirements, the following cases do not provide a prescriptive blueprint. Rather, the cases will hopefully cause the reader to pause and think about different aspects of categorizing learning experiences by modality through a multidimensional lens.

Three Multidimensional Cases

In all three of the cases below, it is assumed that the multidimensionality of the learning experience is intentional and in the best interest of the students. For this reason, there will not be any discussion about delivering the learning experience differently. Rather, the focus will remain solely on how to categorize differently designed learning experiences and not debate whether they should have been designed that way in the first place.

Case #1: A "Mostly" Online Learning Experience. An institution classifies a program as online; however, there is an in-person practicum requirement that students can complete in their local community. There is no requirement for students to go to campus. Due to the practicum component, there is disagreement about whether the institution should designate this program as online or hybrid.

While debate in this scenario may seem to center on the dividing line between an online and hybrid learning experience, the contention relates to the qualities of a distance learning experience and its permissible variations. A useful way to approach the problem in Case #1 is to recognize that online learning is merely a type of distance learning. Although online learning is, by far, the predominant type of distance education, this case illustrates that other ways of learning from an off-campus location continue to be relevant. A course or program that supplements online learning with an in-person practicum experience in one's local community would still be delivered fully absent of on-campus requirements. Similarly, an online course with an in-person exam at an off-campus proctoring center in one's community could also be classified as a distance learning experience.

A purist approach to classification would require that every learning experience fit neatly and entirely into one of the broader categories in the Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum; however, this approach is not always practical or beneficial. Rather, we should reframe the question.

Those at the heart of the debate may want to ask:

- *Are there requirements (policy or funding) that should guide us when adding any in-person component into an online course or program?*
- *Do these policies dictate re-naming this course for compliance purposes (e.g., referring to the course as hybrid instead of online)?*

It may be simpler and more easily understood by students to use the term online to describe the experience, but the description must make it clear that there is some sort of one-off in-person requirement and make clear the expectations about timing and location for the in-person portion.

As an important aside, some policymakers and institutions attempt to resolve scenarios such as this by taking a percentage approach. They put forth that a course/program/institution can be categorized as online if a certain majority percentage of the delivery is online (the remaining portion can be delivered either online or in person). A percentage approach tends to be problematic and should be discouraged whenever possible because percentage delineations are typically arbitrary, and finding metrics to calculate the percentage of time online with precision has proven difficult in the past.

In other words, if an institution must adhere to a standard that a learning experience must be 80% online to count as online learning, how does one differentiate between 79% and 80% to determine the cut-off point? Although some definitions related to reporting requirements list percentages (e.g., Kerensky, 2023), the cut-offs vary widely from one requirement to another and do not provide a universal standard to guide institutions in naming their offerings.

When categorizing a course or program that appears to straddle the line between online and hybrid learning, decision-makers should ask several questions:

- *Is it accurate to place the debate on the line between online and on-campus hybrid learning, or would it be better to approach the issue from a distance learning perspective?*
- *Might the student need to leave their local community to complete any in-person requirements?*
- *Could the in-person components compromise student funding or violate policy mandates?*
- *Will renaming an experience create confusion or add clarity for students?*

Wyoming Distance Education Funding Decision

A few years ago, the Wyoming legislature decided to fund distance education courses at community colleges at 80% of the rate given for standard ("level one") in-person courses. A common misconception in higher education is that online offerings cost less to run, which was part of the reasoning for the reduced funding in this situation. The reduction in funding created a troublesome disincentive for offering online courses in a rural state and led to some fully online courses being labeled as hybrid to obtain the full payment in the funding formula. One of the first bills signed by the Wyoming Governor in 2023, reinstated full payments. The legislature wanted to encourage online courses and, as the head of the Community College Commission observed: "distance education students must receive the same resources and support available to in-person students."

Case #2: An In-Person Learning Experience with Heavy Technology Use. An institution's course classified as in-person requires students to be on campus for an instructor-led class once per week. As part of their homework, the instructor expects students to use the institution's learning management system (LMS) to watch instructional videos, post on a discussion forum, and upload completed assignments. The instructor also records class sessions and posts them on the LMS for students who might have been absent. Given the expectations for technology use and online interaction, some have questioned whether it is fair to students to list this course as in-person (as opposed to hybrid).

In this case, the primary question is: What is the dividing line between a hybrid and a technology-supported in-person learning experience? Although the students receive in-person instruction, some course elements resemble an asynchronous online learning experience. Students must also have access to technologies enabling them to use the LMS to complete the course successfully.

The line between hybrid learning and technology-supported in-person learning is the blurriest line on the Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum. One might argue that these two modalities will eventually bleed into each other to the point that they will become indistinguishable. In such cases, one must ask the following questions: Is it critical (e.g., reporting requirements, student funding) to definitively label this course as hybrid or in-person? If the institution can categorize the course as either hybrid or in-person technology-supported, are there benefits or detriments to choosing one name over the other?
Specific to Case #2, the main point of contention is whether or not it is fair to students to list a learning experience as in-person but then require significant technology use for its completion.

Ensuring students know the technological requirements for a course or program before committing themselves is critical. A few questions to ask in situations like this include:

- *Could a student successfully complete the course if they did not attend any in-person sessions? Conversely, could a student successfully complete the course if they did not have access to Internet technologies off campus?*
- *Are the online components of the learning experience mostly supplementary resources, or is there an instructional component taking place in the online environment?*
- *Are the students aware of the technology requirements before registering for the course or program?*

> When a course does not fit exactly into one of the modality definitions, informing students of the how, when, and where of the course prior to enrollment is essential to the student's decision-making.

In many instances, faculty have considerable freedom in how they deliver a course and the types of technology they incorporate. If this is how an institution operates, then it is likely that some courses listed as in-person offerings are actually being delivered in a hybrid format. There are many advantages to using technology in teaching and learning; however, faculty should be encouraged to be upfront with students before registration if heavy technology use is part of an in-person course.

Situations like Case #2 may also lead to disputes about whether dimensions like synchrony should determine modality. Some institutions only categorize a learning experience as hybrid if there is a synchronous online component, whereas other institutions consider courses with asynchronous online activities to be hybrid. Some institutions attempt to resolve this by creating a vast array of names to describe a multitude of variations. Like the use of percentages, over-granularity in naming conventions tends to be more problematic than helpful.

If the real crux of the issue is not where to place a course in terms of modality but ensuring that students know the technology requirements in advance, then this can be dealt with in ways other than categorization by modality. For any learning experience, information about the following aspects must be made available to students prior to registration:

- *Any expectations to be on campus or in person at set times.*
- *Any expectations for students to be online at set times.*
- *The types of technologies that students will use and whether reliable broadband Internet and an individual device (e.g., laptop, home computer) are necessities for success.*

Indiana University's and University of Central Florida's Extensive Definitions

Institutions should be applauded for undertaking the effort to define and describe the variety of modalities they offer. At the same time, it can be challenging to finalize and code a variety of offerings to provide students with meaningful information. Here are two examples of such efforts:

Indiana University developed a procedure for Student Information System coding of distance education classes and, as part of such procedure, implemented ten (10) instruction mode codes to support their reporting obligations and information sharing with students. Those codes include Online All (OA), Online Interactive (OI), Hybrid Traditional (HY), Hybrid Distance (HD), Distance Other (DO), In-Person (P), Internship/Practica (IN), Independent/Directed Study (IS), Closed Circuit TV (CT), and Correspondence (OC). Indiana University East also developed a policy on Program Modality to ensure that students enrolled in in-person and hybrid programs are enrolled in a sufficient number of in-person courses to comply with Higher Learning Commission requirements.

The University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning also developed a webpage to explain the differences between the course modalities and attributes at their institution and how each modality impacts students. Each modality (fully online, partially online, and traditional) is further broken down into types (web-based, video, mixed mode, limited attendance, in-person) and possible attributes (flexible, live, personalized adaptive learning, and asynchronous online with some required in-person learning). The types and attributes provide information meant to help students make informed decisions when selecting classes. Depending on whether a student is campus-based or online, only certain modalities, and by extension, certain campus-based services, may be available.

Case #3: A Multi-site, In-person Learning Experience. *An institution with multiple campuses offers some courses where the instructor meets with a classroom of students on one campus; however, small groups of students from other campuses also meet together in classrooms at other campuses simultaneously to attend the class via synchronous live stream. A TA is available in the classrooms without the instructor to support students, facilitate interaction, and lead group activities. There is debate on how to classify this type of course since students are all in-person, but the instruction is delivered online for many.*

In many institutions, questions about instructor location in relation to modality are starting to emerge. Can a course be classified as in-person if the instructor and students (or some of the students) are in different locations? The learning experience described in this scenario differs from other delivery modes that use livestream technology (e.g., online synchronous, hyflex) in that all parties must be on campus simultaneously, just not necessarily on the same campus.

Unique and emergent delivery modes may not fit well with the existing naming conventions used at an institution. If there truly is a need to create a new name, the top priority should be choosing a name for the learning experience that creates clarity for students. With Case #3, the course requires students to attend their classes in person; thus, it makes sense to categorize this learning experience primarily as in-person learning. In order to manage student expectations, one should consider adding information about the variation in instructor presence to the course/program description.

Some institutions add indicators about instructor presence into the naming convention rather than the description (e.g., remote in-person learning); however, institutions should exercise caution when taking this approach as the choice of words may confuse students, faculty, and others outside the institution. As mentioned in Case #2, an over-granular approach to naming different course offerings tends to create headaches instead of the straightforwardness students need when deciding if a course is a good fit.

Key questions to ask in such situations include:

- *What is the motivation for creating a new name? To distinguish a specific variation of a learning experience from others that are similar? To create clarity for students? To position an experience as unique and cutting-edge?*
- *Is the overall essence of this learning experience captured in an existing modality? Is the experience so unique that it sits outside of all existing modalities? (In Case #3, the learning experience has many characteristics of being in-person.)*
- *Are there any reporting or funding requirements that create a need to use a new modality designation over an existing one?*
- *Might it be sufficient to add information about the unique aspects of the learning experience in a course or program description rather than creating an entirely new name for a learning experience with unique characteristics?*

Emerging Technologies Sometimes Defy Classifications, Such as Artificial Intelligence

The release of ChatGPT in late 2022 has prompted scholars and institutional leaders to engage in many discussions about the potential uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education. Some have speculated that, in the future, learning experiences may emerge that use AI to deliver instruction. In situations where technological advances lead to new teaching and learning methods, creating a customized and cutting-edge-sounding name may be tempting. Before generating a brand new name and potentially pitching a learning experience as a new modality, consider whether an existing modality already captures the essence of the learning experience. For example, if an institution delivers an AI-instructed learning experience in an online learning environment, it is still well-described as online learning. The variation of using an AI instructor versus a human instructor (or a mix of AI and human instruction) would merely be a characteristic of the course, albeit an important one, and such a course could be named something easily understandable, like “online learning with an AI instructor.”

Discussion and Recommendations

When discussing the nuances between modalities, an inevitable question arises: Why does this matter? Isn’t it all just learning?

Of course, this is true; however, such a mindset fails to capture that different modalities require different resources to be delivered effectively. Institutions and policymakers must understand the demand for different learning modalities to guide resource acquisition and allocation decisions. Additionally, ample research exists that shows that every modality holds the potential to both create and break down barriers to learning for different groups of students.

Clear and consistent naming conventions help students determine whether a course, program, or institution is the right choice for them.

On the contrary, the range of technologies and teaching methods that institutions could (and do) incorporate into their offerings create a wide variety of learning experiences.
Some institutions and scholars treat these variations like entirely new modalities, giving them distinct names to capture the granularity of learning experiences that a student may encounter throughout their studies. Although communicating the nature of a learning experience and any technological requirements is critical for guiding student decision-making, over-granularity leads to a long list of terms that become meaningless when students cannot remember what each involves off the top of their heads.

Our goal must be to strike a balance. When the modality of a learning experience is unclear, dismissing the matter with an "everything is just learning" approach is unhelpful. Likewise, creating a new name for every possible variation of a learning experience is equally problematic. The following discussion calls for a move away from over-granularity. At the same time, the recommendations woven throughout the discussion take a practical approach and reject "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin" sorts of deliberations (e.g., a student does not leave their body while participating in an online course; therefore, all learning is technically in-person). The focus remains on students and what they need to know to make informed decisions about their educational pursuits.

Over-granularity in naming conventions leads to a long list of terms that become meaningless when students cannot remember what each involves.

Common Assertions That Can Create Confusion

Although not as unorthodox as the notion that all learning should be considered in-person learning because students remain in their bodies while learning, other assertions also exacerbate confusion and should be avoided.

If the word "fully" is added to a naming convention (e.g., fully online learning), then it cannot mean anything other than the implementation of a modality in its purest form. In other words, a learning experience described as fully online should not, by nature of the word fully, have any sort of in-person requirements. For example, the California State University System defines a "fully online" course as "any class that's offered in a completely online environment, no in person or on campus meetings." Yet, there are some programs (e.g., Doctor of Nursing Practices) listed as being fully online that have a handful of required on-campus meetings at certain program milestones. While minimal, these in-person meeting requirements are mandatory and challenge the accuracy of their depiction as being "fully online."

- In-person, face-to-face, and on-campus are often used in higher education to describe learning experiences requiring student presence at a specified physical location. When these words are used to describe synchronous online learning experiences, it creates confusion since this usage contradicts the usual meaning according to popular language. While it may be true that a synchronous lesson using videoconferencing technology enables participants to see one another's faces, referring to this sort of experience as "face-to-face" may lead to misunderstandings.
- Hyflex learning (Beatty, 2019) is a very specific type of learning experience characterized by each student's ability to choose how they will attend class sessions in terms of location and synchrony. The word hyflex is a merging of the words hybrid and flexible. In a hyflex learning experience, students have three options for attending class sessions: in-person, online via a synchronous livestream into the in-person session, or asynchronously online at a time of their choosing. The students can decide their mode of attendance on a day-to-day basis. A course that requires each student to select either an online section or an in-person section at the time of registration should not be classified as hyflex unless the students can move freely between the online and in-person modalities throughout the course.

The Importance of "Good Enough" Consensus

It is unlikely that scholars, institutional leaders, and policymakers will ever reach a universal agreement when categorizing learning experiences by modality or naming experiences to capture variations. The Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum (see Johnson et al., 2022) is an evidence-based framework designed to bring the higher education community to a "good enough" consensus. The spectrum approach to the framework permits one modality to gradually seep into the next rather than demanding hard lines between the two. Being able to agree on the general characteristics of an experience that determine its modality instead of arguing about its name generates more fruitful cross-institutional and policy-level discussions about different types of learning experiences.

Each iteration of the Modes of Learning Spectrum (Johnson, 2021; Johnson et al., 2022) has resulted in rich discussions between the authors and hundreds of others representing scholars, institutional leaders, policymakers, and members of other interest groups. Overall the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive (which is a rarity and a pleasant surprise when proposing a solution for an issue that has been the source of much contention and debate in the past). Most importantly, the framework has proven useful in practice, simplifying the process of classifying learning experiences consistently, regardless of what a faculty member, department, or institution may call them.

The Importance of a Student-Centered Approach

Historically, debates about naming conventions have focused on the technological characteristics of the learning experience and the philosophical underpinnings of the semantics used. Many times, it seems as though the student perspective is overlooked in the debate: Will the name of the modality make sense to students at first glance? Will they understand what is expected of them based on the name of the experience? Will they need to figure out new meanings for the same names if they transfer from one institution to another or even across colleges within a single university?

A common framework to guide the classification and naming of learning experiences provides students with consistency and predictability as they move through their educational journey. Of the utmost importance, regardless of what an institution decides to call a learning experience, students must easily understand what is expected of them so they can make an informed choice. The bottom line of the longstanding debate about definitions is that students do not care what definitions or naming conventions we use as long as they understand what they need to have and do to complete the experience successfully.

One final issue that undermines a student-centered approach is when a course is listed as a particular modality, but the course instructor decides to change the modality on their own initiative. Case #2 represents this kind of scenario when a student signs up for what seems like an in-person course but then discovers that the instructor has designed the course with a heavy technology requirement. In many instances, this is only communicated to the student at the start of the course and not at the point of registration. Another practice that may exacerbate this problem is when institutions appoint instructors to courses or sections only a few days before a course begins.

> The bottom line of the longstanding debate about definitions is that students do not care what definitions or naming conventions we use as long as they understand what they need to have and do to complete the experience successfully.

Finalizing instructors at the last minute makes it challenging to provide instructors with the leeway to teach a course as they best see fit (within the parameters set by law and policy) while ensuring students have information about the course requirements well in advance.

To clarify, the argument here is not against technology use in teaching and learning. Technology integration breaks down barriers for many students, and the inherent flexibility provides a more accessible learning experience. These students eagerly enroll in online and hybrid courses and advocate for greater online and hybrid offerings. Some subject areas are also better taught in an online or hybrid context, and technology use enhances the learning experience. On the other hand, there are groups of students for whom technology requirements create barriers to learning. For these reasons, it is important that students clearly understand what is required of them at the time of registration to make an informed choice about enrolling in a course or program.

At the departmental level and institutional levels, it is imperative that there is a culture of communication and transparency about technology integration into courses. This does not mean faculty should be discouraged from technology use in teaching and learning. Rather, faculty should feel comfortable sharing the types of technology they feel would enhance their course so new initiatives can be developed with suitable technology requirements for the student population and support from instructional designers to ensure any accessibility requirements are met. Remembering as well that policy requirements bind institutions, it is important to consider whether the decision to integrate technology changes the modality from a policy perspective. A critical question to ask is: Will a learning experience impact student funding if there are discrepancies between the experience and a policy definition?

A student-centered approach ensures that before registering for a course or program, students are provided with the answers to the following questions:

1. Where are they expected to be for the purposes of completing the course (physical or virtual location)?
2. When (day and time) are they expected to be on campus or attending a synchronous online session?
3. How will they participate in the course…what technologies and materials will they need to succeed (e.g., personal computer or laptop, broadband Internet)?

A Step-By-Step Process for Categorizing Multidimensional Learning Experiences

1. Categorizing multidimensional learning experiences by modality can be daunting, and any decisions made have potentially far-reaching consequences. The steps below present a starting point to guide the process.
2. Determine any policy, funding, and reporting requirements that might be impacted if a learning experience is categorized as one modality instead of another.
3. Identify any requirements for students and assess whether this impacts modality. Good questions to ask include: Will they need to travel to campus? Will they need to attend online sessions on a particular day/time? Are there any in-person requirements that are off campus (e.g., exam at a proctoring center, practicum experience in their local community, sessions at a satellite campus)? Are they able to successfully complete the course without broadband Internet or a personal device (e.g., laptop, personal computer)?
4. Using the Revised Modes of Learning Spectrum framework, decide which modality is the closest fit (even if it is not a perfect fit). If a learning experience straddles the line between modalities, identify that line and the aspects of the experience that fit on either side of the line.
5. Determine whether the course can fit into the modality that is the closest fit and maintain compliance with policy requirements. If not, does the course need to be modified? Should it be moved into a different modality?
6. Decide how this course will be described to students. Does it have a clear name that captures the main modality of the course? Does the name help inform students of the requirements? Is any additional information needed in the course description to help students make an informed choice? Would a student transferring from another institution easily understand the naming conventions?
7. Establish the overall modality name for this type of course. How will it be coded and reported at the institutional level? Review how many modality names are already in existence and ask whether creating a new modality name would contribute to over-granularity and confusion. Whenever possible, broad modality terms should be used for classification and naming, and course/program descriptions should be used to communicate course-specific variations and technology expectations to students.

Conclusion

Categorizing learning experiences by modality is a complex task that is becoming increasingly challenging as new technologies emerge. The two key issues that must underpin any decision when naming a learning experience are:

1. ensuring students have the necessary information in advance of registration to determine whether they can complete a course or program successfully and,
2. knowing what aspects of course delivery must be present or adhered to in order to meet policy requirements.

With the understanding that we will never achieve a place of full agreement, a spectrum approach to classification provides a useful strategy to achieve "good enough" consensus when the lines between modalities are blurred.

Important Note About Modality and Financial Aid

Key to federal financial policy around distance education is regular and substantive interaction. Congress created a distinction between the definitions of "distance education" and "correspondence education" for purposes of federal financial aid eligibility, with the distinction being that distance education courses must include "regular and substantive interaction." In contrast, correspondence courses do not have "regular and substantive interaction." This distinction was made for purposes of financial aid eligibility due to concerns relating to consumer protection and potential fraud in correspondence education and the growth of distance education. Institutions offering more than 50 percent of their total course offerings or enrolling more than 50 percent of their students in correspondence courses are not eligible to participate in Title IV financial aid programs.

Until 2021, the terms "regular and substantive" interaction was not defined by regulation and departmental (USED) guidance was limited. On July 1, 2021, the Department of Education released the final regulations that updated the definition of "distance education" in Chapter 34, §600.2, including specifically defining the critical terms: instructor, regular, and substantive. The Department confirmed in correspondence with WCET that it expects an institution to maintain policies or procedures that create expectations for faculty to substantively interact with students and conduct regular evaluations to ensure instructor compliance.

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About the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association

The Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA) conducts applied research to advance knowledge about digital learning strategies, policies, and practices in close collaboration with Canadian post-secondary institutions and affiliated organizations.
Website: http://www.cdlra-acrfl.ca/

About WCET

WCET - the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, is the leader in the practice, policy, & advocacy of digital learning in higher education. WCET is a member-driven nonprofit that brings together colleges, universities, higher education organizations, and companies to collectively improve the quality and reach of digital learning programs.
Website: https://wcet.wiche.edu/