

# HOW IS ONLINE EDUCATION DIFFERENT THAN FACE-TO-FACE?

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## THE ONLINE TREND

In recent years, online education enrollment has been growing, even as overall higher education enrollments are declining (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). In 2016, 63.3% of higher education institutions surveyed believed that online education was a critical component of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2016). During Fall 2018 at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 40% of face-to-face students took at least one online course and 6% of students exclusively took online courses (University of Nebraska–Lincoln).

**All of this begs the question: should you join the trend and teach online or are classes better left in the classroom as a face-to-face endeavor? This guide will provide you with basic information about the differences in delivery, learning, instructional time investment, and interactions in online and face-to-face environments that can help you determine the opportunities and challenges you may face when delivering your course online.**



## DELIVERY

One of the significant differences between instruction types is where the content is delivered. An online course is any course where a significant portion of the materials are delivered only through an online resource. This online resource is often a Learning Management System (LMS) such as Canvas, Moodle, e-Extension, or Blackboard. Online education is a subset of distance learning, which refers to any course where there is either distance in time or in physical location between the instructor and the student such that the instructor and student typically do not meet in person. Distance learning originally began many centuries ago through the use of letters between professors and students. Since then, most distance education has gradually transitioned to be mediated as what we commonly call “online education.”

Some courses use a combination of tools or features of traditional courses and distance courses. When this is done, it is often referred to as a “hybrid course” or “blended learning.” A “flipped classroom” where students watch lecture videos outside of class and complete interactive activities during class-time falls into the category of a hybrid/blended course.



student has access to the Internet and a device to stream the content from the course. In face-to-face courses, students typically complete the bulk of their learning at designated times when the instructor presents information live in front the students. For many students the flexibility of an online class is attractive to manage scheduling conflicts. For others, such as those returning to school while working full-time, the flexibility of an online class provides them with an opportunity to earn a degree whereas they otherwise could not.

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## TIME INVESTMENT

Some may wonder if teaching online will help lighten their teaching load by saving time. Overall, there are not great indications that online instruction is a large time-saver. According to Van de Vord and Pogue (2012), time investment for online courses may be slightly less than that for face-to-face courses. In their study, the time investment for online courses was lower for items such as interacting with students, preparation for lecture, and modifications of the course, but increased for items such as evaluating student work, recording grades, and technical issues. Overall, instructors reported spending an average of 14.98 hours on a face-to-face course and 12.70 hours per week on an online course. While this is a small amount of time to save, you should know the first few semesters of teaching online can demand more time from instructors than that of a face-to-face course (Freeman, 2015). In summary, instructors shouldn't expect online courses to take significantly less time to implement than face-to-face courses, especially the first few times the course is offered online. The motivation to offer a course online should not be based on saving time as an instructor, but rather based on the learning needs of the students.

## LEARNING

While the mode of instruction for online and face-to-face instruction are different, the learning goals in each environment should be the same. The main difference between these two environments is where and when the learning happens. Online learning is typically asynchronous (meaning it does not happen at one time) and can happen in any place where the

## STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR INTERACTIONS

Many teachers enjoy the face-to-face interaction they have with the students in the classroom. Online teaching naturally reduces the opportunity for those in-person student-instructor interactions. Online instructors should expect they will spend less time seeing students and more time grading student work than face-to-face instructors. Van de Vord and Pogue (2012) report that grading in online courses requires twice as much time as face-to-face courses. The time investment for interacting with students online is about half that of face-to-face courses because of the asynchronous nature of the course that does not include scheduled classes. The lack of synchronous meetings in online courses calls for practicing good “instructor presence” practices online. This can be done through

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weekly announcements, sharing stories in your life that are relevant to the coursework, individualized feedback, and more investment in one-on-one interactions with students when they need them. For ideas on how to create instructor presence, read Faculty Focus by

Magna Publications: [facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/creating-a-sense-of-instructor-presence-in-the-online-classroom](https://facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/creating-a-sense-of-instructor-presence-in-the-online-classroom).

## STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTIONS

In the same way that face-to-face interactions are limited for the student and teacher, there is also a reduction in opportunity for student-student interactions. While face-to-face instructors can employ informal (i.e. think-pair-share, clicker questions, etc.) and formal tactics (i.e. group work on a project), online courses are generally limited to more formal asynchronous interactions. Student-student interactions play an important role in learning because students can help each other learn the course content through conversation. One way online student-student interactions can be encouraged is through discussion board posts in your Learning Management System (LMS). Generally, successful discussions require students to apply information from the course to questions that do not have a clear, correct answer. These types of questions should help create more vibrant discussion than questions where there is just one correct answer.

## ARE YOU READY TO TEACH ONLINE?

Teaching online certainly requires a slightly different skill set than teaching face-to-face. You’ll need to learn how to create good instructor presence and student-student interactions in a digital space asynchronously, which can be challenging. When done well, students will be grateful for a positive online learning experience. There are many resources available to help navigate the online teaching realm such as conversations with colleagues who have online teaching experience, going to workshops, or reading online teaching books/websites. One small but significant step is to use Canvas more fully in your face-to-face courses. While not every course is suited to online delivery, strategically expanding online course offerings can meet the learning needs of the student and further your reach as a teacher.

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