Evolving Definitions in Digital Learning: A National Framework for Categorizing Commonly Used Terms

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This report builds upon several years of research conducted by the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA). Our team first put forth a proposed set of definitions related to digital learning in the 2018 National Report (available at www.cdlra-acrfl.ca/publications). Since that time, we have continued to investigate how institutions are defining terms such as online learning, distance learning, remote learning, and hybrid learning through qualitative interviews with senior administrators and consultations with provincial and national organizations and working groups. The *2021 National Survey of Online and Digital Learning* asked institutions to provide their institutional definitions (if they had one) for these terms and their responses have informed this report. We thank all participating institutions for supporting this important initiative to establish standard, pan-Canadian definitions.

About the CDLRA National Survey of Online and Digital Learning

The *2021 National Survey of Online and Digital Learning* was conducted in Spring 2021. This report features the preliminary findings from a sample of 81 institutions (universities, colleges, and polytechnics) from across Canada who had responded to the survey prior to June 25, 2021. Surveys were sent to identified key administrative contacts at each institution, who then completed the survey themselves or in collaboration with others at their institution. Further findings from the survey will be shared in the 2021 National Report, which will be released in early 2022.

We thank the following 2021 sponsors and partners who have made this research possible: eCampusOntario, BC Campus, Campus Manitoba, Bay View Analytics, Pearson Canada, Keypath Education, D2L, Academica Group, and Contact North.

More information about the CDLRA can be found on our website at www.cdlra-acrfl.ca

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INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic eases in Canada, and a return to large in-person gatherings seems within reach, in-person learning will once again be possible at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Most institutions anticipate that in-person learning will be offered in the Fall 2021 semester.

Yet, even with a return to in-person learning, data collected by the *Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA)* also shows that post-secondary education will be significantly changed as a result of the pandemic. Notably, institutions are planning for more online course offerings, more hybrid course offerings, and more use of technology for in-person teaching and learning going forward.

While the statement that more online, hybrid, and technology-supported learning are expected seems straightforward enough, one only needs to ask what another means when they use these terms to reveal widespread differences in how these commonly used terms are defined.

The purpose of this report is to introduce a pan-Canadian framework for consistently defining commonly used terms related to digital learning. ***Digital learning*** is an overarching term that captures all kinds of technology supported learning.

This report includes:

- A brief overview of the need to establish consistent meanings for commonly used terms related to educational modes of delivery
- An introduction to the *Modes of Learning Spectrum*, which is the proposed definitional framework

The preliminary findings of the *2021 National Survey for Online and Digital Learning* inform the discussion of the need for a standard, pan-Canadian understanding of online learning, hybrid learning, distance learning, and in-person learning. The *Modes of Learning Spectrum* is then presented as a framework for effectively capturing the various terms currently used by institutions.

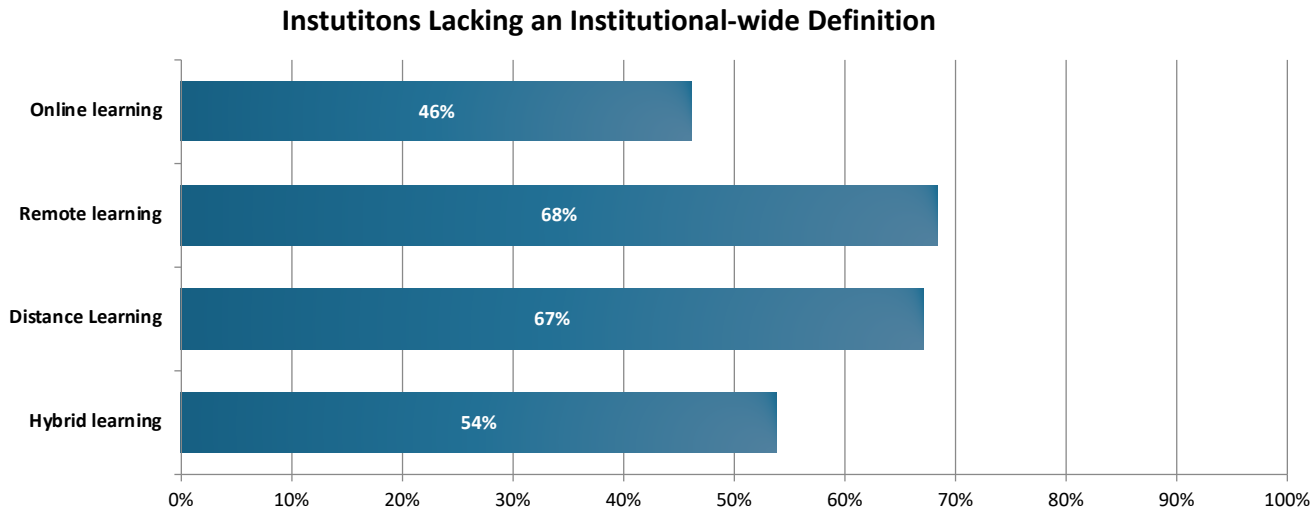
THE NECESSITY OF COMMON DEFINITIONS

For years the terminology used to describe forms of digital learning, such as online learning, hybrid learning, and remote learning has been applied inconsistently. Simply put, two people could be in conversation using the term 'online learning' and hold very different definitions of this term without the other being aware. The pandemic, and the massive shift to delivering courses in an online format, further amplified discrepancies and inconsistencies as individuals and institutions sought to describe and categorize their modes of delivery.

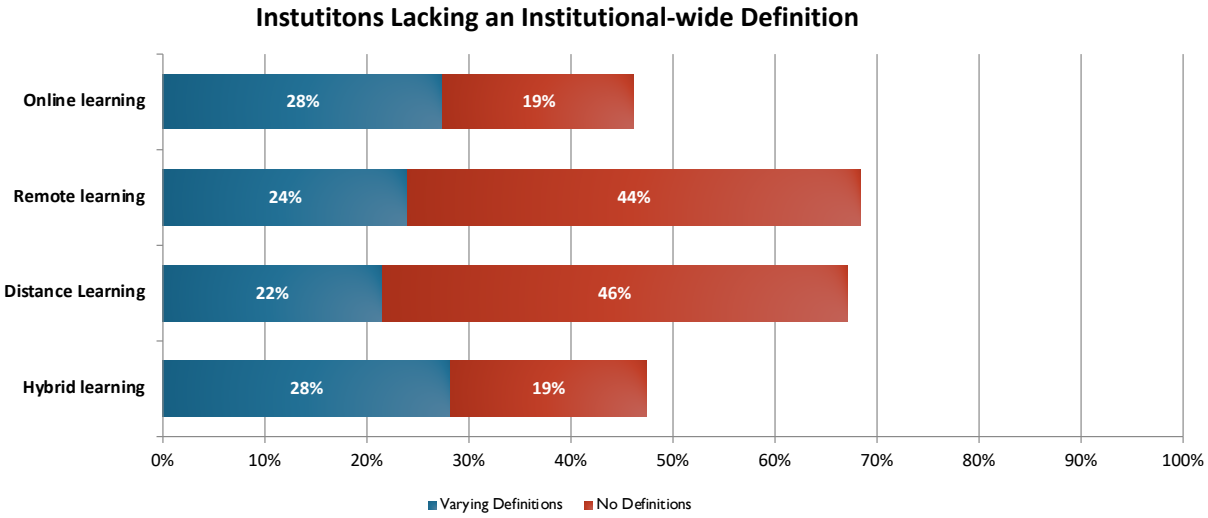
Varying Definitions Within Institutions

The CDLRA *2021 National Survey of Online and Digital Learning* asked institutions whether they have either a single institutional definition, varying definitions by department, program, or individuals, or both for the following terms: online learning, remote learning, distance learning, and hybrid learning.

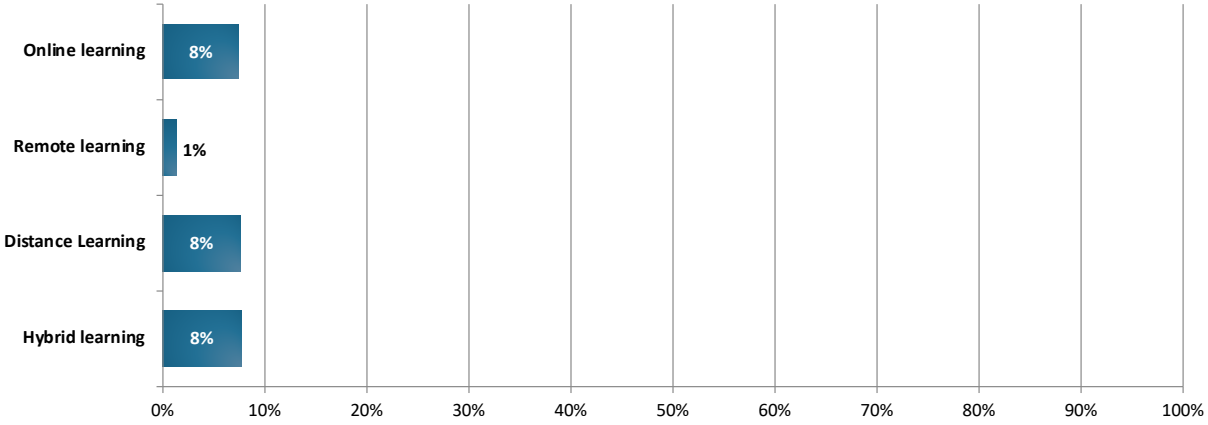
Roughly one-half of institutions are lacking institution-wide definitions for online and hybrid learning. For the terms remote learning and distance learning, the proportion of institutions without a single institutional definition rises to approximately two-thirds.



About one-quarter of the institutions without an institution wide definition have varying definitions by department, program, or individuals; however, a substantial minority have no definition whatsoever.



Of the institutions with an institution-wide definition, some reported that they have both an institution-wide definition and also varying definitions by department, program, or individuals. With the exception of remote learning, 8% of institutions reported having conflicting definitions (varying definitions in addition to having an institution-wide definition).



It is important to note that institutions with an institution-wide definition for one term did not necessarily have institution-wide definitions for other terms. For instance, only 40% of all institutions had an institution-wide definition for hybrid learning and an institution-wide definition for online, remote, or distance learning.

Varying Definitions Among Institutions

To assess the consistency of these definitions across institutions, institutions were asked to provide an open-ended response for each term stating the definitions that they use. The findings from these open-ended responses showed considerable variance from institution to institution and reiterated the need for common meanings.

To illustrate the range of responses, and the contradictions that exist, the following table shows some of the ways that online learning, remote learning, distance learning, and hybrid learning are defined at Canadian post-secondary institutions.

Definitions used by Canadian post-secondary institutions:

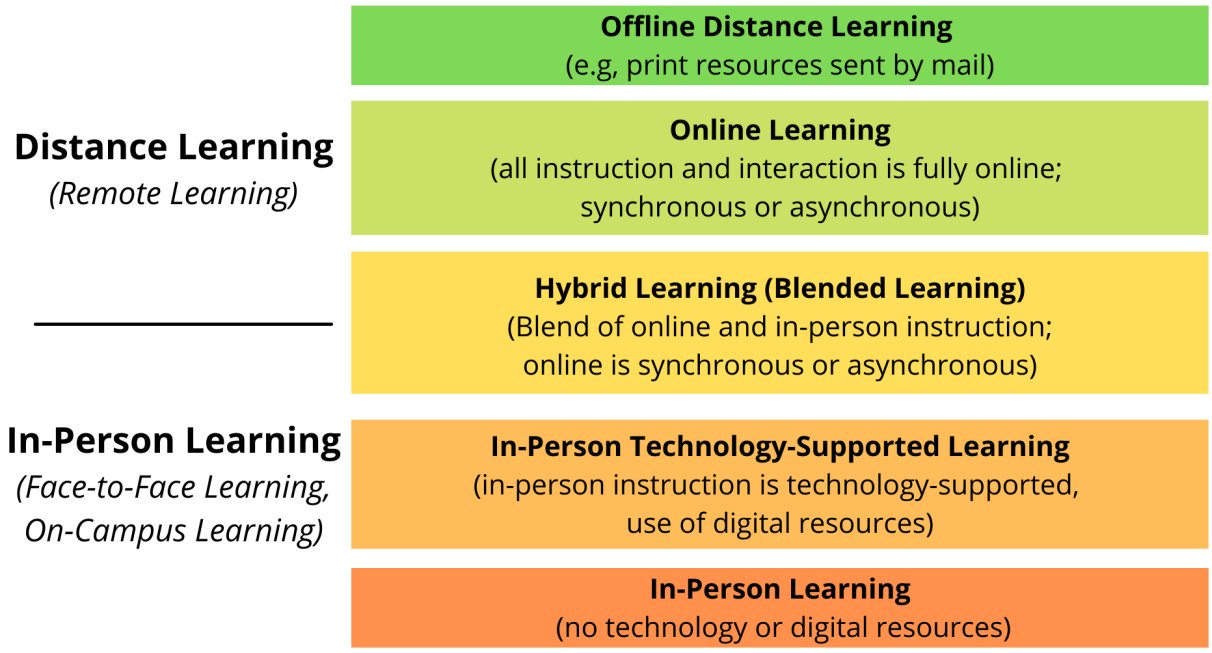
Term	Definitions provided by institutions
Online Learning	• Mix of asynchronous and synchronous learning done online • Learning fully delivered by a LMS • Synchronous remote learning • 100% asynchronous learning • Training on a virtual platform • Distance and hybrid courses • Courses with no in-class component
Remote Learning	• Learning done in an online environment • Synchronous or asynchronous online learning • Unplanned (e.g., emergency) online learning
Distance Learning	• Students choose location of remote learning • Students not required to be on campus • Asynchronous or synchronous learning • Self-paced, individualized learning schedule • Mostly asynchronous with some opportunities for synchronous learning
Hybrid Learning	• Synonymous with blended learning • Differs from blended learning (blended = integration of online and face-to-face; hybrid = replacing most of face-to-face with online) • Has an assigned classroom but offers a combination of in-person and alternate delivery • Theory delivered online and labs delivered in the classroom • Students need to attend some on-campus learning • Requires some physical presence and some online learning (asynchronous or synchronous) • Mostly online with one or more in-person intensive components • Any combination of delivery formats • Mix of online and in-person interaction, involving the use of technologies to facilitate multi-modality, flexibility, and student choice

A NEW FRAMEWORK: THE MODES OF LEARNING SPECTRUM

As evidenced by the findings, there is much work to be done to establish consistent, pan-Canadian definitions for terms related to digital learning. Further, there is strong indication that online and hybrid learning will play a much greater role in post-secondary education going forward as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to effectively track and investigate the evolution of digital learning in Canada, common definitions are critical, even if it requires some institutions to modify their existing definitions.

The *Modes of Learning Spectrum* is proposed to provide a framework for common understanding and it is designed in such a way that the definitions will hold their meaning over time (as technologies and ways of teaching and learning continue to advance). The framework is deliberately broad and enables consistent classification of different modes of learning based on the characteristics of that mode, despite what that type of learning might be called at an individual institution.

The Modes of Learning Spectrum



The ***Modes of Learning Spectrum*** framework first makes the distinction between *distance learning* and *in-person learning*. With the acknowledgement that some institutions have distinct definitions for *remote learning*, this framework considers the terms *distance learning* and *remote learning* to be interchangeable. Similarly, the term *in-person learning* is interchangeable with the terms *face-to-face learning* and *on-campus learning*.

Distance learning is defined as all learning that takes place at a distance. *Online learning* (where the learning experience is delivered via the Internet either synchronously or asynchronously) is the predominant mode of distance learning; however, distance learning also includes *offline distance learning* (where the learning experience is fully remote but does not use Internet technology, such as a course being delivered in print format via mail).

While at the start of the pandemic, *emergency remote teaching* was differentiated from *intentional online learning*, both fall into the category of *online learning* for the purposes of this framework. *Emergency remote teaching* and *intentional online learning* should be considered two different types of online learning.

In-person learning is defined as learning that takes place entirely within a physical classroom with one's peers and instructor physically present. In-person learning may use technology within the classroom, or technology available on-campus, to facilitate learning and students may be expected to use technology (e.g., Learning Management System (LMS), digital textbooks, laptop computer) to complete course assignments. All instruction takes place in a physical classroom context.

The dividing line between distance learning and in-person learning is placed at the centre of *hybrid learning*.

Hybrid learning is a learning experience that is designed to combine both online and in-person instruction. While some institutions have separate definitions for hybrid learning and blended learning, it appears that these terms are used interchangeably for the most part. For consistency sake, the *Modes of Learning Spectrum* uses the term hybrid learning, but considers it to be interchangeable with blended learning.

Hybrid learning presents the greatest area of ambiguity, especially as different forms of hybrid learning have emerged. The term hybrid learning is an umbrella term that captures all different types of hybrid learning such as flipped learning, hyflex learning, and online learning with an in-person intensive component. There are varying definitions for these terms and further definitional work specific to types of hybrid learning is needed.

It is important to note that some forms of hybrid learning require students to participate in both an online learning mode and an in-person learning mode whereas other forms of hybrid learning provide both options, but leave the choice of learning mode to the student. For example, hyflex learning is emerging as an option at more and more institutions across Canada, in which students enrol in a course that offers them the ability to choose their mode of delivery (in-person or online) and shift modes of delivery during the course in accordance with their individual needs and preferences.

The question of determining whether an offering is hybrid is further muddled when looking at courses at the section level and at the student level:

- A course that offers different sections with different modes of learning would not be considered hybrid unless each section either requires or gives students the option of learning both online and in-person (e.g., hyflex learning).
- Upon registration, if students are required to commit to learning either fully online or fully in-person, then the course or section should be marked as either online learning or in-person learning, not hybrid learning.
- A student who has the option to shift between online and in-person learning throughout a course is participating in hybrid learning regardless of whether they choose to learn exclusively online or exclusively in-person.

The objective of the *Modes of Learning Spectrum* is to produce measurable categories and to be able to place most courses offered at post-secondary institutions into three big buckets: online learning, hybrid learning, and in-person learning. The recommended first priority is to be able to differentiate online learning from all other offerings (hybrid and in-person) with the secondary priority to differentiate hybrid learning from in-person learning (particularly in-person technology-supported courses).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the *Modes of Learning Spectrum* seeks to offer clarity where there has previously been confusion, contradiction, and ambiguity. As digital learning advances post-pandemic, it is essential that we have consensus on the meaning of commonly used terms for the following reasons:

- Online and hybrid learning is growing. Institutions are planning to have more online and hybrid course offerings for students in the 2021-22 academic year. There is an expectation that students will want more flexibility and distance learning options even when a full return to in-person learning is possible.
- Because of the inconsistencies in how course offerings are defined, accurately tracking the growth of online and hybrid learning over time has not been possible.
- It is unlikely that institutions will achieve consensus on definitions without a national-level or provincial-level mandate by governing agencies. It is important that any such mandate can effectively capture what institutions are already doing and is not burdensome for institutions to adopt.

Considering the wide range of teaching approaches being used by faculty across the country, as well as the emergence of new pedagogical strategies, overly specific definitions for key terms add unnecessary complexity and confusion. The *Modes of Learning Spectrum* is deliberately broad in order to capture many different ways of teaching and learning in each category.

Consistently categorizing and tracking online learning is the recommended first step. Following that, strategies should then be put into place to differentiate and track hybrid learning and in-person learning.

**This report will be shared with leaders in Canadian post-secondary education throughout 2021 to test and refine the proposed framework (with the objective of gaining national-level consensus on defining and categorizing various modes of learning in the post-pandemic era by 2022). Please contact Dr. Nicole Johnson, CDLRA Research Director, with any feedback you would like to offer on this report.*

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