

## The Distributed or Hybrid Learning Model: The Best of Online and IRL Learning

by Donald Asher

Online education has been a great leap forward in terms of access to education. Now the mother of three toddlers can earn her master's degree without hiring a babysitter, the teacher in a rural area can keep up with her continuing education requirements without dedicating every summer to sitting in some classroom, and the business executive who lives on an airplane can actually finish that MBA. But online education can be a lonely academic experience. A student may face the material with little sense of connection to an academic community. What happens in a classroom is not entirely replicated in even the best of today's online formats. Avatars don't capture 1/nth of what is conveyed by the human body, and live chatrooms are clunky imitations of human conversation.

Some day a college instructor will appear in a virtual classroom as a holographic image, and students will be able to see her facial expressions and hear every nuance of her voice's inflections. In this same classroom, the students will also be holographic images of themselves, taking notes, chatting in the back, showing each other notes in private little asides, flirting with a glance, and doing the things students have always done. They'll be able to raise their hand with a question--or simply to interrupt the instructor--just as if they were all together, live, in the same room. The whole thing will be recorded and databased in a searchable format, allowing a student to return to any point in the lesson at any time. No doubt the professor will be able to edit out any gaffes or misstatements before releasing a final version of each class. Students not available at the scheduled time will download the recording and experience it at their leisure.

That day hasn't arrived yet. That's the future of distance education, and probably the fairly near future.

While we wait for that day, is there some happy medium between online education, with all its technological limitations, and brick and mortar classroom instruction, which is famously inefficient and inconvenient? Is there some way to have the best of both worlds? Some programs are finding success with a hybrid between the two, using some classroom instruction to build bonds between students and between faculty and the class, and using distance pedagogy to finish up the semester.

This is called "distributed learning" or "the hybrid model," and it has solid adherents in the academic world, and its own admittedly arcane encyclopedia. *The Encyclopedia of Distributed Learning* was compiled by Anna DiStefano, provost of Fielding Graduate University, a pioneer in using the model. Fielding offers almost all of its classes in this format, organizing intensives and cluster meetings all over the country where students and faculty come together only briefly. After teams are formed and expectations are established, students disperse to complete the coursework in a variety of ways ranging from independent study to synchronous online formats to team projects that might involve someone from Indianapolis partnering with colleagues from Boston and Lower Dusty Nowhere. One distinct advantage is that all of these team members have met and

bonded, face to face. Charles McClintock, dean of the school of human and organization development, says of the Fielding model, “We offer structure *and* flexibility, and frankly, that’s quite an organizational accomplishment. This works because adults learn differently. They bring their experience into the coursework. We provide a culture and an infrastructure to accomplish educational outcomes.”

This may emerge as the preferred model for the global university of the future. Zen Parry, an Australian working in India, completed an international MBA offered through Purdue University using the distributed learning model. “This is a whole new learning platform,” Parry says. “It’s a great model! We had three different campuses, one at Purdue in Indiana, one in Budapest, Hungary, and one in Hertogenbosch in Holland. We flew in from all over the world every nine weeks for a two-week seminar, and then we picked up our homework week by week. We had a virtual cohort group, our team. I was in India; we had a Dutch, a Hungarian, a Serbian, and a Canadian. Altogether we had 16 mother tongues in our class. We did all our work in English, the language for the school, but over 50% of our class was working outside of the country of their birth.”

Now a nonprofit organizational consultant in Portland, Oregon, Parry thought it was an ideal way to study. “I loved it. I’ll never go back to a regular classroom again. It totally reshaped my expectations around the way you learn and how you cope with other people.”

Most of the experimentation in this area has taken place in graduate programs. Jason Morris, an administrator at Abilene Christian University in Texas, likes the model and is currently developing a distributed learning version of that school’s brick and mortar master’s in education program. Students will meet for two weeks at the beginning of two summers, to form cohort groups. Then the rest of their studies will be completed at a distance.

“We recognize that our students are practicing professionals, most of them with jobs, families, and other obligations,” says Morris. “At the same time, they are the kind of people who are high touch individuals, people who are in education in the first place because they like people. They *want* to get together. We think this model will allow bonding, and allow the students to build the professional relationships that will last into the future. We understand the needs of today’s student. That’s why we are going to do everything we can to provide a quality education that is both interactive and flexible.”

If you are someone who has a complicated life that is not well suited to taking several years out for brick and mortar classroom instruction, and yet want more interaction than a strictly online model provides, you might look for programs with at least some of the classes offered in the distributed learning format.

## BIO

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-*

*Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different; Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate Program of Your Choice; How to Get Any Job, and Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why.* He welcomes your comments at [don@donaldasher.com](mailto:don@donaldasher.com).