ΧΑΡΟΚΟΠΕΙΟ ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ
HAROKOPIO UNIVERSITY

Teaching and Learning Centre (KEDIMA)

GUIDE TO DISTANCE LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY

BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHERS

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1. Introduction

Distance learning has become an integral part of modern university life, responding to the needs of a society characterized by rapid technological development, increased mobility, and diverse learning profiles. In higher education, Article 67 of Law 4957/2022 (Government Gazette Issue A 141) allows the educational process to be conducted using modern distance learning methods across a range of cases, in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

The transition from "traditional" face-to-face teaching in lecture halls to "digital teaching" presents a significant challenge for both lecturers and students. Distance learning requires not only technical infrastructure but also the development of appropriate pedagogical approaches and skills, familiarity with digital platforms and tools, and the cultivation of a new learning culture. In this context, this guide aims to provide a comprehensive tool that will contribute to an understanding of the basic principles and models of distance learning, while offering practical guidance for effective, student-centered teaching and learning in digital environments.

2. Conceptual clarifications

This chapter presents key concepts to help the reader acquire a common vocabulary and a clear understanding of the field of distance education.

Distance education constitutes an organized pedagogical system in which teaching and learning take place without the physical presence of the teacher and students in the same space. It is supported by specially designed educational materials and structured forms of communication, while utilizing methodologies that enhance self-regulation, active participation, and interaction among students within the learning environment (Kokkos, 2005).

Key concepts requiring clarification include:

- **Adulthood:** A state in which an individual assumes responsible social and professional roles (such as an employee, spouse, etc.), tends toward or seeks to make independent life choices, and recognizes elements of maturity within themselves while simultaneously being recognized by others in the same manner (Kokkos, 2005).
- **Adult education:** The field of organized and purposeful learning processes aimed at adults. It is based on their unique experiences and aims at personal, social, and professional development within the context of lifelong learning (Kokkos, as cited in Karalis & Lintzeris, 2022).
- **Lifelong learning:** Any learning activity, whether formal, non-formal, or informal, undertaken throughout an individual's life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competences (Kokkos, 2005).

The structural elements of distance learning methodology—as outlined in the KEDIMA Guide of the Ionian University (Niari, 2023)—are presented in Figure 1.

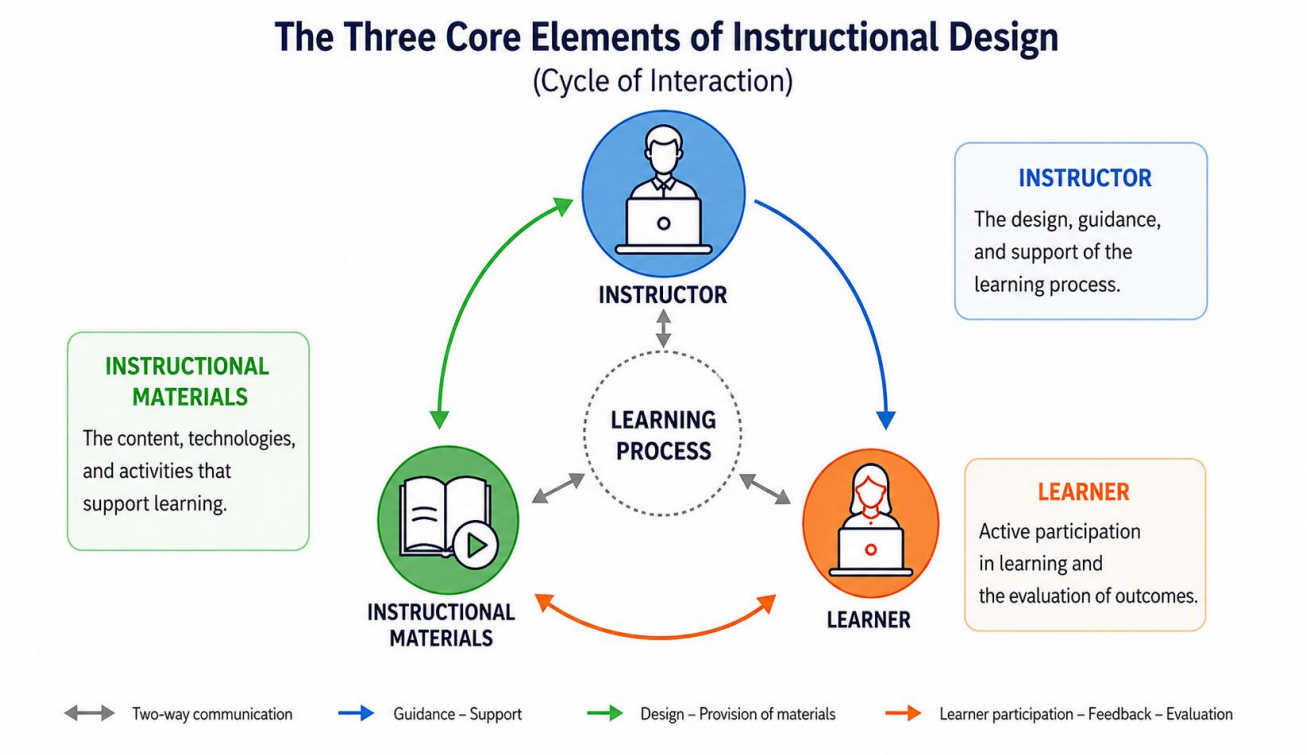

Figure 1: The three structural elements of distance teaching (the figure was created using the Chat GPT tool following the editing of a corresponding figure by Niari, 2023).

3.The methodology of distance learning

The design and implementation of distance learning is not a simple transfer of traditional teaching to the digital environment, but constitutes a pedagogical process with certain key characteristics which teachers must take into account from the outset (Table 1).

Characteristic	What this means in practice
Instructional design and organisation	Instructional design is based on the clear formulation of the course's learning objectives, which also include the expected learning outcomes. The learning process is organised starting with basic concepts and progressing to more complex ones.
Appropriate teaching materials	Use of a variety of educational resources. The material may include texts, presentations, audio files, videos, interactive exercises, etc.
Supportive technology and accessibility	Teachers and learners need to familiarise themselves with the platforms and the necessary technological tools, whilst at the same time ensure that everyone has access to them.
Use of learning platforms	The educational process is organised through learning management systems where the material and activities are centralised.

Characteristic	What this means in practice
Synchronous and asynchronous communication	Learning can take place either in real time (e.g. video conferences) or by accessing material at any time. Both types of communication and learning in the right balance.
Collaboration and interaction	Continuous interaction and an interactive learning environment. Learners collaborate with each other and with the trainer through discussion groups (forums) or online activities.
Flexibility of time and place	Students can attend and study from anywhere and at different times, without the need to be physically present in a classroom.
Autonomy/self-directed learning	The student takes an active role in managing their own learning, organising their time and pace of study.
Ongoing support and feedback	The trainer acts as a mentor, providing support, feedback and guidance throughout the learning process.
Assessment	Assessment should be ongoing and not limited to the end of the module. Formative activities, such as short assignments and self-assessment activities, allow for the monitoring of learners' progress.
Reflection	Reflection (critical evaluation of the learning process) acts as a mechanism for improving and enhancing the quality of the educational process for both tutors and students.

Table 1. Key features of distance learning methodology

4. Forms of communication in distance learning

Synchronous and asynchronous learning are forms of distance education. In distance education, both forms of communication are utilised in a complementary manner.

Asynchronous e-learning supports collaboration both between learners and between the trainer and learners (Hrastinski, 2008). Asynchronous communication takes place when participants are unable to be online at the same time, whilst allowing learners to log into an online learning environment at any time and download documents or send messages to teachers or their peers. They can also devote more time to refining the assignments they are working on, which are generally considered more reflective in nature compared to those involving synchronous communication.

Synchronous e-learning is supported by digital tools such as video conferencing and chat. It supports learners in developing learning communities, with the result that they feel they belong to a learning community and are not isolated (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2002).

4.1 Three types of communication

Figure 2 presents three types of communication, which, according to Haythornthwaite (2002), are particularly important for building and maintaining e-learning communities.

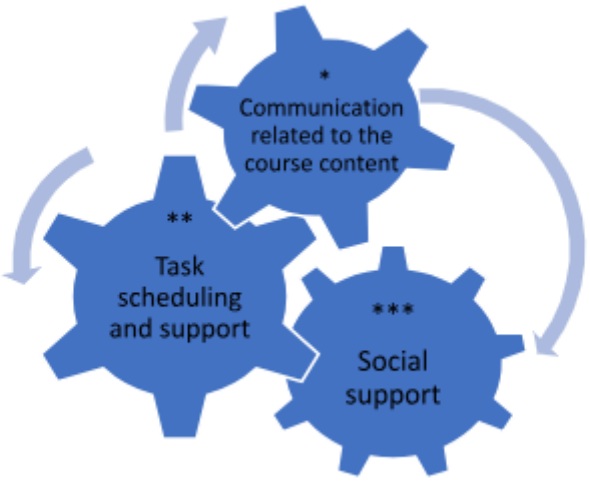

Figure 2: Three types of communication – Adapted by Stefan Hrastinski (2008) from Haythornthwaite (2002)

**Communication relating to course content: Asking and answering a question related to the content. Sharing information. Expressing thoughts and ideas.*

***Task planning and support: Planning work, allocating tasks, coordinating joint efforts or reviewing plans. Negotiating and resolving disagreements.*

****Social support: Expressing camaraderie, providing emotional support or advice. Using emoticons. Offering support when problems arise (such as technical difficulties). Discussing topics unrelated to work (Figure 2).*

4.2 Asynchronous versus Synchronous Communication: When, Why and How?

The choice between asynchronous and synchronous communication is a critical factor in distance learning. Table 2 summarises when, why and how we use each form of communication.

	Asynchronous e-learning	**Synchronous e-learning**
When?	Reflection and response to complex topics When synchronous sessions cannot be scheduled due to work, family or other commitments	Discussion of less complex topics. Getting to know each other,planning projects.
Why?	Students have more time to respond because the sender is not expecting an immediate response.	Students are motivated because a quick reply is expected.
How?	Use of asynchronous media such as email, forums and blogs.	Use of synchronous media such as teleconferences, instant messaging/chat and supplementary face-to-face meetings.
Examples	Learners who are expected to reflect individually on the course topics may be asked to keep a blog. Learners who are expected to share their thoughts on course topics and critically evaluate their peers' ideas may be asked to participate in online discussions on a forum board.	Learners who are expected to work in groups may be advised to use instant messaging as a tool to get to know one another, exchange ideas and plan assignments. A teacher who wishes to present concepts from the literature in a simplified way could give an online lecture via teleconference.

Table 2. Asynchronous versus synchronous e-learning: Good practices – Adapted by Stefan Hrastinski (2008) from Haythornthwaite (2002)

5. Design and development of educational materials in distance learning

The rapid growth of digital education in recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, has highlighted the need to redesign educational materials based on contemporary pedagogical and technological approaches. Educational materials no longer function merely as a vehicle for content, but as a comprehensive learning environment that enhances active, collaborative and self-regulated learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Good practices for the design and development of educational materials in distance learning are presented below:

✓ **Alignment of learning objectives, activities and assessment**

The principle of constructive alignment remains central, with an emphasis on designing materials that directly link learning objectives to activities and assessment methods (Biggs & Tang, 2011). In contemporary approaches, particular importance is placed on the formulation of learning outcomes related to 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving (Redecker, 2017).

✓ **Microlearning and cognitive management**

The contemporary trend of microlearning proposes breaking content down into small, self-contained units, which facilitate concentration and the gradual construction of knowledge. This practice is linked to cognitive load theory and the enhancement of the learning experience (Buchem & Hamelmann, 2010).

✓ **User Experience Design (LxD)**

The design of educational materials now incorporates user experience (UX) design principles, emphasising:

- user-friendliness
- clear navigation
- the coherence of the learning experience

The LxD approach focuses on how the learner experiences learning, rather than solely on the content (Tawfik et al., 2022).

✓ **Promoting active and collaborative learning**

Modern technologies enable the development of adaptive educational material, which responds to:

- inquiry
- collaboration
- content creation by the learners themselves

The social-constructivist dimension of learning is enhanced through tools such as forums, wikis and collaborative assignments (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

✓ **Adaptability and personalisation of learning**

Modern technologies enable the development of adaptive educational material, which responds:

- the level of knowledge
- the pace of learning
- the learner's preferences

Personalisation is linked to increased engagement and learning effectiveness (Holmes et al., 2019).

✓ **Use of multimedia based on pedagogical criteria**

The use of multimedia must be based on principles of multimedia learning, such as:

- combining images and text
- avoiding unnecessary information
- focusing on key concepts

The targeted use of multimedia enhances learning, whilst excessive use can have the opposite effect (Mayer, 2021).

✓ **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**

Modern educational material design must be inclusive, adopting the principles of UDL:

- multiple ways of presenting information
- multiple ways of engaging
- multiple ways of expressing information

This approach ensures accessibility for all learners (CAST, 2018).

✓ **Integration of real-time feedback**

Modern distance learning utilises tools that provide immediate feedback, such as:

- automated quizzes
- interactive activities
- learning analytics (the learner's learning journey within the online environment, e.g. activities completed, time taken, etc.)

Immediate feedback enhances learning and self-regulation (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2019).

✓ **Support for self-regulated learning**

The educational material should incorporate elements that help the learner to:

- set goals
- monitor their progress
- reflect

✓ ***Use of learning analytics***

The use of data from the learning process enables:

- the improvement of teaching materials
- the provision of timely support to learners
- evidence-based decision-making

Learning analytics are a key component of modern educational practice (Siemens & Baker, 2019).

✓ **Continuous redesign and flexibility**

Educational materials must be continuously updated to keep pace with:

- technological developments
- the needs of learners
- changes in the subject matter

6. Communication and teacher–learner relationships

Distance learning relies heavily on the quality of communication between the teacher and the learners, as there is no physical presence and the learning process takes place via technological means. Effective communication is a critical factor for learning success, student satisfaction and their active participation (Armakolas & Panagiotakopoulos, 2020). Figure 3 presents good communication practices.



Figure 3: Best practices for communication between teachers and learners (the figure was created using the Chat GPT tool)

7. Digital tools in asynchronous and synchronous distance learning

The effective use of digital tools is a key factor in the success of distance learning, as it influences both the quality of learning and learner engagement. The pedagogically informed use of technologies can enhance interactivity, collaboration and self-regulated learning (Bond et al., 2021).

7.1 The Google Meet and Zoom platforms

Our University offers the Google Meet and Zoom video conferencing platforms free of charge, which can be accessed via the link: https://www.hua.gr/portal-professors/



Figure 4: The Google Meet and Zoom platforms

The Meet platform allows for digital calls (video or voice) between two or more people for an unlimited duration using your academic account, whilst there are videos with basic instructions for video conferencing: https://www.hua.gr/portal/meet/.

Although both platforms meet the basic needs of modern distance learning, Zoom offers more opportunities for interaction and classroom management, providing more advanced tools for student participation. Basic instructions on how to use Zoom, via video, can be found at the link: https://www.hua.gr/portal/zoom/ Members of the University's Teaching Community can use links for calls of unlimited duration, which will be created by the Secretariats.

Some interactive and participatory digital tools that can be utilised by lecturers are: Padlet(https://padlet.com), Canva (https://www.canva.com), Google Forms (https://forms.google.com), Google Docs (https://docs.google.com), Quizlet (https://quizlet.com), H5P (https://h5p.org) and others. A detailed description and instructions for use can be found in the Guides to the Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Education published by KEDIMA at the Technical University of Crete: https://www.tls.tuc.gr/el/draseis/axiopoiisi-ton-tpe-stin-ekpaideysi

7.2 Best practices for the use of digital tools

Next, we will look at how to utilise digital tools in every form of education (Table 3).

ASYNCHRONOUS DISTANCE LEARNING	SYNCHRONOUS DISTANCE LEARNING
Structured organisation of digital content The clear structure of the educational material into thematic units, with clear objectives and instructions, facilitates navigation and reduces the cognitive load on learners (Mayer, 2021).	**Pedagogical design of the videoconference** Modern teaching should not simply be a transfer of the traditional classroom to the internet. It requires planning with short modules, clear objectives and active participation by learners (Rapanta et al., 2020).
Multimodality and pedagogically appropriate use of multimedia The use of video, audio, interactive presentations and text enhances learning when it is pedagogically designed and does not overload the content (Koumi, 2014; Mayer, 2021). Multimedia must serve specific learning objectives.	**Active participation through interactive tools** The use of tools such as polls, chat and breakout rooms enhances participation and reduces passivity (Martin et al., 2020).
Integration of interactive activities The use of tools such as discussion forums, self-assessment quizzes and collaborative documents enhances participation and active learning (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Activities should encourage critical thinking and the exchange of views.	**Cognitive load management** Information overload during a video conference can reduce comprehension. The use of visual aids and the segmentation of teaching contribute to better information processing (Mayer, 2021).
Enhancing self-regulated learning Digital Digital tools should support learners' autonomy through clear timetables, guidelines and tools for tracking progress (Zimmerman, 2020).	**Enhancing social presence** Encouraging interaction through video, discussion and collaborative activities strengthens the sense of community and learner engagement (Garrison, 2017).
Providing timely and personalised feedback The use of automated tools (e.g. quizzes) combined with quality feedback from the tutor enhances the learning process (Hattie, 2019).	**Recording and reusing lessons** Recording synchronous sessions enables repetition and supports different learning paces (Hrastinski, 2019).

Table 3: Making appropriate use of digital tools in asynchronous and synchronous education

8. The inclusion of people with special educational needs or disabilities

The lack of accessibility in learning environments constitutes a significant barrier to equitable and high-quality education, particularly for students with special educational needs/disabilities, who account for approximately 15% of the global population (UNESCO, 2023). Due to their direct contact with students, lecturers are best placed to convey to the educational institution (e.g. support staff, IT administrators) the need for additional adjustments in various areas, so as to ensure access to educational infrastructure and the achievement of learning outcomes. Support should not be based solely on the type of disability, but on identifying common barriers through a systematic approach and the principles of inclusive teaching design.

In this context, here are some good practices for teachers:

- ✓ Find out about the participation of students with special educational needs/disabilities in your teaching group (course).
- ✓ Try to identify the key needs of students with SEN/disabilities to ensure their full participation.
- ✓ Work with the university's Equal Access Unit for clarification and advice.
- ✓ Check what accessibility options are provided by the platform you use for your courses (e.g. live subtitles, screen magnification, the option to transcribe the session, etc.), to assist people with visual or hearing impairments or learning difficulties.
  Apply accessible teaching practices and personalised adjustments, and seek feedback from people with SEN/disabilities themselves on what works for them and what does not.
  Find out how to create accessible documents and presentations of all kinds (e.g. notes, presentations, exam papers, etc.) via the link https://access.uoa.gr/DAG/
- ✓ Find out more and gradually improve the accessibility of your teaching materials (e.g. audiobooks, subtitles, etc.). Regularly review your teaching materials and make changes to ensure they comply with accessibility standards.
  Try to maintain regular contact with students with special educational needs or disabilities to monitor their progress. Encourage them to ask for help.
- ✓ Keep up to date and share best practices in the field of accessibility with colleagues and specialist professionals in the field.
  You don't need to be perfect, but you do need to be flexible, empathetic and willing to cooperate.

You can also consult the detailed guidelines on Accessibility in distance learning, which are available on the website of the Accessibility Unit at the National and Kapodistrian University: https://access.uoa.gr/TAG/. More specifically, the document 'Guidelines for Lecturers on Accessibility in Distance Learning' (https://tinyurl.com/5hbedxb2) refers to accessibility design, accessibility guidelines for distance learning and guidelines for producing accessible educational content.

9. In Conclusion

By following the guidelines in this guide and continually adapting your practices to the needs of your learners, you can create an effective and supportive distance learning environment. Remember that success in online education depends not only on the tools you use, but primarily on your own willingness to communicate, adapt and continuously develop. With consistency and a genuine interest in your students, you can make a real contribution to their progress and ensure their learning experience is truly meaningful.

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