

# Defining Key Terms Related to Digital Learning

## *Survey of Higher Education Faculty & Administrators Summary Report*

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# INTRODUCTION

For years, there has been a sense of confusion and contention about the meanings of key terms such as online learning and hybrid learning. Additionally, there has been a lack of consensus on how to name different variations of online and hybrid learning (e.g., hyflex learning, synchronous online and hybrid elements, and asynchronous online and hybrid elements).

To address the ongoing debate about how terms related to online and hybrid learning should be defined, WCET (the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) funded a survey to explore the meanings of these terms. Dr. Jeff Seaman from Bay View Analytics conducted the survey and worked with Dr. Nicole Johnson to analyze the data. WCET and the researchers worked in partnership with the following organizations: the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA), Online Learning Consortium (OLC), Quality Matters, and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA).

The purpose of this report is to provide a brief overview of the findings from this study, which are described in detail in the following article published in the *Online Learning Journal*.

Johnson, N., Seaman, J., & Poulin, R. (2022). Defining Different Modes of Learning: Resolving Confusion and Contention Through Consensus. *Online Learning*, 26(3).  
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v26i3.3565>

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## AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The authors appreciate the leadership of the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), Quality Matters, and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) for their assistance in encouraging their members to participate in the survey and in promoting the results.

## COPYRIGHT AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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

For inquiries or more information contact [wcetinfo@wiche.edu](mailto:wcetinfo@wiche.edu).

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## KEY FINDINGS

The participants for this study consisted of 987 higher education faculty and 1,051 administrators (a total of 2,038 participants representing 870 different institutions from all fifty states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia).

The survey asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following terms and their definitions:

TERM	DEFINITION
Online learning	All instruction and interaction is fully online (synchronous or asynchronous).
Hybrid learning	A blend of online and in-person instruction (online instruction is synchronous or asynchronous).
Hyflex learning	Students can move between online and in-person instruction as they see fit (also referred to as multi-access or co-modal learning).
In-person learning	All instruction takes place in an in-person setting.
Synchronous learning	Instruction takes place in real-time and requires student presence (in-person or virtual) at a set time.
Asynchronous learning	Instruction is available for students to access at a time that works best for them.

### Participant Responses to Definitions

#### Online and Hybrid Learning

As indicated in the following charts, there is widespread agreement among faculty, administrators, and teaching and learning leaders with the survey definitions of online learning and hybrid learning. Over 90% of participants agreed with the definitions for these terms.

ONLINE Learning means all instruction and interaction is fully online (synchronous or asynchronous)

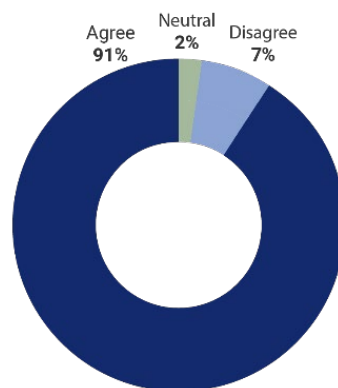


Figure 1 - pie chart showing those who agreed with the definition of ONLINE learning, 91% agree, 7% disagree, 2% neutral.

HYBRID Learning means a blend of online and in-person instruction (online instruction is synchronous or asynchronous)

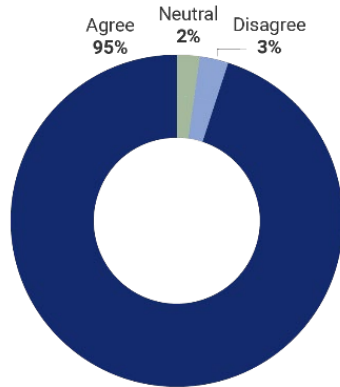


Figure 2 - pie chart showing those who agreed with the definition of HYBRID learning, 95% agree, 3% disagree, 2% neutral.

## Hyflex Learning

Hyflex learning (a term coined by Brian Beatty<sup>1</sup>) is a type of hybrid learning where the selection of learning modality is student-led. In other words, on any given day, students can choose whether to attend their class in-person, synchronously online, or asynchronously online. There was less agreement about the definition of this term as hyflex learning is an emergent modality, and some participants were unfamiliar with the term. The survey findings also showed that, while some participants may have heard of hyflex learning, they did not agree with (or held strong opinions against) the student-led nature of the mode.

HYFLEX Learning means that students can move between online and in-person instruction as they see fit (also referred to as multi-access or co-modal learning)

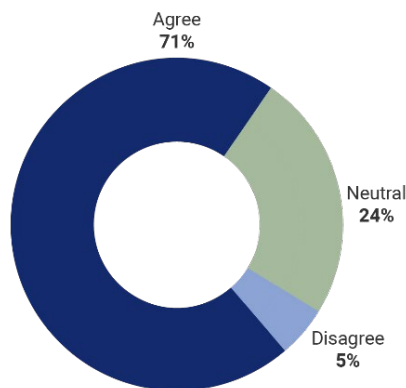


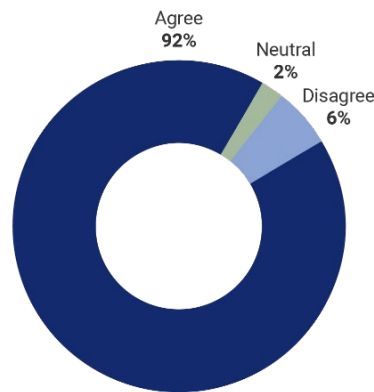
Figure 3 - pie chart showing those who agreed with the definition of HYFLEX learning, 71% agree, 5% disagree, 24% neutral.

<sup>1</sup> Beatty, B. J. (2019). Hybrid-flexible course design: Implementing student-directed hybrid classes (B. J. Beatty, Ed.), EdTech Books. [https://edtechbooks.org/hyflex/book\\_intro](https://edtechbooks.org/hyflex/book_intro)

## In-person Learning

Similar to the terms online learning and hybrid learning, the vast majority of participants agreed with the survey definition of in-person learning.

IN-PERSON Learning means all instruction takes place in an in-person setting

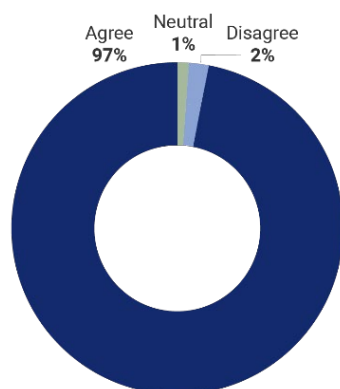


*Figure 4 - pie chart showing those who agreed with the definition of IN-PERSON learning, 92% agree, 6% disagree, 2% neutral.*

## Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

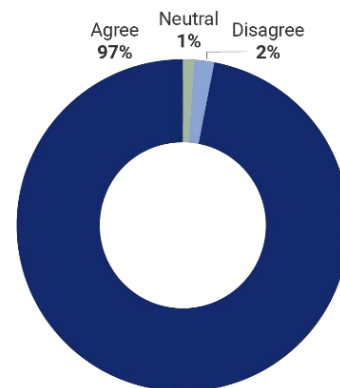
Lastly, most participants also agreed with the survey definitions for synchronous and asynchronous learning. Very few participants disagreed with the survey definitions for these terms.

SYNCHRONOUS Learning means instruction takes place in real-time and requires student presence (in-person or virtual) at a set time.



*Figure 5 - pie chart showing those who agreed with the definition of SYNCHRONOUS learning, 97% agree, 2% disagree, 1% neutral.*

ASYNCHRONOUS Learning means instruction is available for students to access at a time that works best for them.



*Figure 6 - pie chart showing those who agreed with the definition of ASYNCHRONOUS learning, 97% agree, 2% disagree, 1% neutral.*

In summary, there is a strong consensus about what each of these terms means. Considering that the survey participants held various roles within their institution and represented all types of institutions across the United States, the fact that there was minimal disagreement tells us that the survey definitions are appropriate for institutional adoption and scholarly communications. These findings are important because having a common understanding of the meanings of key terms helps support policy development, academic collaborations, and communications with students about course expectations.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The data for this report comes from two complementary national samples of higher education administrators and teaching faculty. The primary sample used email lists from a commercial source, Market Data Retrieval. Additionally, a second sample was constructed from open calls for participants sent to the memberships of WCET, OLC, Quality Matters, and UPCEA. Each organization was provided with a survey link shared through member communications and newsletters. Only responses where the stated institutional affiliation matched the National Center for Educational Statistics' IPEDS database, and the respondent email address matched the correct pattern for that institution were included. The final analysis file included 987 faculty and 1,051 administrators representing 870 different institutions from all fifty states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia.

General personal information (such as name, email address, and IP address) was removed from all survey responses prior to analysis. Only the lead researchers holding human subject research certification had access to the survey responses—they were not shared with other researchers, sponsors, or other organizations.

### Questionnaire

The survey definitions for online, hybrid, and in-person learning were from the Modes of Learning Spectrum (Johnson, 2021). For hyflex learning, Beatty's (2019) stated characteristics of that learning mode formed the survey definition. The researchers generated definitions for synchronous and asynchronous learning based on the general usage of these terms concerning online learning.

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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. Visit <http://www.cdlra-acrfl.ca/> for more information.

### About Bay View Analytics

Bay View Analytics is a statistical research firm focusing on survey design, implementation and analysis. Formerly known as the Babson Survey Research Group, the scope of Bay View Analytics' consulting engagements includes scientific statistical analyses, clinical trial statistics and survey designs for a range of topics, with a particular focus on online education. Bay View Analytics has been conducting research and publishing annual reports on the state of online education in U.S. higher education for thirteen years. Visit [www.bayviewanalytics.com](http://www.bayviewanalytics.com) for more information or contact us at [info@bayviewanalytics.com](mailto:info@bayviewanalytics.com).

### 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 which brings together colleges, universities, higher education organizations, and companies to collectively improve the quality and reach of digital learning programs. Learn more at <https://wcet.wiche.edu/>.