

# The Bewildering Language of Online Learning!

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*“What on Earth Are You Talking About?”*

For many faculty members, instructors, practitioners, administrators and policy makers, the language used to describe and discuss online and flexible learning is confusing. What on earth is a “flipped classroom”? What is the difference between “blended learning” and “fully online” learning? Why do some programs not have “instructors” but do have “mentors, coaches and guides”? It can be confusing.

Let’s look at the language of online and flexible learning and help understand what is being said when key terms are being used.

## A Starting Point

Before we look at a variety of terms, there are some standard definitions of what constitutes an online or blended course. The following table was widely adopted as establishing the definitions for these terms.

Proportion of Content	Type of Course	Typical Description
Delivered Online		
0%	<b>Traditional</b>	Classroom-based teaching with assignments and activities which students pursue independently of each other.
1 to 29%	<b>Web Facilitated</b>	Web resources and technologies are used to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. May use webpages and course management systems (CMS) to post syllabuses, readings and assignments.
30-79%	<b>Blended / Hybrid</b>	Course blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial parts of the content are delivered online and discussions, team projects and activities and web safaris are used for learning. The number of face-to-face sessions is decreased as the volume of online activity increases.
80+%	<b>Online</b>	A course where all, or almost all, of the content is delivered online with no or a very small number of face-to-face meetings.

Table 1: Common Definitions of Terms for Online Learning

The other two key terms used extensively when talking about online learning are synchronous and asynchronous. Here is what these mean:

- **Synchronous learning** – this refers to a learning event or activity in which a group of students are engaging in learning at the same time. For example, students at various different sites are linked together by audioconferencing, videoconferencing or web conferencing for a class at a particular time.
- **Asynchronous learning** – given the above definition of synchronous learning, it comes as no surprise this term refers to courses or learning activities in which students can connect at any time – they don’t have to be online or in class at a specific time. They may still have extensive interactions with other students and their

instructor, but when they do so is less important than the fact they do so.

But since this table was developed and the language of synchronous and asynchronous learning began to be in widespread use some fifteen years ago, new terms have emerged. Three in particular are important: (a) open and flexible; (b) flipped classroom; and (c) competency-based learning. Let us explore these terms.

## Open and Flexible

Two terms which have a wide currency in the field of new approaches to teaching and learning are “open” (as in *open* educational resources or *open* university) and “flexible learning”. Let us look at these two terms:

### Open

- An open university, college or school is a place in which prior learning plays no part in the admission process. Rather than looking at entry qualifications (high school diplomas, GPAs, scores on standardized tests), an open institution accepts all who wish to study. It focuses on rigorous assessment of their learning, rather than what they bring to their learning.
- So as to prevent the idea of an open door to learning becoming a revolving door – one in which more students fail than succeed – investments need to be made in self-assessment tools (“*are you ready for...*”), advising and student support services.
- When used in the context of learning resources – as in “open educational resources” – the term refers to the fact anyone can access and use the learning resources and, in many cases (depending on the nature of the [Commons License](#)), reuse and repurpose them while fully acknowledging their origins. Substantial open resources are available from iTunes University, OER Commons and OERu.

### Flexible

Imagine a student *anywhere in the world* who can for some (but not all) programs:

- Attend a class at a campus and earn credit – 15 weeks (45 hours).
- Study the same course online over 15 weeks.
- Study for a program / course in modules based on competencies, each lasting 2-3 weeks and earn credit (and/or an Open Badge[1]) and accumulate such credits into transferable courses required for program completion.
- Attend a boot camp or intense “hands on” learning period (the duration determined by the time required to master a competence) for practical work. For example, almost all of the Funeral Service program can be seen delivered online, but embalming requires “hands-on” / lab work. This “hands-on” component could be delivered in a five-day boot camp or through proctored work through arrangements with funeral homes throughout the province. Ongoing supervision of this skill could be monitored by video submitted by the student.
- Secure credit for training and development courses taken in the workplace for all but one course in a college or university program.

- Secure credit through PLAR, transfer credit and work-based learning agreements and proctored online challenge exams for all but one course in a program.

All of this requires the college or university to see flexibility as not just about increasing its online learning activities, but also to re-think the experience of learning, credit recognition and the student's connection to the institution. This is why this strategy for flexibility needs to be driven by pedagogy, not technology, finance or administrative needs and why the drivers of this work need to be faculty and instructors supported by expert students, administration and the technology team.

The key principle should be student choice. A focus on flexibility is aimed at expanding the repertoire of services available so that the college or university can make such responses.

## **Flipped Classroom**

There are a variety of roots for this idea, which is growing in use, but the approach to teaching and learning it represents is straightforward.

1. The flipped classroom is a specific form of blended learning.
2. Instructional content – the knowledge and understanding needed for mastery of the learning for a course - is delivered online not in the classroom. No more "sage on the stage".
3. Class time is not used for content, but for exploring the implications of the content or the student's learning. Discussion, MOOTs (used in legal studies), lab work based on the content, project-based learning, small group work, using the content to demonstrate a skill or the application of the learning are used in class time to make the learning "real" and meaningful for the students.
4. Assessments are done and submitted online and feedback is delivered online.
5. Students are also encouraged to engage in reflective learning through blogs and social media.

You can see examples of this approach in use [here](#).

## **Competency-Based Learning**

This is a different approach to how students secure recognition for their learning. Let us use an example as a prelude to explaining this idea.

The University of Wisconsin has started to offer a competency route to a degree based entirely on competency-based assessments. Known as the "flex option", courses are not required, but rubrics for competency are very clear and explicit, making learning focused and direct. The University suggests appropriate learning resources for learners to use to support program completion – all of which are either third party or open educational resources.

Students can use the mentoring and coaching services of the University when they feel the need of assistance. When ready, the student calls for a mastery assessment. Such a program is similar to the Western Governors University offering. They are not alone in doing so. In the US, Southern New Hampshire University, Capella University, Kaplan University and Walden are all offering this same route to a degree. In his call for free college education in the United States, President Barack Obama recognized these developments as "game changers" for skills[2].

To make this kind of learning work, there is a lot for faculty members and instructors to do where the knowledge, skills, understanding and social networks which faculty members and instructors have can be fully leveraged in the interest of students and the program they are attached to. This work includes, but is not limited to:

- In partnership with employers and other faculty members and instructors, determine what the needed knowledge, skills and competencies are for a particular set of learning outcomes.
- Design and develop a range of rigorous, multi-faceted assessments for the knowledge, skills and competencies making best use of all available technologies for assessment.
- Design, in partnership with other faculty members and instructors, instructional designers and librarians, the learning pathway and resource recommendations for students making best use of open educational resources, third party multimedia and more traditional resources, video resources and community resources.
- Design, in partnership with instructional designers and others, alternative routes for students who are most able and those who are least able, given the learning outcomes and competencies they are expected to master.
- Be available to mentor, coach and guide students on an as needs basis following the college or universities design for this support.
- Assess students against the competencies and skills required for mastery.
- Certify students as having mastered the skills required for the learning outcomes.
- Actively engage in research on the knowledge domain and skills so that the work is continuously updated and improved.
- Participate in professional development activities aimed at improving assessment, outcome-based learning, the development of OER material and learning pathways.
- Design, develop and share open educational resources relevant to the field of study and the learning outcomes.

This work fully leverages both the content and professional instructional expertise of faculty, but places them in a different relationship to students than is currently the case.

## **Some Important Technology Terms**

You are also likely to encounter a growing number of technology terms as you explore open, online and flexible learning. Here we look at five which are in common use.

- **Gamification**

The use of serious games as a way of developing understanding and mastery of knowledge, skills or competencies. See [here](#) for an excellent exploration of what this is and why it could be helpful for teaching and learning.

- **Immersive Learning Environments**

As its name suggests, an immersive environment allows students to be totally "immersed" in a self-contained artificial or simulated environment while experiencing it as real. Immersive environments can offer students rich and complex content-based learning while also helping students hone their technical, creative, and problem-solving skills. Because immersive environments are so rich and visual, users tend to be highly engaged. We can expect to see significant developments here as [3D virtual reality headsets](#) become low cost and enable a great many experiences to be highly personal and interactive.

- **Adaptive Learning and Assessment Systems**

These systems enable students to assess their progress with online assessment for learning (these can be complex, challenging or simple assessments). As the students complete their assessments, the system helps them identify where they are strong, what their weaknesses are, and brings to their attention new learning resources that enable the student to strengthen their learning, especially in their areas of weakness.

These systems use machine and artificial intelligence to reorder and find appropriate learning resources, given the performance of each individual student. Such systems are built in to most learning management systems (e.g. Desire2Learn, Blackboard), but are also available as standalone products like Knewton, ALEKS, Grockit and KnowRe. This is also an area of rapid growth and development, as you will see [here](#).

- **Simulation**

Whether in a virtual space or in a game, this refers to the use of technology to simulate situations in which the student may find themselves or wishes to explore. For example, there is [Second Life](#) simulations built for those training to be electricians or explorations of decision-making in historical conflicts for students of history. While some of these simulations use technology, others do not.

Simulations provide multiple chances to practice, including making attempts with higher risks and spectacular failures, and to learn, retry, and master new skills faster and with less effort than through experiences not mediated by computers.

- **Immersive Tutoring**

An intelligent tutoring system is computer software designed to simulate a human tutor's behaviour and guidance. Because these systems are able to interpret complex student responses and can learn as they operate, they are able to discern where and why a student's understanding has gone astray and to offer hints to help the student understand the material at hand.

Intelligent tutors provide many of the benefits of a human tutor to very large numbers of students and can also provide real-time data to faculty, instructors and developers looking to refine teaching methods. You can read more about this development [here](#).

If you come across technical ideas or terms and need help, then Educause offers a place to learn and deepen your understanding. Look in particular for the series [7 Things You Need to Know](#).

**There are many more**

This is a basic introduction to some key terms for online, open and flexible education. There are many other terms – see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for well used glossaries – but we have offered the ones listed here from a faculty and instructor perspective so as to connect these terms to the practice of teaching and learning.

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[2] Speech in Buffalo, New York, August 22, 2013.

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