

# What Effective Distance Learning is like at School of the Nations

Distance Learning is not something new for people who have access to the Internet. Many institutions have been experimenting with distance learning (also known as online education or virtual learning) and blended learning. MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), for example, has been using this method since 2003. The implementation of new technologies has opened up possibilities for many individuals to also try online learning, with many services and providers available worldwide. If you would like to see a little bit of what has been done in the past, you can check websites like [Khan Academy](#) and [EdX](#).

Many formats can be used in online education. It is essential to understand some key concepts before we advance in the Distance Learning concept implemented at School of the Nations. The first distinction that we need to make is between **asynchronous and synchronous** learning.

**Asynchronous learning** means teachers and students can work and have access to the lessons without being online at the same time. Asynchronous learning allows for the most important element of a lesson to be the learning itself and not merely being present. In practical terms, it means that teachers can post videos, assignments, tasks, and resources to students on a digital platform, setting clear deadlines and expectations. Students can access those resources at any time before the deadline and work on their learning.

**Synchronous learning** means all students and teachers are present in the same classroom at the time of instruction. It replicates the environment of the classroom with the time of attendance being the mandatory point of the lesson, that is, lessons start at 7:45 a.m. and finish at 8:30 a.m. If a student is not online at that time, he has missed the lesson and the content.

Given the technical issues that may arise when using technology: a lack of Internet connectivity, a problem with your device, and also the personal issues normal in anyone's daily life—having to deal with a problem at home, or tending to a sick relative—and given the extensive data analysis that has been done by companies like EdX, in an online environment, schools and teachers should favor asynchronous learning as much as possible. This ensures all students can access the material to learn regardless of difficulties they cannot foresee or control.

At School of the Nations, we understand that in a situation in which Distance Learning is forced upon us, such as school closure, we need to understand and cater to all the individual and particular scenarios each of our students may be facing at home, from the lack of proper space to attend lessons at home at a specific time of day, to the need to travel to visit a relative.

## **Because of this, we favor asynchronous learning as much as possible.**

Yet, as we understand the importance of the emotional and social aspect that education has in our lives and the importance of that for learning, we attempt to keep a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities while paying attention to the needs of each sections' developmental level. Teachers have been trained in the use of tools that allow them to meet students, show their faces, check in on everyone's wellbeing, and tell students about the assignments they are going to do. These brief moments of live interaction, even in an online environment, are critical to ensure everyone we are all in the same situation.

### **Differences between On-Site Classes and Distance Learning**

The main mistake that early adopters of distance learning make is simply trying to transpose the learning experience from onsite teaching to distance learning. Many other things involved in the experiences that simply do not translate from one to the other. We are going to list a few of these:

#### **Time of Instruction**

In a regular classroom, in an on-site learning environment, teachers are supposed to teach their lessons and also maintain discipline in the classroom. They are also responsible for engaging students and getting them to focus on the lesson even after interruptions. This means that even though lessons are structured in 45-minute blocks, teachers are not lecturing for all that time. They need to take attendance, ensure all students have the necessary materials, deal with disruptions in class, instruct students, direct them to their learning, walk around to monitor their work, and provide feedback to students on their work.

In Distance Learning, a lot of the disruptions and other elements are not present. When we consider all that teachers are responsible for in a regular classroom, and also students' attention span in a video lesson, we soon realize that online lessons should be concise. A video lesson ranging between 5 to 15 minutes is usually enough for teachers to instruct students and point them toward their work.

It is important to realize that even in a regular, onsite delivery, teachers are not speaking to their students for 45 minutes. This is even more apparent in an online environment. Distance Learning makes it possible for students to watch the same lesson many times, pause the lessons if something happens, rewind and playback the lesson in case of questions, and many other possibilities that are not present in a regular classroom scenario. Each of the settings has its strengths and weaknesses, and we should play to the strength of each of them.

#### **Assignments and Feedback**

Teachers are responsible for helping their students through individualized feedback, which is one of the most effective factors in learning. As such, teachers in distance learning are available to provide individualized feedback on students' work through the digital tools that the school has chosen to use. Teachers also make themselves available to students who have difficulties or questions while working on their assignments.

It is also important to note that assignments can be different from those in a regular classroom. While it is hard to have a group of students present something in front of the whole class, it is easy to adapt the assignment by asking students to either record a video, or a screencast of their presentation in which they explain what they are showing. At School of the Nations, teachers are already prepared to work with essential learning goals, which goes along well with the needs of distance learning.

## Delivery of Instruction

There are many different ways to deliver instruction effectively. Teachers recording their own videos explaining content to students is just one of them. It is important to note that the role of teachers does not change. Teaching is a profession that requires a high level of specialization, just as any other profession. This means that good teachers are not necessarily good textbook writers, nor that they are great at recording their lessons on video. However, as they are the specialists in their fields, teachers can work as curators of content by selecting videos, websites, and sharing resources with students. Curating content is something teachers are extremely well versed in doing, and it is what they do as part of their jobs already. They curate the best textbook in the market to use in their classes, the best videos to show, and the best digital platforms from the many options in the market. In Distance Learning, it is important to offer students multiple resources to go through in their own learning. We also understand that students might even use resources that have not been suggested by their teachers, which is something they already do in regular classes. There is simply too much information available online for anyone to be able to suggest all that is available.

Teachers, then, are expected to deliver their lessons by starting with a question, a task, or an assignment that will pique students' curiosity, engage them in the task, and allow them to learn. In this sense teachers are facilitators of learning. In this regard, however, it is important to remember that not all students are excited about studying Chemistry or History, for example. The challenges of the mandatory school curriculum remain. Teachers do whatever they can to engage learners, but students also must realize the importance of going through subjects that are not necessarily their favorite.

## Attendance

A key point in a distance learning scenario is flexibility. Routines change and, due to technology mishaps and individual changes that an emergency situation brings about, many of our activities are carried out through asynchronous collaboration, that is, material that is posted and available to students at any time. Attendance, therefore, is taken differently from how it occurs in a regular school scenario.

In a regular school scenario, teachers take attendance at the beginning of each class. In distance learning, teachers assign tasks and regularly check in with students throughout the learning process. Attendance is taken based on the completion of tasks, activities, or assignments and all necessary steps required of learners.

## Implementation of Digital Tools

In a moment when the whole world is undergoing so much change, it is not wise to require people to learn how to use new tools in addition to all the adaptations they have to go through. It is simply adding stress to an already stressful situation. Fortunately, at School of the Nations teachers and students are acquainted with and regularly make use of many different digital tools. This means we are going to make adaptations to the tools we already use effectively with our students, and extend the functionalities of some of them. We are not adding new tools to the plan right now because we are trying to ensure students and teachers will not have to go through yet another stage of learning on how to use those tools. Our focus is on the quality of the educational services we are providing and ensuring that high-quality learning is taking place. We are confident we have a very strong plan to ensure that. Please, check below for a more thorough explanation of the tools we are going to use.

## Time Spent in Front of a Screen

In a distance learning environment, the amount of time students spend in front of a screen will be higher than usual. However, we must make sure we balance the activities that are being assigned to our learners. At School of the Nations, we have asked teachers to think creatively and assign tasks in which students have to, for instance, take a stroll outside to observe certain phenomena, or record themselves doing some kind of physical activity. It is important to note the need for balance between screen time and off-screen time. Students do not spend all the time they are in school in front of a screen, and they should not do that while they are following their distance learning plan.

## Collaborative Work

The fact you are not able to physically sit next to your friends does not mean you cannot do collaborative work. At School of the Nations, we use many tools that allow for remote collaboration, and teachers and students are able to think creatively about how to deal with much needed moments of collaboration and interaction between students. We are using video chats and all of our G-Suite tools to ensure collaboration is taking place. We understand the value of collaboration for learning.

## Scheduling Meetings

Teachers, counselors, and principals are available to talk with students and help them. Even though it is easy for us to focus on the learning goals, it is important to remember the emotional response of students in a crisis. Therefore, our team is available for not just academic support but also social and emotional support.

## Flexibility and Adaptation

With all the differences and nuances that Distance Learning entails, we need to remember that it is taking place because of an emergency. No matter how prepared we think we may be, it is something that requires a lot of learning on the part of all stakeholders: administrators, teachers, students,

and parents. In times like these, it is paramount that we are patient and avoid jumping to conclusions because of one or two frustrations. Any new skill we want to learn requires a phase of adaptation, and being flexible is key. For instance, imagine you are a very good guitar player, but suddenly you are informed you will need to transition to using an App to play the guitar on a tablet. The fact that you are an expert in your field will certainly help, but there will surely be a lot of problems with the new situation and a learning curve will be required. If you are not patient and flexible, and you do not realize the necessary adaptations to succeed, you will soon abandon your efforts and blame it on the tools. However, what happens if you are forced to use the new tool? You will persist, and you will soon realize you are getting more and more comfortable with it.

At School of the Nations, all our teachers are experts in pedagogy and their content areas. We are confident that this helps immensely during this transition period. However, there is a learning curve that has to be respected. The fact that teachers must use new tools implies a learning curve, but we need to remember that teachers are well trained in the use of many digital tools, and so are our students. It is normal (and healthy) to experience initial discomfort with anything new we try, but this will fade soon and give way to a world of possibilities that were probably unthinkable before.

We understand it is a moment of adaptation for all families as well, and we do bear that in mind when elaborating a comprehensive plan to carry on with the learning of our students in a successful and effective way.