



Good practices for Distance Learning

CENTER OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Contents

Introduction	1
Definitions	2
Teaching in Distance Learning: Basic Principles & Practices	4
Small, helpful instructions	7
Some tips	9
Good Practices for Teachers	10
References	16

Introduction

The Democritus University of Thrace provides the necessary infrastructure to support both synchronous and asynchronous distance learning. Through the Microsoft Teams platform, it is possible to implement courses in real time, while the eClass platform provides asynchronous distance learning tools.

Distance learning requires good preparation both at a technical and educational level. This guide provides good practices related to distance learning to make it more effective. In this guide you can find some good practices for teaching in a distance learning environment.

Definitions

What is Synchronous Distance Education

Modern Education requires the simultaneous participation of teachers and trainees. The interaction between the trainer and the trainee takes place in "real time" and during it opinions and educational material can be exchanged. Engagement can be achieved either by being in the same place (e.g. in an amphitheater, a class, etc.) or by being connected via the Internet with sound and/or video, while in addition there is the possibility of file exchange and electronic "whiteboard".

Synchronous e-learning offers the immediacy of contact between the teacher and the trainees through online platforms (e.g. Teams, Zoom, etc.). The trainees, although they are not in the same physical space as the instructors, can have voice and visual communication with them, and thus, the restrictions of distance are lifted. For each session of Synchronous Distance Learning, time coordination of all participants is required.

What is Asynchronous Education?

Asynchronous Education does not require the simultaneous participation of trainees and trainers in the course. Participants in the educational process do not need to be gathered in the same place or at the same time. Instead, they can choose their own personal learning time frame and interact with the learning materials at their own pace.

Asynchronous Education may include a recorded lecture, with additional references for briefing, bibliography, possibilities for commenting and discussion, assignments, and quizzes. The integration of the recorded material with all the supporting material, thus forms a complete set of educational material, which provides the learners with knowledge through many different ways.

This type of education includes Self-Study, Semi-Autonomous Education and Collaborative Education.

- In **Self-Study**, the trainee is trained on his own, using any medium and material he deems appropriate (books, MOOCs, etc.).

- In **Semi-Autonomous Education**, the same applies as in Self-Study, except that there is a specific timetable for communication with the instructor either with physical presence in the classroom, or through a network (Internet, E-mail, etc.) or through audio and/or video conference and obviously, at those hours it is considered that there is Synchronous Education.
- In **Collaborative Education**, the trainer and the trainees communicate asynchronously with each other, the trainees study in their own time, but follow a timetable for the delivery of the assignments assigned to them by the trainer.

Synchronous and Asynchronous distance learning do not function as competing concepts, but can, and often is required, complement each other.

Teaching in Distance Learning: Basic Principles & Practices

We are ourselves

Most faculty members enjoy face-to-face teaching because of the ability it provides to interact with students, share passion for a topic, and track their participation and progress. They use their own energetic communication and humor. Many have a unique way of teaching, through verbal and non-verbal communication with students.

In distance learning, many of these elements are lost, because the course often becomes a standardized lecture. However, in a video presentation or in an online teaching does not mean that teachers should not be themselves! The solution is not to lose the physical energy. The teacher should keep his personality and style, in ways that are different from face-to-face teaching, but can remain genuine and authentic.

We are 'present' in our online classroom

Face-to-face teaching requires the teacher to be in the same place, in a classroom or an amphitheater, with his students. He is close to them, has eye contact, addresses students by name, uses his voice appropriately, records the signs of non-verbal communication, organizes and guides educational activities by explaining, asking, depicting, answering questions. He arrives in the classroom on time and stays shortly after class, to talk to any student who needs extra support. That is, the teacher is present and actively participates.

We need to do all this in distance learning as well!

Carefully organize the content of the course

The design of content and learning activities, as in face-to-face teaching, must be done methodically, systematically and deliberately. In distance learning students use many cognitive resources, such as a review of relevant literature, videos, discussions or quizzes. All these sources may be confusing if they are not properly classified by the teacher.

The flow of activities and content should be done according to a gradation of difficulty. The degree of difficulty must follow a logic, so that they neither overload the students by discouraging them, nor facilitate them too much, as a result of which they are bored and not activated enough.

Visualization helps

Online courses have a reputation for being boring, monotonous, and inflexible. Indeed, it is possible that the lecturer resorts to a (tedious) monologue of a lecture, as the lecturer does not have the opportunity to see the faces, movements and expressions of the students.

That's why we need to make sure that our presentation files follow some basic rules, which make them more beautiful, friendly and accessible to the reader. For example, long texts on a slide do not arouse the interest of students - especially if the lecturer just reads them. On the contrary, figures, images, diagrams, keywords, questions, exercises and problems, as well as videos, enrich a presentation and actively involve the learners.

All this needs to be done by an instructor (also) in distance learning

There are some moves of the teacher that are necessary to create meaningful and good online communication with students. For example:

- Draws up a schedule regarding how many hours he will need to devote to each lesson. This includes both their own preparation and the duration of online teaching hours.

- Publishes a weekly overview announcement of the topic for the following week, or a recap of the previous week's material, or both.
- Απαντά σε ερωτήσεις που δημοσιεύονται στο ηλεκτρονικό φόρουμ συζητήσεων ή στέλνει απαντήσεις μέσω ηλεκτρονικού ταχυδρομείου. Οι απαντήσεις δεν πρέπει να απέχουν χρονικά από την ερώτηση ή το θέμα που τέθηκε, αλλιώς θα χαθεί το ενδιαφέρον των φοιτητών.
- Responds to questions posted in the online discussion forum or sends answers via email. The response must not be late, otherwise the students' interest will be lost.
- Sets specific office hours for telephone communication, e.g. every Wednesday 5-7pm.
- Post a guide or a short video to clear up misconceptions about a topic or task.
- Use the forum and online chats.
- Creates thematic units for the better organization of the material and better study by the students.

When faculty members are active and regularly and consistently participate in online classroom remote communication, students are more likely to be consistent and present as well.

Small, helpful instructions

- ✓ Familiarize yourself with the platform you use and experiment with the tools it offers you. Tools like voting can be used to keep your students on their toes. You can ask questions at regular intervals and invite them to answer.
- ✓ Try to "put the students in the game" by giving them the floor. Encourage them to connect with a camera and microphone. Ask them for their opinion.
- ✓ Enrich your presentation with a video that you can watch and then discuss it.
- ✓ Prepare a small self-assessment and encourage them to carry it out. For example, you can have prepared a quiz and towards the end of the lesson give them the link to complete it. This quiz can be hosted either on the eclass platform, or in google docs, or anywhere you wish.
- ✓ Use visual media, interactive tools and learning activities.
- ✓ Video recordings do not have to be professionally produced and there is no need for video to be in every section. Instead, you can write a short introduction and greeting for each lesson. Remember that the written word has its importance to maintain our communication with students.
- ✓ Mini-lectures, assignment instructions, answers to frequent questions, weekly announcements – can be written in a friendly and approachable tone and represent your true self.
- ✓ The written text must show support and interest. In the weekly announcement, for example, instead of writing: "Some of you have sent in the last small task assigned to you overdue. You will not pass the lesson if you continue like this.", you can write, "I know there's a lot to manage as part of your educational commitments. However, make sure you send your assignment on time. Please contact me if we need help or answer any questions. Thank you!".
- ✓ Our written text must be clear, especially when it comes to instructions. Imagine that you are the student, alone, in front of the screen trying to understand what the lecturer means and what is asking to do. We need to ask ourselves if everything is clear to the readers-students, if the instructions are clear, if we have given them examples, if we provide them with adequate explanations and informational material, instructions on how they should cite the sources they use, etc.
- ✓ A friendly tone and immediacy are needed. For example, at the end of the assignment instructions, you could write, "If you have any questions about what to do with it, remember that I'm here to help. Perhaps the answer can also be given through a discussion with your fellow students in the discussion forum." This is friendlier and more reassuring than writing, "If you have questions, please post them on the eclass discussion forum."

- ✓ A good practice is to ask a colleague or research associate to read what you wrote and tell you if everything is clear, if your instructions help the remote student to understand what they are asked to do.
- ✓ Another good practice is to post a sample assignment or solution, or even a part of it, so that everyone has a picture of a "good" answer.

Some tips

For an engaging and effective distance teaching

- Plan the lesson carefully, considering that students watch it from their computer screen and not in the classroom or in the auditorium. It is possible that a series of activities, questions, advances, etc., will have to adapt to the virtual environment and the conditions of computer training.
- You need to familiarize yourself with the technology and applications used in distance learning.
- Create a friendly educational environment, trying to find ways to actively involve students in discussions, assignments, etc.
- Communicate regularly so that students feel that they have the interest and guidance of their teacher.
- Challenge participation and seek feedback from the students.
- Do not hesitate to ask colleagues, partners, friends and relatives for their help, especially in terms of the use of technology.
- The Internet has information on all topics, take advantage of it!

The most common failures in distance learning

- Confusing and roughly organized lesson plans.
- Lack of specialization of teachers in distance learning.
- Technical difficulties.
- Lack of culture in distance learning and the organization it requires to be effective.

Good Practices for Teachers

Lesson design / learning material

<p>Adapting the material to be suitable for distance learning</p>	<p>Lecturers should adapt their material appropriately so that it is accessible to students. They can also enrich it with multimedia material or even create videos with short lectures themselves.</p>
	<p>You can take advantage of the way of organization offered by the Eclass platform and divide your lessons into modules or on a weekly basis, depending on the way that best suits your course.</p>
<p>Adaptation of teaching techniques</p>	<p>In many cases, it is necessary to redefine teaching techniques in relation to those used in face-to-face teaching. The tools available on distance learning platforms (synchronous and asynchronous) should be considered.</p>
<p>Interoperability</p>	<p>Synchronous and asynchronous e-learning platforms should be complementary. It is advisable to adopt a strategy regarding the desired goals and adapt the material and activities we want to use appropriately.</p>

Equipment

<p>Microphone – camera – lighting</p>	<p>In modern distance learning, it is particularly important to have the appropriate equipment. Teachers need to make sure that the camera and especially the microphone they are using is working properly. If the sound is of poor quality, the teaching is affected as a whole and it becomes difficult for students to follow and participate. The proper operation of the equipment must be checked before each lesson.</p>
	<p>Also, make sure to be in a noise-free environment, as it significantly affects the sound quality.</p>

	Lighting should be sufficient, and if possible, avoid places where there is bright lighting behind you (e.g. windows).
	Before the lesson, make sure your equipment is working properly. For this reason, it is good to log in at least 10-15 minutes before the lesson so that there is sufficient time to resolve any technical problems.
Studio and One Button Studio	In Komotini there is a fully equipped studio. Also, in Xanthi, Alexandroupolis and Orestiada there are One Button Studios, which are accessible to the teachers of the Democritus University of Thrace, so that they can create videos that can be used as educational material. On the website of CTL-DUTH you can find relevant instructions for the use of the Studios. https://ctl.duth.gr/?page_id=1882

Preparation / Organization

Distance learning platforms	Make sure students know how to use synchronous and asynchronous distance learning platforms.
User guides	Make sure to inform students about the use of the platforms.
	How to use the Microsoft Teams platform: https://itc.duth.gr/msteams/
	How to use Open eClass: https://itc.duth.gr/open-e-class/
Informing students	Inform students in a timely manner about the detailed schedule of remote meetings as well as any deadlines.

Asynchronous distance learning

<p>Open eClass</p>	<p>Open Eclass operates as a basic platform for asynchronous distance learning at the Democritus University of Thrace. Eclass offers a wealth of tools that can be used by instructors to design and support their course.</p>
	<p>Indicatively, the following tools can be used</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Announcements, to inform students about the courses. - Forum, to exchange messages on a specific course or module. Forums strengthen learning communities and help students and faculty to have a more direct communication. - Exercises, for the preparation of students or their evaluation. The tool offers various types of exercises (multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blanks, text, etc.) and scoring modes. - Assignments, for the submission of written assignments. <p>It is particularly important to have proper organization of the material on the asynchronous distance learning platform.</p> <p>For detailed instructions, you can refer to the links below</p> <p>https://itc.duth.gr/open-e-class/</p> <p>https://ctl.duth.gr/?page_id=1882</p>

Synchronous distance learning

<p>Practices</p>	<p>Teachers should consider the special characteristics of the group and be familiar with the principles of distance learning.</p> <p>Indicatively, some practices that can be used during a modern distance teaching are mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encouraging participation. Lecturers should consider that due to the lack of direct contact, students may not have much participation. So they should encourage them to participate during the lesson. - Encouragement for the use of camera. Teachers should make sure to inform students about the use of camera and encourage them to keep them open so that there is greater immediacy and participation. - Breakout Rooms. Faculty members can incorporate activities that require student collaboration. Microsoft Teams platform allows them to divide students into smaller groups and work in topics that have been
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	<p>given to them. In this way, better communication and cooperation between students is achieved.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informing students about the possibilities offered by the platform. - During the lesson, you should have pauses in speech to give students time to ask any questions or express their opinion. - Use of other applications for evaluation or collaboration. Polls (e.g. Mentimeter, Kahoot, etc.), collaborative documents (e.g. Google Docs, Microsoft Office Online) can be used during the course, virtual bulletin boards (e.g. Padlet), etc. - Correct calculation of the time required, as some activities in distance learning may take longer to complete due to technical limitations. <p>Information about the platforms and tools can be found on the website of CTL DUTH: https://ctl.duth.gr/?page_id=1882</p>
Microsoft Teams	<p>Microsoft Teams is used as the main platform for synchronous distance learning at the Democritus University of Thrace. Microsoft Teams allows instructors to schedule and implement lessons in real-time with student participation, creating a "virtual classroom."</p>

Communication

Ways of communication	<p>Communication between team members plays an important role in distance learning. Indicatively, some points that should be paid special attention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of the institutional account. Lecturers are advised to communicate with students through institutional email accounts. For this reason, they should inform students and encourage them to check institutional e-mail accounts regularly. - Teachers should inform students about the rules of communication. - You should respond promptly to students' messages or notify them when this is not possible. - Teachers can use alternative communication channels. In case of using social media, appropriate measures should be taken so that there are no exclusions. In any case, it is recommended to use the tools offered by the platforms offered by the Democritus University of Thrace (e.g. creation of a Forum in Eclass).
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Evaluation and feedback

Assessment methods	<p>Special attention is required for the evaluation of students in distance education. An evaluation model must be defined to ensure the integrity of the process.</p> <p>It is possible to combine synchronous and asynchronous methods, considering the number of students and other specific parameters related to each subject and the educational team.</p>
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Technical Support

User Guides	<p>Teachers and students should be informed about the user guides that have been developed on the platforms and the software used.</p>
Problem Solving	<p>In order to solve technical problems at the Democritus University of Thrace, there is a request registration platform at https://helpdesk.duth.gr</p> <p>Both teachers and students must be informed and create the appropriate requests when there is a technical problem.</p>

Reflection and improvement

Recording Experience	<p>Write down what went well (to develop it) and what could be done better (to avoid it in the future).</p>
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Accessibility

<p>Students with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs</p>	<p>Teachers should be informed about the participation of students with disabilities and with Special Educational Needs in the educational team. In any case, and in collaboration with the Equal Access Unit of the Democritus University of Thrace, appropriate measures should be taken, so that there are no exclusions and it is possible for these people to attend the courses. Such examples concern the adaptation of teaching material (e.g. audio books, subtitling, adapting presentations for the visually impaired, etc.).</p>
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GDPR Considerations

<p>Personal Data</p>	<p>Appropriate measures should be taken for the full implementation of the GDPR Regulation and the protection of personal data. Appropriate anonymization should be done where required (e.g. announcements). Especially in synchronous distance learning courses, strict recommendations should be made regarding the prohibition of course recording and possible redistribution.</p>
<p>Licenses - copyright</p>	<p>Teachers should pay special attention to the material they distribute through synchronous and asynchronous distance learning platforms, so that they have the necessary licenses and do not violate intellectual property law.</p>

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