



VIRTUAL LEARNING
LEADERSHIP ALLIANCE

KEY ONLINE LEARNING TERMS AND DEFINITIONS



VERSION 2.0

June 2021

INTRODUCTION

The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA) is an association of innovative virtual programs throughout the United States. Consisting of state virtual schools and several consortia, the member organizations* serve over a half million online course enrollments annually, provide their districts and students with over 3500 highly-qualified teachers trained in online instruction, supply blended learning services to their constituents, conduct research, and engage in national projects to strengthen online learning. The VLLA is a 501(c)3 educational nonprofit organization.

The Key Online Learning Terms and Definitions were originally published by the VLLA in 2018. With the onset of the Pandemic requiring schools to move to a form of remote learning, many new terms have become part of our educational systems and vocabulary. In an effort to help clarify and educate districts, parents, and the community on important characteristics and elements that ensure a quality online program, the VLLA members initiated a project to update its Key Online Learning Terms and Definitions. Version 2.0 includes 51 terms and definitions.

VLLA MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

ACCESS VIRTUAL LEARNING

COLORADO DIGITAL LEARNING SOLUTIONS

GEORGIA VIRTUAL

IDAHO DIGITAL LEARNING ALLIANCE

ILLINOIS VIRTUAL SCHOOL

INDIANA ONLINE

MICHIGAN VIRTUAL

MONTANA DIGITAL ACADEMY

NEVADA LEARNING ACADEMY AT CCSD

NC VIRTUAL PUBLIC SCHOOL

NORTH DAKOTA CENTER FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION (CDE)

OREGON DIGITAL LEARNING

VIRTUAL ARKANSAS

VHS LEARNING

VIRTUAL SC

VIRTUAL VIRGINIA

WISCONSIN VIRTUAL SCHOOL

WISCONSIN ESCHOOL NETWORK

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CONNECTING TERMS AND DEFINITIONS TO INDICATORS OF QUALITY

The National Standards for Quality Online Learning ([NSQOL](https://nsqol.org)) includes three sets of standards; Quality Online Courses, Quality Online Programs and Quality Online Teaching. The original standards and indicators were published by iNACOL (now Aurora Institute) in 2011 or 2009. In 2018, the VLLA and Quality Matters joined as partners to review and update all three standards sets. The revision process was a community effort from surveys used to gather input from the field to researchers and practitioners coming together to make recommendations based on experience and research. Each standard set includes relevant standards, indicators, explanations and examples to assist states agencies, programs, and districts ensure quality online learning. Visit <https://nsqol.org> to view or download the standards sets.

In an effort to connect the quality standards with the online learning terms and definitions, the reader will find a NSQOL reference linking terms to the appropriate standard set (e.g., online learning courses, online learning programs, and/or online learning teaching).

For example, the term Accessibility is referenced in both the Online Learning Programs and Online Learning Courses standards sets.

Accessibility: The commitment to provide persons with disabilities the opportunity to acquire the same information, interactions, and services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and equally integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use. The person with a disability must be able to obtain the information as fully, equally, and independently as a person without a disability.

The concept of accessibility is also important for the individual learning needs of learners, such as English language learners, learners in rural communities, or learners from economically disadvantaged homes.

[Online Programs/Standard G: Equity and Access](#)

[Online Courses/Standard E: Accessibility and Usability](#)

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Accessibility

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[Online Programs/Standard G: Equity and Access](#)

[Online Courses/Standard E: Accessibility and Usability](#)

Adaptive Learning

Adaptive learning refers to an instructional approach that adjusts to the specific needs of individual learners by creating a differentiated learning experience within the learning environment. This may involve leveraging digital software and previously obtained learner data to provide learners with different learning pathways based on what competency they may need to practice most. Most commonly this adaptive approach is assessment driven or “dynamic” and can happen in real time if learning materials are connected to machine readable standards and logical criteria.

[Online Teaching/Standard F: Diverse Instruction](#)

Asynchronous Learning

Forms of learning that do not require interaction with others to occur at the same time. For example, interaction and communication may happen through forums, blogs, email, website links, or other contexts where learners may participate within a wider, more flexible range of times when other participants are not actively present in the same moment.

[Online Teaching/Standard F: Diverse Instruction, Standard C: Community Building, Standard D: Learning Engagement](#)

[Online Courses/Standard C: Instructional Design](#)

Blended Learning

Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience. (1)

Reference: Christensen Institute, *Blended Learning*, [What is Blended Learning.](#)

Blended Learning Models

There are a variety of instructional models that fall under the definition of blended learning; station rotation, lab rotation, flipped classroom, individual rotation, flex, a la carte, enriched virtual). For detailed descriptions of each model, please visit the Christensen Institute at <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning-definitions-and-models/>.

Competency-based Learning

This approach allows learners to advance upon mastery of course content rather than seat time. Competency-based education is based on competencies that include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower learners. Assessment is meaningful. Learners are actively engaged in learning and receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

Content Vendor

A content vendor is a supplier of digital learning content to an online program under agreed upon terms between the program and the vendor.

Copyright

Copyright is a set of laws and regulations that protect creators of literary, artistic, educational, and musical works, usually for a set period of time. Copyright laws in the United States provide protection against utilizing creative works without the permission of the creator and/or owner of the work. Typically, owners of copyrighted works stipulate license terms and ask for compensation when creative materials are used inside many settings, including educational settings.

[NSQ Online Courses/Standard B: Content](#)

[NSQ Online Programs/Standard I: Curriculum and Course Design](#)

Course Access

Course access refers to state programs and policies that allow students to take one or more online courses from a state-level course provider and/or a third-party course provider other than the student's home district of enrollment.

Course Completion

A course completion occurs when the student completes the course without dropping or withdrawing.

Course Enrollment

A course enrollment is an individual student enrolled in a single semester or full-year course that usually carries credit based on the specific requirements from the state's department of education.

Creative Commons

Creative Commons licenses give everyone from individual creators to large institutions a standardized way to grant the public permission to use their creative work under copyright law. From the reuser's perspective, the presence of a Creative Commons license on a copyrighted work answers the question, "What can I do with this work?"

Reference: Creative Commons, [About CC Licenses](#)

Credit Recovery

Credit recovery refers to a course or program in which a high school student may take part if he or she has failed to earn credit towards graduation for a specific course previously attempted, in order to avoid failure and earn the credit. Credit recovery options vary widely from retaking entire courses, to approaches not tied to seat time in which students demonstrate mastery of content standards for the particular course in order to earn the credit.

Data Security

The policies and practices that ensure data are organized and kept safe from corruption and that access is limited and appropriate. Data security helps ensure privacy and protects personally identifiable information, confidential and other sensitive data.

In the context of digital learning, educational institutions are obligated to implement protocols and procedures to protect the privacy of learners as mandated by various federal, state, and local laws.

Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship represents the skills, habits and behaviors students need to develop and apply in order to engage appropriately and responsibly when using technology. Digital citizenship includes digital literacy, ethical behavior, and practices that promote online safety.

[NSQ Online Teaching/Standard A: Professional Responsibilities](#)

Digital Learning

Any instructional practice that uses digital technology to improve educational outcomes and learning experiences. Example: The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA) use of the term encompasses online, blended, and related forms of learning that rely on technology. It includes a wide range of digital tools and practices such as instructional content, learner interactions, data and assessment systems, learning platforms, online courses, and adaptive software.

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy represents students' ability to conduct online research effectively, using multiple sources to gather and discern information; to protect their own and others' private information online; to properly cite sources; to understand the extent and consequences of digital footprints; and to respect each other's ideas and opinions.

[NSQ Online Courses/Standard B: Content](#)

Dual Credit (aka Concurrent Credit)

A system in which a student receives both high school and post-secondary credit when taking a course. Dual credit is also referred to as concurrent credit. The course may be hosted at either a secondary or post-secondary institution.

Education Management Organization (EMO)

Education Management Organizations are companies or organizations that provide comprehensive management services to K-12 public schools or charter schools on behalf of a school district.

Fair Use

Fair use is a legal term that permits limited use of copyrighted material without having to acquire permission from the copyright holder. US copyright laws provide for 'fair use' exceptions which allow for creative works to be used for educational purposes without permission. These exceptions are not unlimited and must meet specific legal tests.

[NSQ Online Programs/Standard I: Curriculum and Course Design](#)

Franchise/Partnership Model

Under a franchise/partnership model, a virtual program provides a district (or school) with the necessary infrastructure to support and deliver an online curriculum utilizing the district's teachers and staff. This generally includes access to a learning management system (LMS), online courses/curriculum, student support and training and mentoring for district teachers and administrators, while districts use their own teachers to build local online learning expertise. Franchises/partnerships may be employed by districts to provide fully online or supplemental options and/or blended learning options for students. This partnership model may require the virtual program and partnering districts to develop/establish additional guidelines or policies outlining terms of service to be provided.

Full-time Online

Full-time online refers to students taking the majority of their course load online, based on state policy definitions.

Hybrid Course

A hybrid course is one where a portion of the instruction takes place online, with the student and teacher separated geographically, but also includes traditional face-to-face instruction. In a hybrid course the online instructor remains the teacher of record even though the student may spend time with additional educators.

[NSQ Online Courses](#)

Hybrid Learning

Hybrid learning includes a combination of traditional classroom instruction and online instruction to meet the educational needs of the learner.

Instructional Designer

An instructional designer coordinates the design and build of efficient, effective, and engaging courses and interactives in conjunction with a subject matter expert.

[NSQ Online Courses](#)

[NSQ Online Teaching/Standard H: Instructional Design](#)

Learner Engagement

Learner Engagement is the learner's active participation in the process of acquiring knowledge or developing a specific skill in an educational setting or pursuit. Learner engagement is usually promoted and enhanced by learner interaction with the course instructor, course content, and/or fellow learners.

[NSQ Online Teaching/Standard D: Learner Engagement](#)

[NSQ Online Courses/Standard C: Instructional Design](#)

Learning Environment

A defined physical or virtual space where an intentional effort is made to provide a learner with the opportunity to acquire and master new competencies and or skills.

Learning Management System

A Learning Management System (LMS) is a digital ecosystem consisting of content, learners, and educators. LMS refers to a wide range of platforms that can be somewhere between minimalist to comprehensive in its functionality. LMSs are used to support online learning, blended learning, and face-to-face learning environments.

Learning Object

A digital resource, file, or collection of files targeting a lesson objective, standard or a lesson concept, that can be used and reused for instructional purposes.

Learning objects are often contained in a learning object repository (LOR). LORs can be public or private, and often include search capability and metadata to help end users organize, find and utilize learning materials.

Learning Pathways

A structured group and sequence of specific courses, academic programs, and learning experiences that an individual learner completes as they progress in their education toward a diploma, credential, or certificate. Learning pathways usually refer to educational options that include both academic and career related courses.

Online Course

An online course is a series of structured learning engagements aligned to state standards and delivered over the internet that allow learners to demonstrate mastery of a defined skill set. In the K-12 environment, instructional support is provided by a licensed instructor. Online courses may be accessed from multiple settings.

[NSQ Online Courses](#)

Online Learning

Online learning, as one type of digital learning, refers to the medium or “vehicle” used for instruction. In the online learning medium, over three quarters or more of the instruction typically occurs asynchronously within an online course.

Online Teacher

A licensed teacher-of-record who instructs and facilitates a student's learning experience in an online environment in which teaching and learning may be conducted synchronously and asynchronously. Online teachers perform similar instructional and administrative tasks as traditional face-to-face teachers, although some methodologies and instructional techniques vary based on the online environment. Online teachers use many of the same instructional guidelines and best practices defined by their school or program to ensure constant contact with students, and to monitor student progress.

[NSQ Online Teaching](#)

Open Educational Resources

Open Education Resources (commonly abbreviated as OER) are educational materials that are available in the public domain or through a license that allows for sharing with specific restrictions. An OER is often licensed in a manner to encourage users to adapt (or “remix”) and share the results with others. An OER can be text, pictures, audio or video media, software, or other formats. An OER can be in the form of single pieces of media or full modules, courses, or textbooks.

Schools, districts, and educators should determine whether a particular OER is appropriate for learners with disabilities OR take the appropriate steps to ensure ALL learners may access the OER materials.

[NSQ Online Courses/Standard B: Content](#)

Original Credit

Original credit represents a single, credit-bearing course taken by a student for the first time. These may be core courses required for graduation or elective courses. Original credit courses are also referred to as initial credit or first-time courses.

Personalized Learning

A learning engagement that affords the learner the ability to customize how and when they will demonstrate mastery. All students are expected to master the same objectives. The defined learning objectives however can be demonstrated in different assignments or assessments and at different times.

Remote/Distance Learning

A structured learning environment that is expected to be completed by a learner away from a brick and mortar school setting.

Seat Time

The amount of instructional time to earn a credit, usually measured by attendance in a brick and mortar school. Seat time is typically used in conjunction with some other academic measurement (like a grade or competency report) to justify awarding of credit.

Self-paced Learning

Allows students to learn at their own pace taking control of their learning path. The curriculum is constructed in such a way that the student may proceed without immediate response from the instructor. Students are able to proceed from one topic or segment to the next at their own speed. Self-paced courses do not follow a set schedule. Assignments and exams do not have start or due dates other than the official start and end date of the course. The course may provide a time management tool, such as a pacing guide, may have indicators for graded assignments, and may have suggested due dates.

Single-district Programs

Virtual learning programs offered by a single school district that, apart from limited exceptions, serve only students who reside in the geographical boundaries of that district.

Site Coordinator (aka Virtual Lab Facilitator, Mentor, Learning Coach, etc.)

The Site Coordinator serves as the liaison between the student, online instructor, parents, and school administration to provide a face-to-face component for online learners. Effective Site Coordinators work with the students to monitor progress, support them and build trusting relationships. The Site Coordinator role is often defined in various ways and may be referred to using a variety of job titles.

State Virtual School (aka State Virtual Program)

State virtual schools (also referred to as state virtual programs) deliver online courses, instruction, professional development, technology infrastructure and other online learning services to schools and districts across their states. They are created by legislation or by a state-level agency, and receive state appropriation, grant funding and/or charge course fees to meet operational costs. State virtual programs may be administered by a state education agency but may also be 501(c)(3) nonprofits or organizations contracted by the state to operate the online program. In most cases, the majority of state virtual programs offer supplemental online courses and are not diploma granting.

Student Enrollment

A student enrollment is defined as a single student, usually with a unique identifier issued by the school, taking one or more courses during a school year.

Student Information System (SIS)

A platform for education organizations to manage the day-to-day operations for a school or program, particularly related to managing learner data. SISs provide features to register and roster learners in courses, document grades, attendance, and transcripts, build class schedules and other learner-related data needs.

Supplemental Online Course

A supplemental online course is used to augment the class schedule for a learner's regular course schedule. Supplemental courses meet the definition of an online course, with the instructor and learner separated geographically, using an online instructional delivery system.

[NSQ Online Courses](#)

Synchronous Learning

Forms of education, instruction, and learning that occur at the same time, but not necessarily in the same place.

Teacher of Record (TOR)

The Teacher of Record (TOR) is a licensed educator who is responsible for a student's learning activities that are within a subject or course which are aligned to performance measures and the student's final grade in a course.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is "a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn."¹ Within a UDL approach, access to material and the way students access it is flexible and lessons are developed to take into consideration all learning styles to meet individual's needs. UDL guidelines look at the "why", "what", and "how" of learning that leverages action and expression, engagement, and representation, and allows all learners to interact and participate in learning opportunities to their fullest potentials.

Reference: CAST, [About Universal Design for Learning](#).

Virtual Attendance Option

A student may be considered present in a virtual learning environment if the student is present in either a video conferencing platform or phone conferencing platform. If the learning engagement occurs asynchronously, a student may be considered present by different parameters such as assignments submitted on due dates, minutes/days logged into the LMS, or total number of assignments submitted.

Virtual Schools

Typically, Virtual Schools or Online Schools are diploma-granting institutions that enroll students on a full-time online basis. Teachers and students are geographically remote from one another and all or most of the instruction is provided online through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Virtual schools generally do not maintain a physical facility, although some have small campuses or buildings for select activities. Virtual schools are usually responsible for providing all of the education services and requirements as a physical school; special education services, administering and reporting state assessments, providing counseling, reporting state and federal data, etc. These schools may be virtual charter or non-charter schools.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) is developed with a goal of providing a single shared standard for web content accessibility that meets the needs of individuals, organizations, and governments internationally. The guidelines make web content more accessible, primarily for people with disabilities. For more information about the latest WCAG version, visit their [website](#).

Reference: [The World Wide Web Consortium \(W3C\)/Web Accessibility Initiative \(WAI\)](#).

[NSQ Online Courses/Standard E: Accessibility and Usability](#)

SOURCES

NOTE: Below are sources reviewed when updating key terms definitions.

- Aurora Institute (October 2013), [Mean What You Say: Defining and Integrating Personalized Blended and Competency Education](#)
- Center for Educational Leadership and Technology
- Common Sense Media, [What is Digital Literacy](#)
- Quality Matters, [Learner Engagement and Online Course](#)
- State of New Jersey Department of Education, [Digital Learning Glossary of Terms](#)
- Waters, John K., (2014), [Adaptive Learning: Are We There Yet?](#), The Journal.
- Wikipedia, [Fair Use](#)

VLLA MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

