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What is Distance Education?

If you're new to online learning, you may be asking...what is distance education? You may be encountering terms and phrases that are unfamiliar. Luckily, our online learning glossary provides fast, straightforward definitions. Look up unknown words that you encounter in your college search, or use this glossary to help you navigate through your first online course.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

A

Academic Advisor - A staff or faculty member who is tasked with helping students in academic-related matters, such as selecting a major, choosing courses to take, and developing a degree plan or academic curriculum that meets the requirements of a particular department or degree.

Academic Credential - Written proof, typically in the form of a diploma or certificate, indicating the completion of an educational or knowledge level. Common academic credentials include: MPH, PhD, and ThD.

Accredited - The formal recognition of a university, college, or postsecondary higher education institution by a regional or national accrediting agency as meeting certain standards or requirements with regards to quality.

American Opportunity Credit - The American Opportunity Credit is a tax credit allowing U.S. taxpayers to receive a tax credit of up to \$2,500 for tuition payment made to a postsecondary institution.

Applet - A tiny program that is embedded in a webpage built in HTML (hyper-text markup language), and which launches when the webpage is loaded. Applets are written in Java and are frequently used in playing videos, animated images, audio, and other features that enhance a person's experience in the page. Unfortunately, applets are often written in ways that require individuals to download programs such as the latest version of Java language that may not be allowed on their computer. Thus, web browsing experiences that rely on applets can be frustrating for individuals who may need to use computers that have firewalls and security.

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Associate Degree - A degree granted after completion of a two-year postsecondary program beyond the completion of high school, usually consisting about twenty classes or a minimum of 60 credit hours. Associate degrees can be either transfer-oriented (if your goal is to get a bachelor's degree) or career-oriented (if your goal is to get a job immediately) and are awarded by community colleges, junior colleges and some bachelor's degree-granting colleges and universities. Common abbreviations for popular associate's degrees are A.A. (Associate of Arts), A.S. (Associate of Science) and A.A.S. (Associate of Applied Science). Search for online associate degrees. (/online-college-degrees/associate/)

Asynchronous Communication - Non-synchronous, two-way communication in which there is a delay between when a message is sent and when it is actually received. In distance learning, asynchronous communication most often take the form of email (e.g. your professor emails you with feedback on an assignment), voicemail (e.g. you leave a message for your professor on his/her office phone), and discussion boards (e.g. you post a reply to a classmate's question in a threaded class discussion.)

Asynchronous Learning - Any learning event where interaction is delayed over time. This allows learners to participate according to their schedule, and be geographically separate from the instructor. Could be in the form of a correspondence course or e-learning. Interaction can take use various technologies like threaded discussion.

Audio Conferencing - Voice communication delivered through standard telephone lines or Internet-based software sometimes used in distance learning.

Audit - To enroll and participate in an individual course without receiving academic credit. A popular option for lifelong learners who seek to indulge their love of learning.

B

Bachelor Degree - A degree usually awarded by a four-year college or university after the completion of a postsecondary program beyond the completion of high school, consisting of approximately 120 credit hours, which takes about four years of full-time academic study. The bachelor's degree prepares graduates for entrance into the workforce or for progression toward a graduate degree or certification. Common abbreviations for popular bachelor's degrees are B.A. (Bachelor of Arts), B.S. (Bachelor of Science), B.S.N. (Bachelor of Science in Nursing), and B.B.A. (Bachelor of Business Administration.)

Backup - A digital copy of the data saved on a computer hard drive that is used for the purpose of restoring the information in the event the data is erased or made inaccessible (e.g. photos, videos, documents, and music files copied from a computer hard drive and saved to a compact disk).

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Bandwidth - Refers the capacity of a connection to transport digital content. It is usually measured in bits per second (bits per second). Generally speaking, text transfers more quickly and requires less bandwidth than audio or video. Very effective compression can change that somewhat.

Blog - Short for "web log." A blog is an updatable website that is chronologically arranged, and updated at the user's discretion. What makes a blog different than a regular website is the fact that it can be syndicated so that others can subscribe and have the content delivered to a certain place automatically. Weblogs started out as journals and chronologically arranged websites. However, it is common now for blogs to include audio, video, graphics, and text. It is common for blogs to be available as RSS or Atom feeds.

Brick-and-Mortar - An organization, school, or business operating from a physical building or campus.

Broadband - As opposed to the connection speeds and capacity that one can obtain over a phone line with a modem, a broadband connection can accommodate the rapid transfer of large amounts or packets of information. Generally, Internet connections provided by cable or DSL are broadband. Most distance learning courses will recommend that you have a broadband connection.

Browser - Software that allows you to access view Web sites on the Internet from your PC, laptop, or handheld PDA. Examples of browsers include Firefox, Internet Explorer, Mozilla, Opera, and Safari.

C

Career Coach - Professional who is hired by others to evaluate their clients' career paths, offering insight about growth, development, as well as guidance in achieving goals.

Certificate - Written record indicating the attainment of a specific skill-set or body of knowledge.

Chat - When two or more users communicate in real-time by typing messages which are sent instantly within the chat room or instant messaging program. In distance learning, a chat may be used for a class discussion, or so that students may ask the instructor questions or receive feedback from an instructor as a group.

CCNE - Acronym for "Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education." CCNE is an independent national accreditation agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education that evaluates postsecondary nursing programs for academic and instructional quality.

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CLEP - Acronym for "College Level Examination Program." CLEP refers to a series of tests offered by the College Board that allow students to demonstrate college-level proficiency in a specific subject area, for which over 2,900 postsecondary institutions offer college credit, thereby reducing costs and time to degree completion. CLEP tests, priced at \$60 each, are offered in areas such as business, science and mathematics, history and social sciences, foreign languages, and composition and literature. These examinations are founded upon the belief that learning can and does occur outside of a classroom.

Cognition - The understanding and awareness of a concept or an object.

CNE Certification - Short for "Certified Nurse Educator Certification." CNE certification is a credential that indicates a demonstrated level of expertise and professionalism in the field of nursing as an educator. CNE certification is rewarded to individuals who have successfully passed the Certified Nurse Educator™ (CNE) Examination. An individual who has gained CNE certification is often referred to as a "CNE."

Cohort - A cohort is a group of students that move together through an educational program. Cohorts allow a small number of learners, usually starting courses at the same time, to take a group of core classes over a period of time. However, students in a cohort may not necessarily progress through the program at the same rate or graduate at the same time. Cohorts can be very beneficial, because students can get to know each other really well and provide a supportive learning environment for each other.

College - A postsecondary school that offers a general or liberal arts education, usually leading to an associate's, bachelor's, master's, doctor's, or first-professional degree. A college can also refer to a division within a university system (e.g. the College of Business, or College of Nursing)

Computer Based Training (CBT) - Training or instruction where a computer program provides motivation and feedback in place of a live instructor. CBT can be delivered via CD-ROM, LAN or Internet. Creation is done by teams of people including instructional designers, and often has high development costs.

Concentration - A program of study, usually a set of courses with a degree program, that allows a student to focus on a particular subject within or related to the major area. For example, an MBA-seeking student may choose a concentration or specialization in Accounting or Marketing.

Cookies - These are not programs, even though many people think that they have viruses or spyware in them. Instead, cookies consist of information that is sent by the

browser to a web-server and back. They are very useful because they store information about the website one has visited and make it easier to load the website the next time one visits. Some learning management systems require cookies in order for the user to log in or have access to certain sites. Other applications, such as shopping carts

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used in e-commerce also use cookies. Cookies are used to track web-browsing patterns and behaviors. They are also used to monitor a person's activities. For that reason, cookies have been held out as examples of how one's privacy can be violated in the Internet.

Correspondence Course - Also called "home study." Now considered somewhat old-fashioned, this form of distance learning, which first became popular in the 1890's, is education conducted via postal mail. Course materials, which may include textbooks, study guides, assignments, and tests are sent to the learner. Instructors communicate with students through mail, email, telephone, and FAX. which is a course in which you study at home, receiving your work by post and sending it back by post.

Course Management System - Also shortened to "CMS." The software, usually web-based, used by colleges and universities, as well as corporations and government, that facilitates distance learning by centralizing the development, management, and distribution of instructional-related information and materials. A CMS provides faculty with a set of tools that allows the easy creation of course content - syllabi, course modules, lecture notes, assignments, tests and quizzes, etc. - and is the framework in which they teach and manage the class. To an online student, a CMS is simply the vehicle by which you, the instructor, and your fellow learners interact using asynchronous discussion boards and live chat tools; access course information and materials, submit assignments, check your grades, etc.

Coursework - Tasks, assignments, and projects completed over the duration of an undergraduate or graduate course.

Credit - A unit of measurement to record the amount of academic work that has been successfully completed by a student.

D

DANTES - Acronym for "Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support" providing voluntary educational programs on behalf of the U.S. Department of Defense. DANTES facilitates the delivery of examinations evaluating knowledge and skills to award college credit.

Deadline - The limit by which a task or assignment must be completed and ready for submission.

Degree Program - An ordered series of courses culminating in an associate, bachelor, master, or doctoral degree.

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DHTML - Acronym for "Dynamic HyperText Markup Language." Dynamic web pages are written in a combination of languages that add interactivity. They allow users to enter data, send it to the server, and to move items. Dynamic web pages often establish two-way communication and allow for customized portal pages where the user behavior is recorded and "remembered" to give the user a customized experience.

Diploma Mill - Also called "degree mill." An organization lacking recognition by legitimate accrediting agencies which "awards" academic degrees and diplomas for a flat fee, usually requiring little or no academic study.

Distance Education - The formal process of distance learning. This term has traditionally implied the higher education level, but can include K-12 education, as well as continuing education.

Doctoral Degree - An earned degree carrying the title of doctor. The Doctor of Philosophy degree (Ph.D.) is the highest academic degree and requires mastery within a field of knowledge and demonstrated ability to perform scholarly research. Other doctorates are awarded for fulfilling specialized requirements in professional fields, such as education (Ed.D.), musical arts (D.M.A.), business administration (D.B.A.), and engineering (D.Eng. or D.E.S.). Many doctor's degrees in both academic and professional fields require an earned master's degree as a prerequisite.

E

Ebook - A book that can be read in a digital format, such as a PDF, using a computer, tablet, or ebook reader.

e-Learning - Any learning that utilizes a network (LAN, WAN or Internet) for delivery, interaction, or facilitation. This would include distributed learning, distance learning (other than pure correspondence), CBT delivered over a network, and WBT. Can be synchronous, asynchronous, instructor-led or computer-based or a combination.

ECE - Abbreviation for "Excelsior College Examinations." Formerly called Regents College Examinations, students can earn credit towards a college degree by taking an ECE. Most Excelsior College Exams are objective, consisting of multiple-choice questions. Some are entirely essay exams. Exams are based on coursework covered in undergraduate-level courses and examine how well one knows facts and terminology, along with how well one can apply essential concepts and skills.

EFC - An acronym for "Expected Family Contribution." The dollar amount a student's household is estimated to be able to contribute towards the cost of tuition. Used by the U.S. Department of Education and financial aid offices to determine the cost of colleges and universities.

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Employer Tuition Reimbursement - An employee benefit offered by employers to fully

or partially cover the costs of tuition for post-secondary or training courses.

Enrollment Advisor - Also "^(/)Enrollment Counselor." A college or university employee who is in charge of contacting, managing, recruiting and enrolling prospective, usually through extensive telephone and email contact. An enrollment advisor/counselor guides new students through the enrollment and initial registration process.

Ergonomics - The study of efficiency, the human body, and how it interacts with objects within the office and home environment. Findings from this study can help inform the design of furnishings and everyday objects.

Eyestrain - The tiring of the eye muscles that can result in headaches and difficulty focusing.

F

Face-to-Face - Also shortened to "F2F." A term used to describe a "traditional" classroom environment where the instructor and students are not separated by geographic distance or time.

FAFSA - Abbreviation for "Free Application for Federal Student Aid." The official, federal application students are required to complete in order to determine eligibility for federal financial aid. The FAFSA qualifies families for financial aid, grants, scholarships, loans, and many other awards, and is used by federal, state, and local governments, as well as schools. This form must be filled out each academic year by the student and can be completed online at fafsa.ed.gov.

Focus - Maintaining concentrated thought on a particular idea or action.

File - A collection of information to be used at a later time for referencing.

First-Professional Degree - Sometimes shortened to "Professional degree." The award designating the completion of an academic program required for professional practice that includes at least two years of college-level work prior to entering the program. First-professional degrees are awarded in the fields of dentistry (D.D.S. or D.M.D.), medicine (M.D.), optometry (O.D.), osteopathic medicine (D.O.), pharmacy (D.Pharm.), podiatry (D.P.M.), veterinary medicine (D.V.M.), chiropractic (D.C. or D.C.M.), law (LL.B. or J.D.) and theological professions (M.Div. or M.H.L.).

G

Goal - The culminating end point of directed effort or action.

Graduate Student - A student who holds the bachelors for first professional degree, or the equivalent, and who are working toward a master's or doctor's degree.

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Graduate Studies - Coursework beyond the bachelor's degree that leads to a master's degree, professional, or doctoral degree.

Grant - A type of funding paid to a student who has demonstrated a need for financial assistance in order to pay educational expenses.

GRE - An acronym for "Graduate Record Exams." This is a test designed to help admissions committees determine whether or not candidates are likely to succeed in a graduate school program (i.e. a master's degree program.)

GMAT - An acronym for "Graduate Management Admission Test." This is a test typically required by graduate-level business schools designed to measure analytical writing skills, quantitative skills, and verbal skills.

H

Home Office - A separate space in a home that serves as an area to complete paperwork. The space typically includes: a desk and chair; a computer and printer; as well as office supplies.

Hope Scholarship Tax Credit - The Hope Scholarship Credit may be claimed for the qualified tuition and related expenses of each student in the taxpayer's family (i.e. the taxpayer, the taxpayer's spouse, or an eligible dependent) who is enrolled at least half-time in one of the first two years of postsecondary education and who is enrolled in a program leading to a degree, certificate, or other recognized educational credential.

HTML - Abbreviation for "HyperText Markup Language." The programming language used to create web pages in hypertext, which refers to the code used to arrange the text on the page and to create formatting so that the pages appear a certain way on the World Wide Web.

HTTP - Abbreviation for "HyperText Transfer Protocol." An Internet protocol that is used by a web server and a web browser to transfer data (such as text, images, sound, video, and other multimedia files) between them. When you enter a URL in your web browser, this actually sends an HTTP command to the Web server directing it to fetch and transmit the requested web page.

I

Instant Messenger - Also shortened to "IM." Software that lists a user's buddy list (who may consist of friends, family, co-workers, classmates, etc.) who are also online and enables users to exchange text-based messages. Some instant messenger programs also include voice chat, file transfer, and other applications. Popular instant messaging

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programs are available for free by ICQ, AOL, Yahoo!, and MSN. IM may be used in distance learning to facilitate communication between two students or between a learner and his or her instructor.

Internet Service Provider - Also shortened to "ISP." A company that provides Internet access to consumers and businesses, usually for a monthly fee. Services include e-mail, the World Wide Web, FTP, newsgroups, etc. Popular ISPs include America Online, Earthlink, CompuServe.

J

Job Training - Instruction and practice centered around a series of tasks for a specific role.

K

Keyboard Shortcut - Computer keystrokes that, when triggered, complete an action or series of actions within a software program.

Keystroke - Pressing one key or a number of keys simultaneously on a computer keyboard.

L

Lifetime Learning Tax Credit - The Lifetime Learning Tax Credit is available to people beyond the first two years of undergraduate studies, graduate students or working U.S. citizens taking classes to improve or upgrade their job skills. It can be used for qualified tuition and related expenses (i.e. tuition and fees) paid by a taxpayer.

M

Master Degree - An advanced degree awarded for the successful completion of a program generally requiring at least one year of full-time graduate-level study beyond the bachelor's degree. One type of master's degree, including the Master of Arts degree (M.A.) and the Master of Science degree (M.S.), is awarded in the liberal arts and sciences for advanced scholarship in a subject field or discipline and demonstrated ability to perform scholarly research. A second type of master's degree is awarded for the completion of a professionally oriented program, for example, an M.Ed. in education, an M.B.A. in business administration, an M.F.A. in fine arts, an M.M. in music, an M.S.W. in social work, or an M.P.A. in public administration. A third type of master's degree is awarded in professional fields for study beyond the first-professional degree, for example, the Master of Laws (LL.M.) and Master of Science in various medical specializations.

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Multi-Tasking - To actively work on more than one task simultaneously.

N

Netiquette - (//) - informal rules of conduct for how to behave on the Internet. For example, in a distance learning course, it is poor netiquette to use ALL CAPITAL LETTERS in a messages, as this is the equivalent of shouting.

Non-Traditional Student - Also called "adult student", "adult learner", "re-entry student", or "returning student." According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a non-traditional student has one or more of the following characteristics: delays enrollment (does not entering postsecondary education right after high school); attends part time; works full time (35 hours a week or more); is financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others); is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma (has completed high school with a GED or other nontraditional diploma or has not finished high school).

NLNAC - Acronym for "National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission." NLNAC is a national accreditation agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education specializing in voluntary evaluations of postsecondary nursing education programs for rigor, integrity, and quality.

O

Occupation - A role within an organization requiring the performance of a certain skill or skills.

Off-the-Grid - A colloquialism referring to a home that is not connected to municipal utilities such as electricity, water, sewage, etc. The phrase is more commonly used to describe an individual who lacks a digital footprint on the Internet.

Offline - Not having access to the Internet or other computer network.

Online Learning - e-Learning delivered over the Internet (as opposed to a local or wide area network).

P

Personal Interest - An activity or subject matter to which a person is inherently drawn.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) - A process available at some colleges and universities by which you can earn academic credit for what you already know and can do, though the formal evaluation of a experiential or prior learning portfolio that identifies, documents, and assesses significant college-level learning acquired through informal or

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independent study, work experience, community service, non-credit courses, and other life experiences. PL is based on the belief that college-level learning is not limited to the classroom.

Private Institution - A school or institution that is controlled by an individual or agency other than a state, a subdivision of a state, or the federal government; that is usually supported primarily by other than public funds; and the operation of whose program rests with other than publicly elected or appointed officials.

Public Institution - A school or institution controlled and operated by publicly elected or appointed officials and generally deriving its primary support from public funds.

Q

Qualified Tuition Program (QTP) - A savings program, typically managed by a state or approved agency, allowing individuals to contribute to a special account set aside to help pay for tuition and other expenses associated with higher education at an eligible college or university. Formerly referred to as a "Qualified State Tuition Program (QSTP)" and currently also known as a "529 plan."

R

Registrar - A college or university department responsible for keeping record of transcripts, enrollment status, and student records.

Research - The pursuit of knowledge or understanding about a particular concept using a specific methodology.

S

Scholarship - A merit award given to students for academic achievement that typically includes a monetary gift.

Section 508 - The section of the 1998 Rehabilitation Act is a U.S. law that requires that all electronic and information technology procured, used, or developed by the federal government after June 25, 2001, to be accessible to people with disabilities. Affected technology includes hardware such as copiers, fax machines, telephones, and other electronic devices as well as application software and websites.

Semester - The half-year of an academic calendar typically lasting six months.

Skimming - The act of reading over text quickly to understand the overall concepts.

Study - A discipline or field of study pursued for the sake of gaining knowledge or expertise.

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SQ3R - A method used to improve reading comprehension by breaking down the reading process into five parts: skim the text; question what the text covers; read the text; recall the meaning of the text orally or in writing; and review the important points of the text. The SQ3R method is also referred to as the SQRRR method.

Streaming Video - Video sent in compressed form over the Internet that you view as it is being received, rather than waiting until for the entire file to be downloaded first. There may be two versions available: a dial-up version is usually a smaller file, with a smaller video screen and a slower frame rate, for 56k dial-up users and a high-speed version, a larger file with higher quality image, is designed for users with faster broadband Internet connections.

Surge Protector - A device designed to maintain a safe voltage level during voltage spikes, such as a lightning strike.

Syllabus - A document provided by an instructor at the start of a class that offers an overview of the course. The syllabus usually covers course objectives, topics to be studied, assignments, required textbooks, grading policies, due dates for assignments, examination dates, and other relevant course information.

Synchronous Communication - Live, real-time communication. Examples include a conversation at the grocery store, phoning your children to say hello when you're traveling on business, instant messaging or chatting in an AOL chat room.

Synchronous Learning - Any learning event where interaction happens simultaneously in real-time. This requires that learners attend class at its scheduled time. Could be held in a traditional classroom, or delivered via distributed or e-Learning technologies.

System Requirements - The technological conditions required to run a software application. Includes the operating system, programming language, database, hardware configuration, bandwidth, processing power, and so forth.

T

Terminal Degree - The generally accepted highest degree in a field of study, which is usually, but not always, a doctoral degree. Abbreviations of some common terminal degrees: Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), M.D. (Medical Doctor), D.D.S. (Doctor of Dental Surgery), D.D.M. (Doctor of Dental Medicine), D.V.M. (Doctor of Veterinary Medicine), J.D. (Juris Doctor).

Threaded Discussion - A common feature of distance learning that allows students to interact with their classmates and instructor. A threaded discussion is a series of messages on a particular topic posted in a discussion forum. A threaded discussion is asynchronous, not fixed in time or space, so students can log on at any time from any Internet-enabled computer to seek clarification for issues they encounter in their

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coursework, to discuss topics raised in class, or to initiate new discussions on related topics. A word or line discussion has the same effect of group or in-class discussion, in which students build on one another's perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the materials.

Time Management - Exercising judgment about how to accomplish specific goals and tasks within a specified period.

Title IV - The system of Pell grants and guaranteed students loans overseen by the U.S. government.

To-do List - A collection of tasks organized by how quickly each item must be completed as well as its importance or priority.

Touchpad - An instrument, typically found as part of a laptop keyboard, allowing the user to move and operate the cursor on a computer screen with the touch of a fingertip. (Also referred to as a "trackpad.")

Transfer Credit - Academic credits earned at one institution that are acknowledged, or accepted, by another institution.

U

Undergraduate Student - A college student who is pursuing a two-year associate degree or four-year bachelor degree.

University - A postsecondary institution that consists of at least one graduate school or professional school that award advanced degrees (master's degrees and doctoral degrees), as well as an undergraduate division that awards bachelor's degrees.

U.S. Department of Education - a government agency of the United States of America focused on equity in accessing education, managing distribution of federal financial aid, as well as researching and analyzing data about American schools.

USB Flash Drive - A device designed to store data and information, much in the same way floppy disks were used. The device is also referred to as a "jump drive," or a "thumb drive."

V

Video Conferencing - Real-time visual and audio communication using a computer, video camera or web camera, and a network, such as the Internet. Examples of video

conferencing include an instructor delivering a live lecture from one central point to many different students, all geographically separated, or a meeting between two students collaborating on a group project.

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Virtual - Simulated or conceptual, not physical in nature. In distance learning, the term "virtual instruction" refers to the online environment in which students and instructors interact.

W

Web Based Training (WBT) - Training which is delivered over a network (LAN, WAN or Internet). Can be either Instructor-led or Computer Based. Very similar to e-Learning, but usually implies that the learning is in the professional or corporate level.

Wi-Fi - An abbreviation for "Wireless Fidelity," trademarked by the Wi-Fi Alliance, indicating the presence of a local network to connect to the Internet and other devices.

Whiteboard - The electronic equivalent of a blackboard and chalk on a computer screen that allows multiple, remote users to add text, create drawings or diagrams in a shared electronic workspace that is visible to all participants. Whiteboards are a common feature of distance learning course management software systems because it can be used for online instruction the same way a blackboard is used in a traditional classroom.

Work-Life Balance - A lifestyle that maintains an equilibrium between professional, familial, and personal pursuits.

WPM - Acronym for "word per minute." A unit of measurement for the rate with which an individual types on a computer keyboard.

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