The History of Distance Education
1728 1729 1730 1731 1732 1733 1734 1735 1736 1737 1738 1739 1740 1741 1742 1743 1744 1745 1746 1747 1748 1749 1750 1751 1752 1753 1754 1755 1756 1757 1758 1759 1760 1761 1762 1763 1764 1765 1766 1767 1768 1769 1770 1771 1772 1773 1774 1775 1776 1777 1778 1779 1780 1781 1782 1783 1784 1785 1786 1787 1788 1789 1790 1791 1792 1793 1794 1795 1796 1797 1798 1799 1800 1801 1802 1803 1804 1805 1806 1807 1808 1809 1810 1811 1812 1813 1814 1815 1816 1817 1818 1819 1820 1821 1822 1823 1824 1825 1826 1827 1828 1829 1830 1831 1832 1833 1834 1835 1836 1837 1838 1839 1840 1841 1842 1843 1844 1845 1846 1847 1848 1849 1850 1851 1852 1853 1854 1855 1856 1857 1858 1859 1860 1861 1862 1863 1864 1865 1866 1867 1868 1869 1870 1871 1872 1873 1874 1875 1876 1877 1878 1879 1880 1881 1882 1883 1884 1885 1886 1887 1888 1889 1890 1891 1892 1893 1894 1895 1896 1897 1898 1899 1900 1901 1902 1903 1904 1905 1906 1907 1908 1909 1910 1911 1912 1913 1914 1915 1916 1917 1918 1919 1920 1921 1922 1923 1924 1925 1926 1927 1928 1929 1930 1931 1932 1933 1934 1935 1936 1937 1938 1939 1940 1941 1942 1943 1944 1945 1946 1947 1948 1949 1950 1951 1952 1953 1954 1955 1956 1957 1958 1959 1960 1961 1962 1963 1964 1965 1966 1967 1968 1969 1970 1971 1972 1973 1974 1975 1976 1977 1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014

Blackboard
1999

Blackboard, the learning management software that would
come to dominate the market for over a decade, first
launches.

The Machine Stops
1909

E.M. Forster publishes the short story "The Machine
Stops" in the Oxford and Cambridge Review. Besides
being consistently noted as one of the best science fiction
novellas of all time, the story is remarkable for its
description of an audio/visual communication network
used to transmit knowledge across the globe.

Skerry's College founded
1878

Skerry’s College was founded in Edinburgh, Scotland as a
way to prepare candidates for the Civil Service
Examinations by Post.

Instructional Television Fixed Services
1963

The Fedeal Communications Commission authorizes the
use of 20 microwave channels to be used by both
secondary schools and institutions of higher education to
deliver video programming within their districts or
immediate areas. The stations licensed under ITFS were
required to broadcast 40 hours of educational
programming during the daytime every week, but could
be used for other programming during their "o

ff hours."
This allowed television stations to use the spectrum for the
first "Pay-TV" o

fferings such as HBO.

DANTES
1974

The US Department of Defense closes the US Armed
Forces Institute and launches DANTES, Defense Activity
for Non-Traditional Education Support as a way of
educating US millitary personnel. DANTES works closely
with the Independent Study Division of the National
University Continuing Education Association to design the
new program.

Harper o

ffers Hebrew instruction by mail
1880

Chicagoan William Harper founded a correspondence
school to o

ffer instruction in Hebrew in the early 1880’s.
He later served as President of both the University of
Chicago and Bradley University. He was also closely
involved in the creation of the Chautauqua Institution,
which as the Chautauqua Correspondence College, was
one of the first colleges to o

ffer courses by mail.

University of Chicago launches first university-based distance ed
program
1892

The University of Chicago launches the first university-
based correspondence program. It's targeted towards
Illinois farmers and their families as a way of supporting
the state's economic structure.

Pittman starts Phonographic Correspondence Society
1843

Pittman’s correspondence course empire morphed into
the Phonographic Correspondence Society. The
Phonographic Correspondence Society later became the
Sir Isaac Pittman Correspondence Colleges

Cornell Home Economics Extension Program
1900

Founded by Martha Van Rensselaer in order to teach
"domestic science" to rural women in the state of New
York. Housed at Cornell University, Van Rensselaer's
program attracted 20,000 students by 1905.

ARPANET
1969

ARPANET, the precursor to the Internet, launches.

Western Governors University
1995

19 US Governors come together to form Western
Governors University, a distance-education based
institution designed to bring higher education to
underserved populations in their states.

University of the Air
1964

UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson appoints Jennie Lee as
Minister of the Arts and tasks her with creating "The
University of the Air," which was later to become Open
University. It had been envisioned by Wilson in 1963 as an
educational trust utilizing multiple institutions to develop
educational materials and educational television programs.

Pitman Shorthand Training
1840

Taking advantage of the new postal rates, Isaac Pittman offers a new service that allows people to learn shorthand
through the mail via postcard. Students would transcribe
Bible passages in shorthand and send them to Pittman to
be evaluated.

University of the Air (Canada)
1964

Inspired by the University of the Air in the UK, Canadian
CTV begins broadcasting educational television.

UB Online M.B.A.
1998

The University of Baltimore o

ffers the first fully-online,
AACSB-accredited M.B.A. program.

Social Media & Open Education
2007

University of Regina professor Alec Couros first teaches
his class Social Media & Open Education . The class was
open to both University of Regina students (who could
take it for credit) and anyone else who wanted to
participate (but not recieve credit). This course is often
credited as the model for the first MOOC.

Khan Academy
2008

Khan Academy launched by founder Salman Khan with
the express purpose of providing a high-quality education
to anyone in the world for free.

First LMS
1990

Software company SoftArc releases FirstClass,
considered by many to be the first Learning Management
System. FirstClass was the first system of its kind that
didn't have to run on mainframe computers, instead
FirstClass ran on Macintosh personal computers.
FirstClass was soon adopted by the Open University in
the UK.

Colliery School of Mines
1891

Founded initially as an attempt to help train the miners of
Eastern/Central Pennsylvania about mine safety, the
School grew out of an advice column in the daily Mining
Herald. Herald editor Thomas J. Foster recognized a need
after reading letters from miners and founded the
correspondence course so that they could pass the
examinations mandated by the Mine Safety Act of 1885.
The initial course was so successful that he soon
expanded into other fields including serving the growing
needs of iron and railroad workers. This e

ffort eventually
became the International Correspondence Schools of
Scranton, PA.

First hint at the future of computer-assisted learning
1912

Edward Thorndike, an educational psychologist at the
Columbia University Teachers College writes in his book
"Education: A First Book" "If by a miriacle of mechanical
ingenuity, a book could be so arranged that only to him
who had done what was directed on page one would
page two become visible, and so on, much that now
requires personal instruction could be managed by
print" (p. 165)

Deschooling Society
1971

Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich publishes "Deschooling
Society," a critique of education in modern societies. In the
book, he lays out many of the principles that were later to
be incorporated in online distance education, calling for
technology to be used to support "learning webs,"
networks of learners sharing similar interests.

CS221 Introduction to Artifical Intelligence
2011

Standford professors Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig
gain widespread fame when they o

ffer their course CS221
Introduction to Artificial Intelligence to the world for free.
This is the first time an elite university has provided such
an o

ffering at no cost.

Open University Japan
1981

Open University Japan founded.

Project Athena
1983

MIT launches Project Athena in order to develop
computer-based learning tools.

National Defense Education Act
1958

Alarmed by the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, the first
satelite sent into orbit around the Earth, the US Congress
passes the National Defense Education Act in order to
boost the US supply of scientists, engineers,
mathematicians, and linguits. Among other provisions, the
NDEA provides the first federally-backed loans for
students interested in studying science, math, and foreign
languages.

Lunds Weckoblad correspondence course advertisement
1833

An advertisement that appeared in the Lunds Wekoblad,

a weekly newspaper published in Lund, Sweden (No. 30), offered the opportunity to study “Composition through the

medium of the Post”

Anna Eliot Ticknor founds The Society to Encourage Studies at Home
1873

The daughter of a Harvard professor, Ticknor was
inspired by the English Society for the Encouragement of
Home Study to form a correspondence school for women.
However, unlike the English Society which was restricted
to members of the upper class, Ticknor founded her
school for all women in order “to induce among the ladies
the habit of devoting some part of every day to study of
systematic and thorough kind.” The courses utilized letters
back and forth between the students and teachers,
guided readings, and frequent tests in order to teach the
material o

ffered by Ticknor. Her Society lasted for 24
years until her death and served over 7,000 students and
employed approximately 200 teachers.

Penn State Adult Education Program
1986

Pennsylvania State University launches the first online
computer-based courses. Activity on the screen is
supplemented with audioconferencing between instructors
and students.

Hermods founded
1898

Hermods is founded in Sweden. It is to become one of the
largest and most influential international distance-learning
institutions.

Facebook
2004

Facebook founded. While other social networking
platforms had existed before Facebook (MySpace and
Friendser, for example), it was Facebook that was to
define "social media" for over a billion people across the
world.

Twitter Launches
2006

Twitter launches when one of its founders tweets that he's
setting up his “twttr.”

First recorded advertisement for a correspondence course
1728

Caleb Phillipps, “Teacher of the New Method of Short
Hand” advertised in the Boston Gazette that “Persons in
the Country desirous to Learn this Art may by having
several Lessons sent weekly to them, be as perfectly
instructed as those that live in Boston.”

University of Pheonix
1976

University of Pheonix founded to serve working adults and
other non-traditional learners.

Foulks Lynch Correspondence Tuition Service
1884

This correspondence school was founded in London and
specialized in accountancy.

SAKI
1956

Gordon Pask and Robin McKinnon-Wood design SAKI or
Self Adaptive Keyboard Instructor in order to help
students learn to type more quickly and accurately. SAKI
is the first adaptive teaching system in production.

"MOOC" coined
2008

George Siemens and Stephen Downes coin the term
MOOC (Massively-Open Online Classroom) when they
decide to o

ffer their course CCK08 informally to the world
at no cost.

First use of the phrase "Distance Education"
1891

The phrase appeared in the course catalog for the
University of Wisconsin-Madison.

First Web server launched
1990

The first Web server is launched to an internal audience at
CERN. The URL is info.cern.ch

Diploma Correspondence College
1894

Diploma Correspondence College begins in Oxford,
England. It's designed to prepare students to qualify for
university, but soon expands to o

ffer a wide range of
courses. It i later renamed Wolsey Hall.

Coursera
2012

Coursera is launched as a for-profit venture by Stanford
professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller as a platform
for universities to deliver course content online in a MOOC
format. While the public can take courses at no cost,
Coursera derives revenue through charging for
certifications and certificates of completion for students
who complete their courses. Revenue is shared with
institutions providing course materials. To date (December
2013), Coursera has raised over $65 million in venture
capital funding.

England introduces uniform postal rates
1840

In 1840, the Uniform Penny Post was established when
the UK’s postal service became a government monopoly.
Under the new regulations, mail weighing in at less than
1/4 oz could be sent for a penny, a change that made the
Post accessible to a large portion of the British population.

National Home Study Council
1926

The NHSC as a trade association dedicated to
preserviung the reputation of reputable correspondence
schools.

UMUC founded
1947

University of Maryland University College is founded as a
branch of the University of Maryland College Park in order
to provide education to working adults. It becomes an
independent degree-grantting institution in 1970.

CALC
1982

Margaret Morabito founds the Compuer Assisted
Learning Center (CALC) in Rindge, New Hampshire. It is
origainally designed as a small, in-person, computer-

based learning center for adults. PLATO
1961

PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching
Operations) is developed at the University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign. Not only is the system the first
computer assisted instruction system, but its use by
students across the campus also creates the first online
community.

Electroniic University Network
1992

The Electronic University Network o

ffers the first online
Ph.D. program through America Online.

First "Learning Machine"
1926

Ohio State University Educational Psychology professor
Sidney Pressey invents the first "learning machine," a
device designed to help teach students in introductory
courses at the University. Pressey hoped that the
machine could "lift from her [the teacher's] shoulders as
much ass possible of this burden [of routine drills] and
make her free for those inspirational and thought-
stimulating activities which are, presumably, the real
function of a teacher."

NHSC renamed
1994

The National Home Study Council renames itself as the
Distance Education and Training Council

US Government issues Educational Radio Licenses
1921

The Radio Division of the US Department of Commerce
(precursor to the Federal Communications Commission)
begins issuing licenses for both commercial and
educational radio stations. The first educational radio
license was issued to the University of Salt Lake City,
soon followed by the University of Wisconsin and the
University of Minnesota. Over 200 educational licenses
were granted by 1946.

MUD
1978

Essex University student Roy Trubshaw develops the
first MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) on a DEC PDP-11.
Intended to be a game, Trubshaw's MUD also served as
a model for future online communities and the origin of
online gaming.

NSF issues unfavorable report on Udacity
2013

The National Science Foundation issues an unfavorable
report on Udacity's experiment with teaching mathematics
to students at San Jose State University and some local
high schools. The report finds that the MOOC format does
not perform well with students who need additional
assistance.

BITNET
1981

BITNET founded as a joint project of the City University of
New York and Yale University. BITNET would later be
integrated into what was to become the Internet.
edX
2012

edX is launched as a joint venture of Harvard and MIT to
bring courses via MOOCs to the public.

California Virtual University
1997

A consortium of California colleges comes together to o

ffer
over 1,000 courses online.

United States Army Institute
1941

Started by William Young at the beginning of the United
States entry into World War II, the Instiute was created in
order to educate US Army personnel stationed overseas
during the War.

Udacity launched
2011

Encouraged by the success of the CS221 course,
Sebastian Thrun, David Stavens, and Mike Sokolsky
launch Udacity as a plaform for delivering free online
courses via the MOOC format.

MIT OpenCourseware Project
2002

MIT begins o

ffering course materials from a select set of
their courses online for free through their
OpenCourseware Project, setting the stage for the later
development of the MOOC.

University Correspondence College
1887

The College was founded in Cambridge England in order
to prepare students for the University of London. The
University Correspondence College was absorbed into
the National Extension College in 1965.

CALC goes online
1986

The first Computer-Assisted Learning Center goes live on
QuantumLink, a network for Commodore 64 users.
QuantumLink later becomes America Online.

As We May Think
1945

Scientist Vannever Bush publishes "As We May Think" in
the Atlantic Monthly, describing a system that "would
enhance human memory and thinking and [allow] people
to retrieve information from a computer in many of the
same ways in which retrieval is accomplished within
human memory." This article is often credited as the
inspiration for hypertext and, later, the World Wide Web.

Chautauqua Correspondence College
1881

According to The Chautauquan (v. 20), the College “is a
department of the Chautauqua System distinct from the
reading circle. In this department students receive actual
college instruction and recite assigned lessons in regular
college textbooks. The work is carried on by means of a
direct personal correspondence between individual
students in all parts of the country and instructors in
leading American Institutions.”

Univerity of Iowa
1916

University of Iowa begins to o

ffer correspondence
courses.

Diversity University
1993

Diversity University MOO opens online as the first "online
university" operating in a virtual world. While not a degree-
granting institution itself, Diversity University provides a
platform for early experiments by educational institutions
into real-time online learning. Diversity Univerity was
created by Jeanne McWhorter while a sociology graduate
student at the University of Houston.

First use of TV as instructional medium
1932

The University of Iowa begins broadcasting from W9XK,
the first educational television station. Audio was available
on radio station WSUI.

World Wide Web
1991

CERN releases the World Wide Web code to the world.

First class in SecondLife
2006

The Berkman Center and Harvard Extension School o

ffer
the first university course through SecondLife, a 3D virtual
world platform wildly popular at the time.

Open Education Alliance
2013

Udacity launches the Open Education Alliance to "provide
students worldwide with the relevant and necessary skills
and knowledge to pursue successful careers in
technology. This alliance consists of leading technology
companies who are stepping up to define the education
requirements for the workforce of the 21st Century. And it
includes educational institutions who provide pathways
and assessment that will empower students to learn the
skills required for success in the workforce."

AlphaMOO launched
1990

Stephen White writes the first version of a MOO (MUD,
Oblect Oriented) virtual world server in May of 1990 and
launches AlphaMOO. Xerox PARC employee Pavel Curtis
enhances White's code and launches LambdaMOO in
October of 1990.

Open University
1969

The British Open University begins to grant degrees.

United States Armed Forces Institute
1943

The US Army Institute is shuttered and reborn as the
United States Armed Forces Institute with a mission to
educate millitary personnel from all services both during
war and peacetime.

GI Bill
1944

Congress passes the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of
1944, more commonly known as the "GI Bill of Rights."
Among other provisions it provides funds for educating
soldiers returning from WWII. By 1947 almost one half
(49%) of all people admitted to college are veterans.

Toussaint and Lanenscheidt form correspondence language school
1856

Charles Toussaint (a Frenchman) and Gustav
Langenscheidt (a German) form a new school in Berlin with
the aim of teaching languages by mail. It wasn’t exactly
“interactive” by today’s standards: the prospectus noted
that students could submit questions, but “it would hardly
be necessary…since everything is fully explained in the
course.”