

NONPROFIT E-LEARNING OVERVIEW

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By Jacques LeCavalier and Bill Tucker

Like any complex, quickly evolving field, e-learning is often misunderstood and oversimplified. Some of the most frequent misconceptions are summarized below:

Myth: E-Learning is about replacing classroom training.

Truth: Maybe or maybe not. E-Learning is generally seen as better than physical classroom instruction for knowledge transfer. However, most organizations that are adopting e-learning are “blending” e-learning with classroom learning, using each to its best advantage.

Myth: E-Learning is just reading text on the screen.

Truth: Some products sold as e-learning courses are little more than “page-turners,” but most e-learning course designers aim for learner interactivity with the course material, instructor and fellow learners. You have to judge how well each course accomplishes this aim. Even the ability to link pages together in a non-linear way makes e-learning more interactive than a book. At its best, e-learning is extremely engaging, rich and instructionally powerful.

Myth: E-Learning is strictly a cost-saving measure.

Truth: Although e-learning requires significant initial investment, organizations can generate huge cost savings due to reduced travel, trainee and instructor time savings and reduced facilities costs. But there are several other major reasons for implementing e-learning, including reaching more learners, achieving faster knowledge dissemination, global consistency of instruction, and managing organizational learning more systematically.

Myth: E-Learning is just for teaching information technology.

Truth: Certainly not! E-learning is used today to support a wide range of topics and competencies, from highly technical content to business and personal skills.

Myth: E-Learning removes the role of the instructor.

Truth: E-learning allows instructors to spend less time on basic knowledge and skill development. It can enhance classroom instruction by ensuring that trainees master basic concepts before they get to the classroom. E-learning can also enrich the role of instructors who are willing to learn new skills, such as live e-learning facilitation, online coaching and online course management.

Myth: E-Learning dismisses the importance of discussion and collaboration.

Truth: Virtual classrooms, discussion boards and many other strategies support collaborative learning, both synchronously and asynchronously.

What Makes E-Learning Challenging?

- *Emphasis on design:* Bad online learning cannot be rescued by a good instructor; the materials live and die by the quality of their design and implementation.
- *Technology intensive:* E-learning relies on a sometimes complex system of software, hardware, protocols and network infrastructure. While reliability is steadily improving, technical problems remain. Good technical support is essential.
- *Bandwidth limitations:* Sound, video and other rich media components require high-speed connections and can put a strain on limited-capacity organizational networks.
- *Less face-to-face contact:* E-learning makes some learning activities solitary, and takes away much of the informal interactions common to face-to-face training. This can be an issue in organizations where training is seen as a "perk."
- *Up-front investment required:* E-learning is considerably more expensive to develop than conventional training. Moreover, first e-learning projects are almost always more costly than expected, as with any complex endeavor.
- *Decision makers must be educated:* Educating managers about the costs, benefits, requirements and appropriate uses of e-learning can be a long-term process.

The Benefits of E-Learning

- *Flexibility and convenience:* Learners can proceed "at their own pace and at their own place," accessing training at any time, and only as much as they need.
- *Universal access:* Thanks to universal Internet protocols and widely available Web browsers, the same training program can be delivered to virtually any computer anywhere in the world.
- *Cost and time savings:* There are no travel costs, and facilities costs can be greatly reduced. The time required for online learning is, on average, about 50 percent of the time required by an equivalent classroom training session, lowering costs further. When an e-learning project is based on a sound business case, up-front development costs can be quickly recovered through training delivery savings.
- *Consistency and customization:* The same content is delivered to every learner, yet material can also be customized for different groups or for specific learning needs.
- *Ease of update:* Changes can easily be made in the content and everyone worldwide can instantly access the update.
- *Community building:* Online collaborative learning can allow groups and organizations to create and cultivate enduring communities of practice over the Web.
- *Scalability:* With the right infrastructure in place, programs can be "ramped up" to many thousands of learners, with little extra effort or cost.

T H R E E T Y P E S O F E - L E A R N I N G

Self-Paced E-Learning

This is the type of e-learning frequently referred to as Web-based training (formerly computer-based training). It encompasses a wide range of technology-based learning products, from online tutorials and exams/assessments to sophisticated simulations, using media ranging from simple text and graphics to audio and video.

On their own, online information, documentation or reference tools (including most Web sites) are not e-learning. What distinguishes self-paced e-learning from these types of tools is, simply put, active involvement of the learner with the content. This is achieved through practice, assessments and instructionally sound design. Unfortunately, there are still many who try to pass off "page turners" and online PowerPoint presentations as e-learning. We consider that online information. As we mention in our discussion of blended learning, online reference and performance support can be an effective complement to e-learning programs. For example, it is good practice in some competency areas to include practice exercises that require learners to use online reference tools which will also be used on the job. This is one way to more closely integrate learning with work.

Live E-Learning

Live, or synchronous, e-learning refers primarily to instructor-led learning that brings learners together in real time over the Internet. Examples of live e-learning include virtual classes, online chat and application sharing to support group projects, and Web-based lectures and conferences.

Live e-learning requires less content preparation than the other forms of e-learning but is more demanding in terms of planning and logistics. Likewise, it is not as scalable as self-paced online learning. Mostly, this type of learning takes place over synchronous communications platforms such as Isoph Blue's integrated Web conferencing system.

Online Collaborative Learning

This refers to group learning in which exchanges among instructors and learners occur with a time delay (i.e., not in real time), and usually over more than one day. Some examples include online discussions, forums, debates or seminars, polling exercises, group research or design projects, Internet communications with mentors or experts, some multi-user games and "blogging." While online collaborative learning can be a powerful strategy, it requires significant effort and commitment from both learners and instructors. Generally found in academic settings, its applications in corporate and nonprofit e-learning are growing in number and sophistication.

Contacting Isoph

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