



UNDERSTANDING E-LEARNING

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Abstract

E-learning has been around more than 18 years, and yet is still relatively misunderstood. Although it continues to grow in popularity and now accounts for more than 10 per cent of all training, many people are missing its full potential and are failing to understand the benefits it can yield. This Conceptual Research Paper aims to confer various concepts of e-learning, components of e-learning, models of e-learning, characteristics of e-learning and pros and cons of e-learning. Better understanding and delivery of e-learning will provide the tangible results to convince skeptics of the real, direct impact it can have.

Key Words: *E-learning, components, models, characteristics, benefits*



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Introduction:

As Carl Sagan said, “we live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology”. (Fee, 2010) This is aptly applicable to the major and new concept of *e-learning* in the field of education. Many a time, the people have wrong notions about e-learning that it is related with solitary individual sitting at a keyboard, working his or her way through readings, exercise and test. Some think it as distance learning, and they think of it as self-study, lacking the interactions and the ‘human dimension’ of more traditional ways of learning. Some people think it is related with amalgamation of information and communication technology (ICT) with the already existing content matter. One another objection with *e-learning* is that it is useful for only certain knowledge or limited skills. No doubt, to some extent it is correct that certain e-learning methods are better suited to knowledge acquisition rather and skill development. The researcher has tried to answer all the above misconceptions in this conceptual paper with the help of referring various books and websites related to *e-learning*.

Objective of the study:

Following objectives are aligned with while preparing this conceptual research paper.

1. To understand meaning and definitions of e-learning
2. To understand components of e-learning
3. To understand nature of e-learning
4. To understand various models of e-learning
5. To understand benefits of e-learning

Definitions of e-learning:

Before discussing the available definitions of e-learning, we came to know that “according to the etymology in Webster’s American English dictionary, the term first appeared in the year 1997.” (Fee, 2010). Surprisingly, most British dictionaries have not included this term considering it ‘a discrete entry for e-learning, simply offering e- as prefix denoting electronic’. (Fee, 2010). There are several of versions of the spelling of ‘*e-learning*’. The major spelling variations are e-learning, eLearning, elearning, e-Learning, *e-learning*. “And the leading British journal on the subject idiosyncratically spells it e.learning.” (Fee, 2010)

The origins of the term e-Learning is not certain, although it is suggested that the term most likely originated during the 1980's, within the similar time frame of another delivery mode online learning. While some authors explicitly define e-Learning, others imply a specific definition or view of e-Learning in their article. These definitions materialize, some through conflicting views of other definitions, and some just by simply comparing defining characteristics with other existing terms. In particular, Ellis (2004)^a disagrees with authors like Nichols (2003)^b who define e-Learning as strictly being accessible using technological tools that are either web-based, web-distributed, or web-capable. The belief that e-Learning not only covers content and instructional methods delivered via CD-ROM, the Internet or an Intranet (Benson et al., 2002; Clark, 2002)^c but also includes audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast and interactive TV is the one held by Ellis. Although technological characteristics are included in the definition of the term, Tavangarian, Leypold, Nölting, Röser, and Voigt (2004) as well as Triacca, Bolchini, Botturi, and Inversini (2004) felt that the technology being used was insufficient as a descriptor. Tavangarian et al. (2004) included the constructivist theoretical model as a framework for their definition by stating that e-Learning is not only procedural but also shows some transformation of an individual's experience into the individual's knowledge through the knowledge construction process. Both Ellis (2004) and Triacca et al. (2004) believed that some level of interactivity needs to be included to make the definition truly applicable in describing the learning experience, even though Triacca et al. (2004) added that e-Learning was a type of online learning. As there is still the main struggle as to what technologies should be used so that the term can be referenced, some authors will provide either no clear definition or a very vague reference to other terms such as online course/learning, web-based learning, web-based training, learning objects or distance learning believing that the term can be used synonymously (Dringus & Cohen, 2005; Khan, 2001; Triacca et al., 2004; Wagner, 2001). What is abundantly obvious is that there is some uncertainty as to what exactly are the characteristics of the term, but what is clear is that all forms of e-Learning, whether they be as applications, programs, objects, websites, etc., can eventually provide a learning opportunity for individuals.^d In 2006, Marc Rosenberg suggested the following definition of eLearning: “E-Learning is the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance.” (p. 28)^e

According to the European Union (EU): “ eLearning is the European programme in the field of ICT for education and training which promotes the inclusion of ICT in all learning systems and environments (formal, non-formal, informal – school, higher and adult education and training.” (Fee, 2010). This definition is very practical and taking broad view

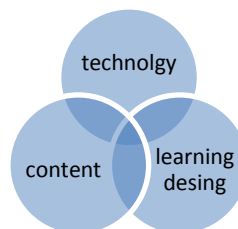
of EU initiatives. What this definition neglect is the exact role of ICT in the process of learning.

The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) defines e-learning like this: “e-learning covers a wide set of applications and process, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, intranet/ extranet (LAN/ WAN), audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV and CD-Rom” (Fee, 2010). This definition is providing us too much technological specifications dealing with e-learning confusing those who know what e-learning is. This definition was further expanded by ASTD as follows: “E-learning refers to anything delivered, enabled or mediated by electronic technology for the explicit purpose of learning. This definition excludes things that might fit under the title ‘distance learning’, but are non-electronic (such as books and paper-based correspondence). It is broader than, but includes, online learning, Web-based learning, and computer-based training. E-learning includes both one-way and two-way learning exchanges, as well as learner-to-learner interaction (as occurs in learning communities). For simplicity, assume that if you use a computer in some fashion to affect learning, then it is e-learning.” (Fee, 2010). This definition is more useful, self-referential but exhaustive.

The United Kingdom’s Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) defines e-learning very briefly as follows: “e-learning is learning that is delivered, enabled or mediated using electronic technology for the explicit purpose of training in organizations. (Fee, 2010) This definition is also from the organizations point of view. After discussing so many varied and multi-faceted definitions of e-learning we have to come to a comprehensive definition which is given by Kenneth Fee in his book ‘Understanding e-learning’, which reads like this; “ E-learning is an approach to learning and development: a collection of learning methods using digital technologies, which enable, distribute and enhance learning.” (Fee, 2010). This could be the exact and comprehensive definition to be accepted by all those who are concerned with e-learning. What Fee is striking out in this definition is that he says it is an approach to learning and development. He insists that it is a collection of various learning methods enabled by digital technology. And more importantly he is emphasizing on the process of learning than the use of ICT.

Components of e-learning:

There are three possible components of e-learning namely enabling technology, learning content and learning design.



Most of the people like to emphasize either first or the second component. The market oriented people put much stress on the first component, the technology, because it is new and unfamiliar component. And more correctly this is the component where they could contribute a lot for their financial benefit. But it doesn't mean that the other two components are of less importance, rather equally important. Some people put more stress on the content component.

No doubt content of any learning is important, but it could not be of the prime importance. Technologies underestimate what is involved in learning. For them learning is nothing but manipulation of content. Such ignorance of the process of learning results in the good combination of technology and content only. Any programme considering technology and content only may convert into merely publication of information for learning and training. Learning is more complex process. Therefore the third component the learning design is of prime importance. This components concentrates on the process of learning, understands how people learn, and how best to manage the learning process to achieve improved performance at work. In other words a good e-learning is a perfect combination of technology, meaningful content and effective learning design. One should be very alert in combining these components to make the programme effective. The learning design should make the most of the content and the technology should be able to work both the content and design. Following figure shows the interrelation between these components more precisely.

Why e-learning is an Approach and not a Method:

Often e-learning is considered as a new method or new technique of learning, which is not correct. It is more an Approach, because of aggregation of various methods using latest digital technologies and those yet to come. E-learning is about attaching those technologies, incorporating them into existing learning methods so that drawing upon them to reconsider the use and effectiveness of those methods. This new Approach includes various methods already we know as the following: Self-study online, E-assessment, Synchronous online learning, Online Instruction Manual, Online Simulation and many more. These are different methods representing a different Approach i.e. e-learning.

If we consider and analyze any classical learning process in short, we get four phases. These four phases are Learning Needs Analysis, Planning and Preparation, Execution or Implementation, and Evaluation. At present we could intervene e-learning at the second phase i.e. Planning and Preparation.



E-learning is therefore an approach to traditional learning and development activities that requires new thinking associated with new technologies, with an emphasis on planning and implementing learning interventions, and managing them – and appreciation of the potential of these technologies inform our understanding of learning in general. (Fee, 2010)

Five Models of E-learning:

Martyn Sloman, in his seminal 2003 book ‘*Training in the Age of the Learner*’ has given the following typology of e-learning: web-based training, supported online training and informal e-learning. Kenneth Fee in his 2010 book ‘*Delivering E-Learning*’ has further classified these

methods under five broad models of e-learning which includes all present methods of e-learning. The following table shows those five models and their principles.

Model No	Name of the Model	Principle/ Distinct feature
Model 1	Online Courses	Exclusively online courses, providing learning solely via the internet
Model 2	Integrated Online and Offline Learning	Learning programmes that integrated online learning with complementary offline activities
Model 3	Self-managed e-learning	The provision of online learning resources for self-managed learning
Model 4	Live e-learning	Synchronous online learning events involving learners in multiple locations
Model 5	Electronic Performance Support (EPS)	Work-based online learning to support specific tasks, systems or operational procedures

(Fee, 2010)

The first Model includes all types of web-based trainings. In this model content is delivered to the learner without significant interaction or support from trainers, managers or other learners. This type of delivery can be also made intranets or corporate networks, stored on a PC hard drive or a disk. This model is derived from computer-based training (CBT), widely available since the 1980s.

The second model is nothing but open or distance learning and is sometimes called as 'blended learning'. It is also called as mixed-mode or mixed-media learning. Here online training is supported by traditional training course prior or later. There are number of types of blended learning such as The Sandwich, The Milestone, Knowledge and Skill and Complementary Resources.

The third model is Self-managed e-learning, as learning is self managed or it the application of knowledge management for learning.

The fourth model is Live e-learning, in which the learner has live synchronous learning experiences. The *Webinars* is a fine example of this model. This model lacks offline dimension the second model.

The last and fifth model is Electronic Performance Support, in which instructions are available in the workplace incorporated into a computerized system designed to perform a task, such as an electronic form of instruction manual.

Benefits of e-learning:

Kenneth Fee (2010), in his book 'Delivering E-Learning' has given benefits of e-learning in the following way-

1. E-learning make learning possible or affordable in circumstance where other approaches are not feasible
2. It saves cost
3. It delivers learning faster
4. It leverages greater value from corporate ICT investments
5. It makes better use of learning opportunities already available on the web

6. It exploits learners' enthusiasm for digital technologies
7. It is very adaptable to change, through speed of published and updating
8. It offers a highly learner-centered solution.

Conclusion:

While concluding abruptly we could say that there are various misconceptions about e-learning in our community. We discussed various definitions of e-learning as well as various spelling versions of e-learning. Then we tried to finalize the components of e-learning. We also discussed about why e-learning is an approach and not a method. Then we tried to categories the present e-learning methods into five distinct models and in the end we listed the benefits of e-learning.

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