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Electronic learning (or e-Learning or eLearning) is a type of Technology supported education/learning (TSL) where the medium of instruction is through computer technology, particularly involving digital technologies. E-learning has been defined as "pedagogy empowered by digital technology". In some instances, no face-to-face interaction takes place. E-learning is used interchangeably in a wide variety of contexts. In companies, it refers to the strategies that use the company network to deliver training courses to employees. In the United States, it is defined as a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies, mainly Internet or computer-based, to reach learners. Lately in most Universities, e-learning is used to define a specific mode to attend a course or program of study where the students rarely, if ever, attend face-to-face for on-campus access to educational facilities, because they study online.

Keywords: e-learning, virtual classrooms, learning technology, online learning, online education, m-learning

Market

The worldwide e-learning industry is estimated to be worth over thirty-eight (38) billion euro according to conservative estimates, although in the European Union only about 20% of e-learning products are produced within the common market. Developments in internet and multimedia technologies are the basic enabler of e-learning, with content, technologies and services being identified as the three key sectors of the e-learning industry. ELearning is a catch-all term that covers a wide range of instructional material that can be delivered on a CD-ROM or DVD, over a local area network (LAN), or on the Internet.

Growth of e-learning

Many higher educations, for-profit institutions, now offer online classes. By contrast, only about half of private, non-profit schools offer them. The Sloan report, based on a poll of academic leaders, says that students generally appear to be at least as satisfied with their online classes as they are with traditional ones. Private institutions may become more involved with online presentations as the cost of instituting such a system decreases. Properly trained staff must also be hired to work with students online. These staff members need to understand the content area, and also be highly trained in the use of the computer and Internet. Online education is rapidly increasing, and online doctoral programs have even developed at leading research universities.

Technology

Today many technologies can be, and are, used in e-Learning, from blogs to collaborative software, ePortfolio, and virtual classrooms. Most eLearning situations use combinations of these techniques.

Along with the terms *learning technology*, *instructional technology*, and Educational Technology, the term is generally used to refer to the use of technology in learning in a much broader sense than the computer-based training or *Computer Aided Instruction* of the 1980s. It is also broader than the terms *Online Learning* or *Online Education* which generally refer to purely web-based learning. In cases where mobile technologies are used, the term M-learning has become more common. E-learning, however, also has implications beyond just the technology and refers to the actual learning that takes place using these systems.

E-learning is naturally suited to distance learning and flexible learning, but can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching, in which case the term Blended learning is commonly used. E-Learning pioneer Bernard Luskin argues that the "E" must be understood to have broad meaning if e-Learning is to be effective. Luskin says that the "e" should be interpreted to mean exciting, energetic, enthusiastic, emotional, extended, excellent, and educational in addition to "electronic" that is a traditional national interpretation.

In higher education especially, the increasing tendency is to create a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (which is sometimes combined with a Management Information System (MIS) to create a Managed Learning Environment) in which all aspects of a course are handled through a consistent user interface standard throughout

the institution. A growing number of physical universities, as well as newer online-only colleges, have begun to offer a select set of academic degree and certificate programs via the Internet at a wide range of levels and in a wide range of disciplines. While some programs require students to attend some campus classes or orientations, many are delivered completely online. In addition, several universities offer online student support services, such as online advising and registration, e-counseling, online textbook purchase, student governments and student newspapers.

E-Learning can also refer to educational web sites such as those offering learning scenarios, worksheets and interactive exercises for children. The term is also used extensively in the business sector where it generally refers to cost-effective online training.

Goals of e-learning

E-Learning lessons are generally designed to guide students through information or to help students perform in specific tasks. Information based e-Learning content communicates information to the student. Examples include content that distributes the history or facts related to a service, company, or product. In information-based content, there is no specific skill to be learned. In performance-based content, the lessons build off of a procedural skill in which the student is expected to increase proficiency.

Computer-based learning

Computer Based Learning, sometimes abbreviated to CBL, refers to the use of computers as a key component of the educational environment. While this can refer to the use of computers in a classroom, the term more broadly refers to a structured environment in which computers are used for teaching purposes. The concept is generally seen as being distinct from the use of computers in ways where learning is at least a peripheral element of the experience (e.g. computer games and web browsing).

Computer-based training

Computer-based training (CBT) services are where a student learns by executing special training programs on a computer relating to their occupation. CBT is especially effective for training people to use computer applications because the CBT program can be integrated with the applications so that students can practice using the application as they learn. Historically, CBTs growth has been hampered by the enormous resources required: human resources to create a CBT program, and hardware resources needed to run it. However, the increase in PC computing power, and especially the growing prevalence of computers equipped with CD-ROMs, is making CBT a more viable option for corporations and individuals alike. Many PC applications now come with some modest form of CBT, often called a tutorial. Web-based training (WBT) is a type of training that is similar to CBT; however, it is delivered over the Internet using a web browser. Web-based training frequently includes interactive methods, such as bulletin boards, chat rooms, instant messaging, videoconferencing, and discussion threads. Web based training is usually a self-paced learning medium though some systems allow for online testing and evaluation at specific times. Recent years have seen an explosion in online training for educators by content providers such as Knowledge Delivery Systems, Atomic Learning, PBS Teacher line, and more.

Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL)

Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) is one of the most promising innovations to improve teaching and learning with the help of modern information and communication technology. Collaborative or group learning refers to instructional methods whereby students are encouraged or required to work together on learning tasks. It is widely agreed to distinguish collaborative learning from the traditional 'direct transfer' model in which the instructor is assumed to be the distributor of knowledge and skills.

Pedagogical elements

Pedagogical elements are an attempt to define structures or units of educational material. For example, this could be a lesson, an assignment, a multiple choice question, a quiz, a discussion group or a case study. These units should be format independent, so although it may be implemented in any of the following methods, pedagogical structures would **not** include a textbook, a web page, a video conference or Podcast.

When beginning to create e-Learning content, the pedagogical approaches need to be evaluated. Simple pedagogical approaches make it easy to create content, but lack flexibility, richness and downstream functionality. On the other hand, complex pedagogical approaches can be difficult to set up and slow to develop, though they have the potential to provide more engaging learning experiences for students. Somewhere between these extremes is an ideal pedagogy that allows a particular educator to effectively create educational materials while simultaneously providing the most engaging educational experiences for students.

Reusability, standards and learning objects

Much effort has been put into the technical reuse of electronically-based teaching materials and in particular creating or re-using *Learning Objects*. These are self contained units that are properly tagged with keywords, or other metadata, and often stored in an XML file format. Creating a course requires putting together a sequence of learning objects. There are proprietary and open, non-commercial and commercial, peer-reviewed repositories of learning objects such as the Merlot repository.

A common standard format for e-learning content is SCORM whilst other specifications allow for the transporting of "learning objects" (Schools Interoperability Framework) or categorizing metadata (LOM).

An excellent example of e-learning that relates to knowledge management and reusability is Navy E-Learning, which is available to Active Duty, Retired, or Disable Military members. This online tool provides certificate courses to enrich the user in various subjects related to military training and civilian skill sets. The e-learning system not only provides learning objectives, but also evaluates the progress of the student and credit can be earned toward higher learning institutions. This reuse is an excellent example of knowledge retention and the cyclical process of knowledge transfer and use of data and records.

Communication technologies used in e-learning

Communication technologies are generally categorized as asynchronous or synchronous. *Asynchronous* activities use technologies such as blogs, wikis, and discussion boards. The idea here is that participants may engage in the exchange of ideas or information without the dependency of other participants' involvement at the same time. Electronic mail (Email) is also asynchronous in that mail can be sent or received without having both the participants' involvement at the same time.

Synchronous activities involve the exchange of ideas and information with one or more participants during the same period of time. A face to face discussion is an example of synchronous communications. *Synchronous* activities occur with all participants joining in at once, as with an online chat session or a virtual classroom or meeting.

Virtual classrooms and meetings can often use a mix of communication technologies.

In many models, the writing community and the communication channels relate with the E-learning and the M-learning communities. Both the communities provide a general overview of the basic learning models and the activities required for the participants to join the learning sessions across the virtual classroom or even across standard classrooms enabled by technology. Many activities, essential for the learners in these environments, require frequent chat sessions in the form of virtual classrooms and/or blog meetings.

E-Learning 2.0

The term e-Learning 2.0 is used to refer to new ways of thinking about e-learning inspired by the emergence of Web 2.0. From an e-Learning 2.0 perspective, conventional e-learning systems were based on instructional packets that were delivered to students using Internet technologies. The role of the student consisted in learning from the readings and preparing assignments. Assignments were evaluated by the teacher. In contrast, the new e-learning places increased emphasis on social learning and use of social software such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and virtual worlds such as Second Life. This phenomenon has also been referred to as Long Tail Learning.

The first 10 years of e-learning (e-learning 1.0) was focused on using the internet to replicate the instructor-led experience. Content was designed to lead a learner through the content, providing a wide and ever-increasing set of interactions, experiences, assessments, and simulations. E-learning 2.0, by contrast (patterned after Web 2.0) is built around collaboration. E-learning 2.0 assumes that knowledge (as meaning and understanding) is socially constructed. Learning takes place through conversations about content and grounded interaction about problems and actions. Advocates of social learning claim that one of the best ways to learn something is to teach it to others.

There is also an increased use of virtual classrooms (online presentations delivered live) as an online learning platform and classroom for a diverse set of education providers such as Fox School of Business for Temple University, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and Sachem School District.

Computer-aided assessment and learning design

Computer-aided Assessment (also but less commonly referred to as E-assessment), ranging from automated multiple-choice tests to more sophisticated systems is becoming increasingly common. With some systems, feedback can be geared towards a student's specific mistakes or the computer can navigate the student through a series of questions adapting to what the student appears to have learned or not learned.

The best examples follow a Formative Assessment structure and are called "Online Formative Assessment". This involves making an initial formative assessment by sifting out the incorrect answers. The author/teacher will then explain what the pupil should have done with each question. It will then give the pupil at least one practice at each slight variation of sifted out questions. This is the formative learning stage. The next stage is to make a Summative Assessment by a new set of questions only covering the topics previously taught. Some will take this even further and repeat the cycle such as BOFA which is aimed at the Eleven plus exam set in the UK.

The term *learning design* has sometimes come to refer to the type of activity enabled by software such as the open-source system LAMS which supports sequences of activities that can be both adaptive and collaborative. The IMS Learning Design specification is intended as a standard format for learning designs, and IMS LD Level A is supported in LAMS V2. ELearning has been replacing the traditional settings due to its cost effectiveness.

Benefits of eLearning versus traditional classroom settings

ELearning can provide for major benefits for the organizations and individuals involved.

Reducing environmental impact: eLearning allows people to avoid travel, thus reducing the overall carbon output. The fact that it takes place in a virtual environment also allows some reduction of paper usage. With virtual notes instead of paper notes and online assessments instead of paper assessments, eLearning is a more environmentally friendly solution.

Quality education, made affordable: The fact that instructors of the highest caliber can share their knowledge across borders allows students to attend courses across physical, political, and economic boundaries. Recognized experts have the opportunity of making information available internationally, to anyone interested at minimum costs. This can drastically reduce the costs of higher education, making it much more affordable and accessible to the masses. An internet connection, a computer, and a projector would allow an entire classroom in a third world university to benefit from the knowledge of an opinion leader.

Convenience and flexibility to learners: in many contexts, eLearning is self-paced and the learning sessions are available 24x7. Learners are not bound to a specific day/time to physically attend classes. They can also pause learning sessions at their convenience.

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