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We've all heard the term eLearning. It seems to be one of the "hot topics" or new buzz words in today's landscape of corporate training programs. In 2006, 53 percent of all corporate training involved some form of eLearning (Bersin Associates, 2007). Even universities—stalwarts of traditional classroom learning—have jumped on the bandwagon, with 96 percent of universities with more than 15,000 students offering some type of online class (<http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/survey06.asp>, The Sloan Consortium, 2007). Beyond a doubt, eLearning is a concept embraced by students and instructors alike in both corporate and academic settings. But what is it exactly? And—even more importantly—how will it affect you?

eLearning, simply put, is instruction delivered via the computer. It includes texts, spoken words, graphics, animation, video, examples, interactive exercises, and assessments to convey course material just as traditional classroom instruction does. However, in the case of eLearning, all of these learning aids are delivered via a computer connected to the Internet. That is the defining feature of eLearning—the computer-based technology that serves as the delivery medium.

In the corporate world, most training programs fall into one of two categories—those designed to *inform* employees about information relevant to their jobs or those designed to teach employees how to *perform* a task needed on the job. In fact, most training programs share both objectives. eLearning is a medium well-suited for delivering training with these objectives. Many companies have shifted to eLearning to deliver their new hire orientations—to *inform* new employees about the company's mission, values, history, and so on. Compliance training is another type of instruction that is often done via eLearning. Now let's examine three common forms of eLearning: synchronous training, asynchronous training, and blended.

Synchronous

Although you may not recognize the term synchronous learning, most of us are familiar with the concept because we have all been in a classroom as student or instructor. Synchronous learning occurs when a learner and instructor are in the same place at the same time. Lecture is an example of synchronous learning.

Synchronous Web-based learning uses the Internet so that we experience classroom interaction in a virtual environment. Instruction is distributed to many locations but occurs through real-time interaction between students and their instructor. An example of this type of learning is a webcast, where employees must log onto a class at a specified time in order to interact with the instructor via their computer.

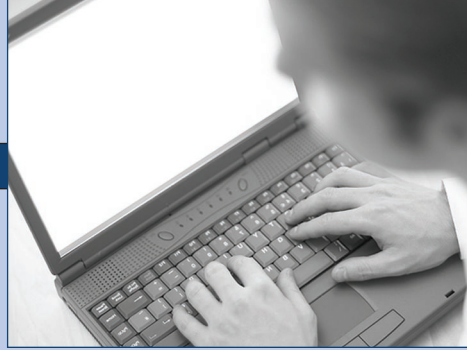


Asynchronous

Asynchronous learning is a teaching method where the delivery of training materials occurs at different times for all of the students involved. The asynchronous format has existed for quite some time, but the use of computers and the Internet has greatly increased the popularity of this method as well as the number of educational topics that are available asynchronously. It is widely accepted that this approach can enable learners to increase knowledge and skills through self-paced and self-directed courses completed when the learner is prepared and motivated to learn. For example, correspondence courses are a traditional form of asynchronous learning.

Blended

Blended learning is the combination of multiple approaches to learning. Blended learning can be accomplished through the blending of virtual and physical resources. A typical example of this would be a combination of technology-based materials and face-to-face sessions used together to deliver instruction. The new TBM Lean Certification course is our first foray into blended learning. In the program, students participate in the synchronous element through their four weeks of traditional classroom learning. They work asynchronously on their projects during the certification process. Furthermore, students are exposed to an online component where they demonstrate and quantify their skills retention by taking tests through a Learning Management System (LMS). This blended approach ensures that students use the most effective delivery method for the material being taught or tested.

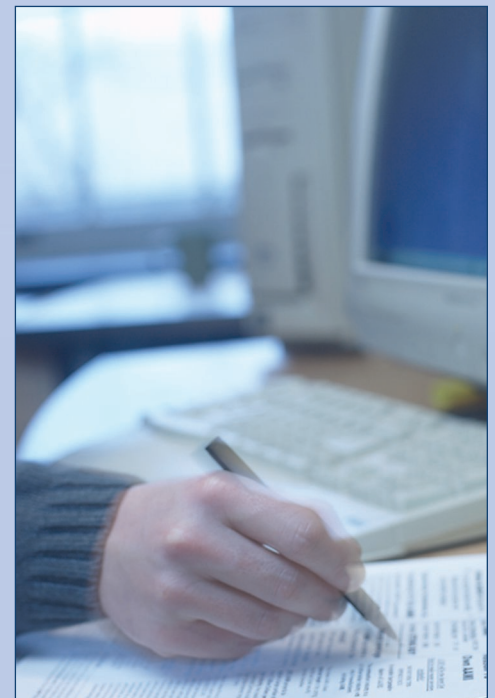


Identifying Effective eLearning

Just as you can have a bad classroom experience, you can have a bad eLearning experience. With the number of eLearning offerings available, it may be difficult to determine what good eLearning looks like. Here are five elements to look for when evaluating eLearning programs:

- A user-friendly interface that is intuitive and does not distract from the learning.
- All classes should have clearly defined learning objectives. Evaluate the learning objectives to ensure they meet your instructional needs.
- Multiple media (i.e., sound, video, animation, and text.) to stimulate as many senses as possible during the learning experience.
- Interactive exercises that clearly reinforce the learning (these are critical components of an effective eLearning program).
- A post-assessment that measures the effectiveness of the instruction and ensures that all learning objectives were achieved.

The great advantage of eLearning is that once an effective eLearning course is developed, the computer and Internet can make it widely available without the need for travel, time out of the office, or committing to a specific date and time. Through eLearning, employees around the world can have access to top-notch training with more convenience and flexibility than ever before. Employers can also realize economies of scale—training their workforces on more topics and at a faster pace than ever before. ELearning is an effective way to build awareness and understanding across a broad base of employees. Most important, it can serve as a vehicle for rapid change within an organization. ■



TBM recently launched new Essential Lean Learning—the first comprehensive online awareness training for lean. For a demo, please go to <http://www.tbmcg.com/learnonline>