



COMMONWEALTH of LEARNING

**Issues in E-Learning & Distance Education Video Series**

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# What is eLearning?

## *Summary*

*Dr. Mark Bullen, Education Specialist for eLearning at the Commonwealth of Learning explains his perspective on the meaning of eLearning. His key message is that eLearning should be seen as a continuum of opportunities for using ICT in education. This can involve supporting and enhancing traditional face-to-face teaching, using ICT to provide blended learning or flipped classroom options and delivering fully online distance education programmes.*

### <Introduction>

E-learning is a term that has been defined in many different ways and I think this is a problem because if we don't agree on what it is, it's difficult to have a meaningful discussion about how to use it.

I want to spend the next few minutes explaining my understanding of eLearning and in the process I hope I can bring some clarity to the discussion of eLearning.

For me, at its core, *eLearning is about using information and communication technologies (or ICT) to expand access to education and to enhance and transform teaching and learning.*

But what does that mean exactly?

### <The eLearning Continuum>

Well I think it's helpful to think of eLearning in terms of a continuum.

And the graphic that you see illustrates this

Face-to-face teaching **without** the use of ICT is at one end of the continuum and fully online distance learning is at the other end.

As we move along the continuum from fully face-to-face teaching, more and more technology is used to replace the face-to-face elements.

Initially, this has very little impact on how teaching is organized and how learning occurs because the technology is used primarily to enhance the face-to-face teaching.

But as we move further along the continuum, the nature of teaching and how it is organized is increasingly affected by the use of ICT.

Somewhere around the middle of the continuum we have what is called blended learning.

In a blended environment, fewer face-to-face sessions are held as technology is used increasingly to deliver the teaching and to facilitate the learning. And nature of the face-to-face sessions changes. Instead of coming to class to listen to a teacher, students come to discuss, and to work and collaborate in small groups. Once we reach the right end of the continuum there is no longer any face-to-face teaching and we have fully online learning in which all teaching is technology-mediated.

eLearning is that part of the continuum that begins when technology is used to replace some of the face-to-face teaching to the point on the continuum where it replaces it all.

### **<eLearning More than Technology>**

But it's important to understand that elearning isn't just about technology or about adding technology to existing ways of doing things.

It's about integrating technology and using it to enhance and transform teaching and learning.

Some talk about moving from an architecture of presentation to an architecture of participation in which technology is used to help learners manage and direct their own learning.

This means moving away from a transmission model of education in which teachers are primarily dispensers of information and learners are passive recipients, to a model in which the affordances of eLearning technology are used to promote collaboration with peers, self-directed learning, active engagement with the content and, ultimately, the creation of new knowledge.

This doesn't mean that teachers will no longer be needed. It just means they will do much less direct teaching and transmission of content and much more guiding, explaining and reinforcing as the need arises.

### **<elearning and Distance Education>**

It's also important to understand the relationship between e-learning and distance education. These are overlapping concepts.

Increasingly, distance education is fully online but historically it has used other technologies and there is still a considerable amount of distance education that would not be considered e-learning.

So, we can have blended e-learning which combines face-to-face and technology-mediated teaching....

or distance education e-learning which doesn't involve any face-to-face meetings.

And there can be distance education that is primarily print-based and would not even be considered e-learning.

### **<eLearning and Open Education>**

The final perspective to consider in thinking about what e-learning means, comes from the open education movement.

## Transcript

Open education has the potential to radically change education by promoting and facilitating the sharing and reuse of educational resources and pedagogical practices and by making this all freely available to anybody who has Internet access.

According to Richard Baraniuk, open education is based on the idea that:

*“knowledge should be free and open to use and reuse; that collaboration should be easier, not harder;*

*that people should receive credit and kudos for contributing to education and research;*

*and that concepts and ideas are linked in unusual and surprising ways and not in the simple linear forms that today’s textbooks present”* (p. 229).

Clearly, eLearning and open education are closely linked.

### **<Conclusion>**

To conclude, remember that e-learning is not one thing, but many.

It can involve a variety of different technologies used in different ways and it is best thought of in terms of a continuum of opportunities.

But ultimately it is about integrating learning technologies into teaching and learning, not simply using them to enhance existing approaches.