

HOW FLEXIBLE IS E-LEARNING?

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Author's note

This article is based on a workshop run by Dr John Gundry for attendees at Western Australia's *Training Forum 2003* in Perth, May 2003. It continues from his Keynote Speech to the 700 attendees at the Forum, the majority of whom were from the Vocational Education and Training sector.

E-Learning Flexibility

E-learning is often sold on the basis that the learning takes place "any place, any time". Statements like this can be found all over the literature and particularly in vendors' and promoters' propositions. However the reality is not so simple.

The table below presents common e-learning tools and describes their location flexibility and time flexibility. Unless otherwise obvious these tools can be accessed on a desktop or laptop computer, and may (either now, or soon) be accessed through a personal digital assistant or sophisticated mobile telephone (that is, "mobile learning").

E-Learning Tool	Location Flexibility	Time Flexibility
Web pages Access through a web browser to a selection of text, graphics, animations and stored sound and video.	any place	any time
Discussion forum Group version of email: learners exchange messages with each other and the tutor.	any place	flexible time

<p>Chat Learners dialogue in short messages with each other and the tutor in real time.</p>	<p>any place</p>	<p>set time</p>
<p>Audio conference A group telephone call: learners get debriefings from the tutor, or discuss learning material or individual / class progress.</p>	<p>any time</p>	<p>set time</p>
<p>Web cast Live delivery of slides, images or streaming video often with an audio conference or chat session alongside.</p>	<p>any place</p>	<p>set time</p>

All these tools are capable of delivering learning any place. However, their time flexibility is more complicated.

- Only web pages are available *any time*.
- The tools that support live, real-time interaction are usually employed at *set times* during a course, because learners and the tutor have to make arrangements to be available. Further, the service usually has to be set up at a set time with the service provider.
- Discussion forums offer a time flexibility in between any time and set time that I call *flexible time*. Typically there is a defined period, of perhaps days or one or two weeks, in a course during which learners must exchange messages with other learners and or with the tutor on a particular topic or course module. Interaction outside this time window does not fit with the course's schedule: things have moved on to the next topic.

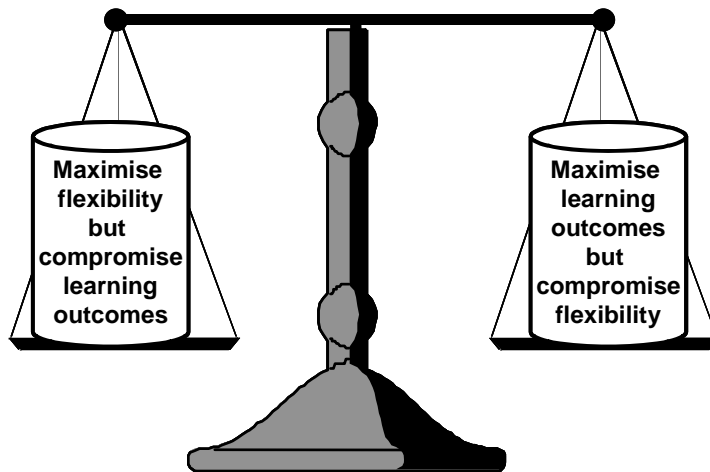
The principal variables for time flexibility are therefore

- the tool(s) being employed,
- whether the learner belongs to a class of learners,
- whether the learner is required to interact with other learners and or the tutor as part of the learning experience.

Thus for a course designer there are decisions to make to trade off the value of a learning tool, and the learning processes it supports, with its effect on time flexibility.

This is especially difficult as current thinking recommends blended learning (a combination of self-study [any time] and interaction with other learners and the tutor [set time or flexible time]) for quality e-learning.

This dilemma, illustrated to the right, is explored in the following scenarios.



Scenario One

A company's course designer is creating an e-learning course on servicing a new technology to be delivered through e-learning the company's field engineers. These field engineers have hectic diaries, are on call for emergencies, and only spend a short time anywhere. A design decision is:

- whether to deliver the course entirely through web pages, in which case it can be taken anywhere at any time 'off the shelf' as learners require it - simply downloaded from the intranet;

or

- to include interaction through a tutor-led discussion forum.

The purpose of the discussion forum would be to clarify and situate the course material and allow for peer to peer collaborative learning.

If the discussion forum is incorporated, the course must run to a schedule with signed-up classes of learners, which is an administrative overhead, and some learners will not have time to participate in the interaction.

What would you advise the course designer to do?

Scenario Two

A training company designing a four-week part-time e-learning course on personnel management to be sold to busy managers in a Canadian-wide financial company, who are often travelling across the company's areas of operations. A design decision is:

- Whether to deliver the course entirely through a combination of web pages and a tutor-led discussion forum;

or

- to include tutor-led web-casts (together with an audio conference) at the start of the course, then every Friday, and at its conclusion.

The purpose of the web casts and associated audio discussions would be to highlight highly graphical material in a slide show, to reveal learners' interests to be discussed in the discussion forum, to answer their questions, and to increase their motivation to participate fully.

If included, however, it is clear that some of these live sessions will clash with learners' business commitments. These may be real commitments, or potential learners may feel that they are usually too busy to book into a course requiring their 'attendance' at set times.

Some may not therefore book onto the course, leading to reduced revenue for the training company and perhaps cancellation of the programme.

What would you advise the training company to do? Should they include the web casts as part of their course design?

Conclusion

E-learning is widely claimed to offer flexible "any time, any place" learning.

The claim for "any place" is valid in principle and is a great development. Many people can engage with rich learning materials that simply were not possible in a paper or broadcast distance learning era.

But the claim for "any time" is in reality over-stated. Quality, blended e-learning requires interactivity amongst learners and the tutor. Practically, however, providing this interactivity restricts e-learning at best to flexible time periods, and at worst to set time periods. In many cases, this is not a problem; learners may well be able to 'attend' according to the schedule.

However, in many corporate training situations, learning providers are forced into difficult flexibility / quality trade-offs, which I believe will get worse. Hectic work patterns and life-styles of the employees in today's lean, pressurised, highly-competitive corporations are already creating time starvation. If this trend increases, and I don't see any reason for it not to, it may become commercially inadvisable or even unrealistic to offer interactivity in e-learning. You can have flexible e-learning, as long as you don't mind learning on your own.

Professor Robin Mason of the UK Open University put her finger on it precisely when, in her [2001 Inaugural Lecture](#), she said "Time is the new distance."

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