
CONSUMERS GUIDE TO e-LEARNING

Prepared for the Canadian Association for Community Education
by FuturEd Inc., January 2002

WHAT IS e-LEARNING?

The word “e-learning” is used to mean learning using both a computer and the Internet.

E-learning products or services take various forms.

They may be:

- single courses and/or entire programs
- course units, lessons or components
- aimed at individuals or entire groups in classes
- instruction with or without various support services, such as access to a library
- offered for credit at an education institution and/or for general interest without credit
- very expensive, free of charge, or consistent with other public education tuition fees
- aimed at specific age groups and/or any age group
- offered by public and/or commercial education and training agencies
- really effective or of questionable quality

This consumer’s guide is best used with e-learning at the post-secondary and adult education level – college and university level, continuing education or work-related skills training. It will help you choose the right e-learning for you by examining one product or service at a time.

LET’S GO

The background to this Guide is available online at

<http://www.futured.com> and many other websites.

These questions are designed on three levels to help you select the best e-learning option for you. The first level are the basics – the most important questions. You will progress to levels two and three if the products and services you are looking at meet the basic quality requirements.

Before you sign up for an e-learning course or program, ask yourself these questions.

- What is my purpose for taking this course? Do I know what I want or need to learn?
- Do I need a credit or certificate when I finish it, or do I just want to know more?
- How much can I afford to spend? How much time can I invest?
- What hardware and software do I have, and is it enough?
- Where will I access the Internet, what will it cost, and how convenient will it be?
- Are my computer and Internet skills good enough for the course I have in mind? Will I need technical help?

You will need a lot of information to make an informed choice. Good e-learning products and services will provide you with written information and a “demo” to help with decision making.

For help to understand education terms, go to the glossary at:

<http://www.canlearn.ca/english/help/glossary.html>
<http://www.canlearn.ca/francais/aide/glossaire.html>

For help to understand technology terms, go to the glossary at:

<http://wombat.doc.ic.ac.uk/foldoc/index.html>

LEVEL 1

Suppliers of all e-learning products and services should tell you, IN WRITING:

- Exactly what you are expected to learn – the “intended learning outcomes” – and entry level knowledge or skills necessary for your success
- What you get when you finish and who it is recognized or awarded by – e.g., a college credit, completion certificate or professional designation
- How skilled you need to be at reading, taking exams, managing your own time – the learning skills you need for success
- The type of material you’ll cover, why it is important and where it has come from
- How you will learn – the format for instruction and assessment – e.g., individualized or in a group
- Who will be teaching and assessing you – if actual people are involved (e.g., sometimes the instruction is imbedded in text and exams are computer-marked)
- How you will be assessed – the criteria for evaluation and success
- When you can expect to complete – mandatory and/or flexible timelines
- What you need in terms of minimum computer and operating system requirements -- with options where they exist
- What you need to be able to do – your technical competence

Ponder these questions. If your answer is NO to any category of question, consider moving on to another e-learning option.

- Is this what I want or need to learn? Do I have the entry requirements so that I stand a reasonable chance at success?
- Can I do anything with this course? Will it be recognized by an education institution or by an employer? Is it a good investment of my time and money?
- Do I have the preparation to do work at this level? Can I get help in this course/program if I need it?
- Is the content current and relevant, either to real work or advanced education? Is it well-organized, credible and complete?
- Can I learn this way? Would I prefer to learn on my own or in a group? By reading or by listening? By myself or in a group?
- Is the instructor / assessor qualified and credible? How important is it that I have a person to communicate with?
- Is it clear how I will be tested and can I perform my best that way? Are there options? Do I know what is expected for success?
- Does the timeframe and schedule work for me? Do I have the flexibility I need to do the work and to finish?
- Do I have the equipment and software I need? Am I willing and able to buy more?
- Do I have the skills to use the computer and Internet? Is there an orientation to get me started?

Yes/No

Comments

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

Yes/No

LEVEL 1 CON'T

Suppliers of all e-learning products and services should tell you, IN WRITING:

Ponder these questions. If your answer is NO to any category of question, consider moving on to another e-learning option.

Yes/No

Comments

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What you will pay in total – registration, tuition, books and materials, equipment, other · How credible the product/service is – the qualifications of the content, design and delivery personnel and objective evaluation reports · How to get started and connect with the supplier – complete registration procedures and services · How to get help – contacts for technical assistance and content expertise · How to get out if you're not satisfied – policies for withdrawal and refunds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Can I afford it? Exactly how much is this going to cost? Is everything included, like access to technical assistance? · Does this supplier have a good reputation? How do I know? What do other students think? Can I see an objective evaluation report? · Is it easy to get started? Do I need transcripts or pre-tests? Is the registration process clear? · Is assistance available 24/7? How do I access technical and content assistance? · Can I get my money back if this doesn't work for me? | <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> |
|---|--|---|

LEVEL1 IS FINISHED – Are you satisfied with the basics of your e-learning choice? If not, go on to **LEVEL2**

LEVEL 2

IF YOU STILL HAVE MORE THAN ONE e-LEARNING OPTION TO CHOOSE FROM, APPLY THESE CRITERIA.

Good design and delivery of e-learning means that:	Is there evidence of good e-design and e-delivery?	Yes/No	Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The system works for the learner. • Navigation is logical and well-organized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the demo or the system work consistently? • Can I navigate my way in to and out of the online system? Can I make my way through the materials and find what I need? 	<p>Yes/No Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content is relevant, well-organized and presented in an interesting manner. • Materials are updateable and frequently updated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the organization make sense? Is there a logic that I can relate to? • Is the content updated, or the same thing year after year? 	<p>Yes/No Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning package has options for individuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can I personalize the course for maximum benefit? 	<p>Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A package includes all institutional services (registration, payment, advising, tutorial assistance, library services). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I have access to the learning resources and advice that I need around organizational requirements? Does the system appear to be organized and efficient? 	<p>Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online instruction and communication are conducted in “real time” (synchronous) or more flexible (asynchronous) for a reason. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I have to meet specific schedules or can I access the course as and when I am able to? What is the reason that there are scheduled expectations? 	<p>Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everything learners realistically need to succeed is easily and accessible online. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I able to efficiently access the course and the assistance I need online or do I have to find other ways? 	<p>Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and interaction opportunities with teachers, content experts, process experts, and other students are provided. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there ways for me to feel connected to the instructors and to other students? Are they convenient and effective? 	<p>Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of learning takes a variety of forms and is against clear, achievable criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will I be able to successfully demonstrate what I've learned? 	<p>Yes/No</p>	

LEVEL2 IS FINISHED – Are you satisfied with the design? If so, go on to **LEVEL3**

LEVEL 3

STILL CAN'T DECIDE? WAN'T THE VERY BEST?
HERE ARE SOME ESPECIALLY DETAILED CRITERIA.

Good design and delivery of e-learning means that:	Is there evidence of good e-design and e-delivery?	Yes/No	Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Treating students as important individuals. · Flexible scheduling and learner-centred approaches. · Materials that are appealing and user-friendly, well-organized, current and affordable. · Approaches and materials that are free of cultural, racial, class, age and gender bias. · An understanding that you already know some things and shouldn't have to relearn them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Am I made to feel like a valued customer? · Can I register, learn and be assessed when and where I need to? · Are the materials interesting and motivating? · Is there any obvious insensitivity to different cultures, sexual orientation, ability, race or gender? · Is there a Prior Learning Assessment process? Do I have the chance to demonstrate my current skills and knowledge so that I can get advance credit or a shortened training program? 	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A statement of acquired skills and knowledge – what you've learned – that is as important as a completion certificate. · Various approaches to meet different learning styles – learning best by reading, doing, listening, viewing, demonstrating. · Regular, systematic and objective evaluation of all components – instructors, curriculum, student success, processes and resources · Demonstration of return on investment – a favorable comparison of the benefits to the costs for the student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Will I be able to add a new body of skills and knowledge to my learning portfolio? · Will I be able to learn in a way that works for me? Are there options for learning and testing? · Do I have access to evaluation reports and references? Is there an efficient approach to delivering a quality service? · Will the benefits of taking this course justify the expense? Is it a good investment? 	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p>	

LEVEL3 IS FINISHED – Congratulations! You should feel confident about your choice. We hope this has been helpful to you.

If you have suggestions or comments,
please contact us at: e-learningguide@futuresd.com

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Association for Media and Technology in Education in Canada
<http://www.amtec.ca>
Canadian Association for Community Education
<http://www.nald.ca/cacenet.htm>
Canadian Association for Distance Education
<http://www.cade-aced.ca>



Commonwealth of Learning
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