



Do we need 'e' in learning?

From cashpoints to mobile phones, the digital revolution has led to wide-ranging changes for society. Education has been a major beneficiary of these changes, underpinned by continuing advances in communications technologies and information exchange. E-learning, now informed by theoretical and good pedagogical practices, is well established as a method for delivering quality education.

What is e-learning? Diana Laurillard, Head of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) e-learning Strategy Group, defined e-learning as 'learning in a way that uses information and communication technologies (ICT).¹ When instructor and student are physically separated the term 'distance learning' has been applied.

A new focus on pedagogically-driven learning has seen the more useful term 'flexible learning' coming into use, the premise being that students learn when, what and from wherever they wish.² Flexible learning principles also apply to 'blended learning'; a combination of online and face-to-face learning. These approaches have proven to be highly suited to dentistry and learning 'on the job' in dental practice.³

There has been much hype, hope and hokum associated with e-learning, with initiatives such as the e-University failing.⁴ However Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and DfES policy,

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prepared jointly with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC),⁵ has offered new optimism and opportunity. It recognises that successful e-learning strategy rests on the development of a common digital infrastructure and ICT capability. Collaborative approaches to personalised learning and support packages for practitioners play key roles, as does facilitating more learners to study minor specialities.

But how can e-learning help practising dentists? The UK needs to provide training for 1,000 more dentists⁶ and current evidence suggests that based upon a blended approach, 'e' really can provide 'extra'. Historically, the provision of online CPD has not been successful. Simply publishing lectures in webpage or webcast format was also not effective, but educational research has enabled dental educators to understand dentists' needs and to use online media wisely⁷ and effectively in 'virtual learning environments'.

For example, King's College London, through the External Programme of London

University, run a high quality online postgraduate degree – the e-MClinDent (www.londonexternal.ac.uk/dentistry). This is an excellent example of a 'blended' package of online teaching supported by intensive annual face-to-face components. Such programmes are now profitable enough to support the development of innovatory online teaching materials such as study model holograms. High quality well-designed CPD programmes will surely follow.

Altogether the future is bright and pedagogically driven e-learning is the key to quality dental training. With user-friendly technology, teaching capacity can be increased to provide high quality courses for dental teams. The concept of an International Virtual Dental School is no longer a pipe dream, indeed the framework is already in place⁸ thanks to the global dentistry standards developed by international collaborations such as DentEd. New technologies such as virtual reality and haptics are enabling both 'immersion scenario' teaching and tactile instruction across the web. All evidence suggests that e-programmes

can deliver highly effective flexible learning. The 'e' in learning is evolving. 🦷

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