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## Topic: Is it time to drop the 'e' from e-learning?

Fiona Joseph looks at blended learning.

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As recently as two years ago being on the internet seemed quite revolutionary but as the internet industry matures then references to e-commerce, e-business, e-marketing, and the like are beginning to sound dated. This is most evident in the commercial sector where, for example, the German software giant SAP.com has recently undergone a re-branding exercise. Not only has the company dropped the .com suffix from its name, its website has also deleted any reference to e-business (it now prefers the simple term 'business'). So is the term e-learning now equally ripe for change?

The e-learning industry is - thankfully - emerging from a period of intense hype and speculation, which reached its height with the now-famous quote from John Chambers, CEO of CISCO Systems, about online education being "the next killer application for the Internet" and one that would "make email look like a rounding error." Three years after this prediction e-learning has yet to achieve anything like the levels of adoption that were expected. There are a number of reasons for this.

The bottom line is that the focus has been on the technology and its revolutionary nature yet this has alienated many ordinary teachers. As with any new technology there is a band of 'early adopters' who relish the challenge of getting to grips with different ways of doing things, but the majority of teachers want and need a clear case for changing their teaching methods.

A good illustration of this is where a teaching institution has introduced a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). A VLE usually encompasses a set of tools designed (in theory at least) to make the administration of online courses much easier. Popular VLEs such as Blackboard or WebCT come with their own tools for allowing teachers to do many of the following tasks: emailing class members, posting assignment deadlines on an online calendar, authoring and publishing materials online, tracking student scores, and facilitating or moderating online discussions through bulletin boards or chat.

But are teachers' lives necessarily made any easier? Many argue that they simply don't have the time to learn a brand new set of unfamiliar administration tools. Equally, teachers may be reluctant to make their in-house materials available to an audience beyond their own classroom, and not all teachers make good course writers in any case.



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It's perhaps worth reminding ourselves of the perceived benefit of e-learning over traditional face-to-face delivery: that flexible 'anytime-anyplace' learning has the capacity to reach learners anywhere in the world. But unless there is a specific target market for e-learning provision then online course providers are not going to generate sufficient revenue to pay even for development costs. (Online learning has the potential to work well for UK language providers, for example, providing they can market their courses to students abroad who are less keen to travel to the UK but who still want to learn with a quality provider.)

Given some of the problems of e-learning it is reassuring to see growing evidence that the re-branding of e-learning is already taking place. In training departments and universities around the world the term 'blended learning' provides a useful and much-needed refocus, which puts the emphasis on learning rather than the medium of delivery (i.e. electronic vs. face to face). Blended learning is simply about choosing the best and most appropriate format of delivery for the learner and situation.

At this point most teachers will want to scream: "Tell us something we don't know! We've been doing blended learning for years!" It is true that teachers are used to using a range of teaching methods: lectures, seminars, project work, discussion, exams, etc. and perhaps the term 'blended learning' is only a revelation for those who have been seduced by the thought that the computer could offer everything to the learner.

So does this let teachers off the hook in terms of embracing new technology in their teaching? Not quite, but I believe that instead of emphasising the revolutionary nature of e-learning we should focus on building a repertoire of skills for teachers to acquire at their own pace (and only where it suits their learning situation).

Here are some examples of ways that teachers can incorporate technology into their teaching in a graduated, step-by-step way.

### **Submission, grading and return of written assignments**

Students submit written assignments by email ? Teacher grades the work using an online mark-up tool (such as the excellent Markin or even Word) ? Students corrected work is published online in a personal folder

### **Using external electronic resources**

Teacher recommends online resources for students to visit out of class time? Teacher incorporates web resources (e.g. Web Quests) into the lesson ? Teacher rebalances the curriculum to include dedicated computer-based learning and reducing classroom hours, if appropriate



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### **Creating in-house materials**

Teacher puts Word version of handouts online ? Teacher produces online presentations using presentation software such as Powerpoint ? Teacher uses authoring tool to develop interactive quizzes and tests

Most teachers have skills that feature somewhere along these continuums or they would be keen to try at least one or two new ways of doing things. Perhaps it's time to rid ourselves of the off-putting connotations of the term e-learning once and for all, and 'blended learning' offers us the chance to do just that.

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