



Learning curve

The internet should be a rich haven for those hoping for a little self-improvement or to expand their job prospects. But is online learning any real substitute for face-to-face teaching, self-study courses or even CD-based training tools? Wendy Brewer finds out

Ever thought that there ought to be more to life than endless commuting and a stultifying nine-to-five job that severely lacks variety? Keen to progress or expand your horizons, perhaps even change direction altogether? Maybe you simply fancy putting your brain to good use learning a new skill.

The most obvious route to self-improvement is to take an evening class. But the strictures of spending two hours on a Tuesday evening for the next eight weeks learning to be a mechanic are not suited to us all. You may work erratic hours, have demanding dependents or are turned off by the idea of sitting in a classroom being taught by someone who reminds you of your schoolmistress. If your ambitions require intensive study, you could always jack in your job and return to mainstream education.

If either of those routes are for you, good luck to you. Personally speaking, I value my free time far too much to want to spend large chunks of it having French grammar drilled into me. And I've no intention of returning to university and a diet of beans on toast. But I do want to further my career. So instead I signed up for a computer-based distance learning course in which modules are emailed to me, while feedback and mentoring support are delivered to my PC.

While this particular course simply uses the PC as a means of delivery, computers – in particular the internet – are becoming increasingly valuable to people like me who want to study at their own pace in their own place. Over the following pages we'll look at a number of PC-based learning methods,

focusing on the development and growth of online courses and whether or not they have anything unique to bring to class.

Electronic avenues

The internet was originally a tool for academics, a chance to share information with colleagues around the world in a way that had never before been possible. More than 10 years down the line, the general public are taking advantage of the practical applications the web has to offer, from gathering information for research purposes to broadening their knowledge of specific areas; everything from gardening to history can be found with little effort.

It was from this heritage that online training was born. Users can research projects online; PCs and the web can be used as a training medium. Students can attend online seminars and learn new skills, receive real-time feedback and mentoring as well as downloading course notes and lessons. Broadband connection speeds even make it possible to send complete course materials and download any illustrative video footage or software.

But internet-based training isn't the only option for PC users – electronic learning takes a number of forms. Let's explore the options for both business users and hobbyists who want to learn new skills but want to do so in the comfort of their own living rooms.

From a distance

Online courses come in many forms, from modular-based degree programmes to study group support and research schemes, but

the idea of distance learning is nothing new. The OU (Open University) has been running distance learning programmes for more than 30 years and has steadily advanced to online schemes. OU courses have traditionally offered a learning format to retired people and those in full-time employment. As a rule, its students are people without the time or physical ability to attend scheduled classes. The online model is therefore the perfect complement to the OU's self-study schemes.

"As a distance teaching organisation, electronic communication allows more interactive and faster contact with our geographically dispersed student body," says OU administrator Dean Taylor.

The growth of the internet means the OU can now offer its students the ability to communicate on a daily basis with lecturers and other students – something distance learning schemes had previously been missing – while allowing students to work at their own pace.

Made to measure

The advantages of online learning are manifold. Tailor-made courses are simply impractical for attendance-based systems, where slower learners are vulnerable to falling behind and often encouraged to drop out of courses altogether.

"Students can study where they want 24/7 and are able to fit their education around their daily routine," says Jane Bodley-Scott, director of online learning provider Premier IT.

"Users can be totally in touch with their own personal learning style and their tutor

← BBC's Webwise and LearnDirect are just two examples of companies that offer numerous online learning courses

can pick and choose techniques that most appeal to them, such as quizzes or essay-type learning,” agrees Patrick McGuire, executive editor of BBC’s Webwise online learning scheme. The option to work at home often creates a comfortable environment for learners, especially those who have not attended educational establishments for some time.

“Learners can work within their own comfort zones at their own pace. This means they can choose a time [to study] when they are feeling most responsive,” says McGuire. “This is particularly important in sensitive areas, such as basic skills like literacy and IT, where learners can feel that judgements are being made about their progress.”

Learn to share

For employers, an online course can be a useful way of addressing staff training. In an office packed with networked PCs, it’s an obvious choice if you’re looking to update your own and your colleague’s knowledge of a particular technology, piece of software or managerial competence.

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A number of companies offering such courses have sprung up in the past couple of years. NETg, one of the better known e-training companies, cites one of the major advantages as the ability to “offer staff a flexible and consistent learning solution which can be accessed wherever and whenever they like”.

NETg has tapped into the idea of staff sharing newly acquired knowledge as well as using courses placed on clients’ intranets, thus providing a “consistent and easily accessible learning solution”.

A rich blend

But almost all online course providers are clear in their opinion that learning via the web must not be used to replace classroom-based tutoring. In fact, the most successful courses are those that involve so-called ‘blended learning’.

“Blended learning gives people the opportunity to learn in a way that is most appropriate to their requirements. By providing flexible training, users are able to determine where, when and how learning content is delivered, combining the best aspects of instructor-led training with just-in-time e-learning,” added BBC’s McGuire.

“It will always be necessary to provide personal instruction with online training,” agreed Mark Stimson, manager of training company Click2learn. “The most effective online courses are those that replicate the community aspects of traditional learning.” While most online courses offer some form of personal tuition – whether via phone, email or online study groups – some still feel this is not enough.

“We recommend students add online facilities to their learning and revision practice, but online courses are not an adequate form of learning. Explaining

something in person is often far easier than explaining something in written form,” says John Dawley, an ex-secondary school headmaster.

As yet the types of course available online seem to be limited, partially because there are some subjects that simply do not lend themselves to an online format.

“When hands-on experience is required classroom learning is undeniably the most appropriate method of delivery,” says Premier IT’s Jane Bodley-Scott.

However, there is room for more ‘fun’ courses. “Elderly people particularly are interested in learning a new hobby or skill but most internet courses seem to be IT-based. This is a shame because there’s a huge market that most training companies aren’t tapping into,” says a spokeswoman for Help the Aged.

Obvious audience

Many people within the disabled and elderly communities miss out on university and other training courses because they cannot physically get to the teaching institutions. Online courses are a way for elderly people to learn new skills and meet people, but many organisations are still not targeting this market. Charity Age Concern (www.ageconcern.org.uk) offers computer-training courses to the elderly. All courses are currently over-subscribed, proving that elderly people want to get involved in this learning medium.

“Older people are apprehensive to start with as they think online learning is only for the young. But once they’ve had a go they are often astonished at how simple and easy it is to learn new skills online. If you want more older people to learn online then there is a lot of work that needs to

↑ Niace helps to keep its dropout rate low by nurturing a one-to-one relationship between students and tutors as well as sending regular emails

→ E-training firm NETg offers company staff members training on a particular piece of technology, software or managerial competence

be done to break down psychological barriers,” says Andy Wallace, an IT trainer at Age Concern.

But according to the charity, many elderly people simply do not have access to PCs. “There is a growing need for training materials which are aimed specifically at people aged over 50. [These need to provide] examples that are relevant to older people and that take account of different learning styles,” says Wallace. Elderly people aren’t the only group that could benefit from online tuition.

“Course providers need to take into account visually impaired people who have difficulty attending courses and are also neglected in the online course market,” says Royal National Institute for the Blind’s campaigns officer, Julie Howell. Larger text, sounds and bright colours are just some of the improvements that would help visually impaired people.

As yet, the BBC is one of the few training providers that offers access to large-text documents and provides courses for people who have difficulty reading

standard text. But it’s a fairly obvious area for course providers to target, particularly as it would improve course take-up rates.

Acceptable alternatives

Despite the lower overheads (no need to hire premises, buy coursebooks or other teaching materials) online learning isn’t a cheap option and many people are put off by the cost. In fact, online learning has traditionally been more expensive than attendance-based learning, but this trend is starting to change.

Online course providers

Typing the phrase ‘online course providers’ into a search engine will bring up a host of them. A comprehensive list is impractical here, but the following are good starting points.

• BBC Learning Zone (www.bbc.co.uk/education/izone) **The BBC is one of the best online resources for hobbyists and those looking to learn new skills for free. Everything from gardening and cooking to language skills and revision guides is provided. Find out more at www.bbc.co.uk/learning/courses.**

• Click2learn (www.click2learn.com) **Offers customised learning solutions for companies needing to implement a structured training regime, plus software for those wishing to create tailor-made learning programmes.**

• Floodlight (www.floodlight.co.uk); Hot Courses (www.hotcourses.co.uk); and On Course (www.oncourse.co.uk) **Details of evening classes, academic courses and online courses in the Greater London area.**

• LearnDirect (www.learnirect.co.uk) **In addition to numerous PC hardware and software courses and training modules, LearnDirect features more general retail and managerial, environmental and automotive courses.**

• NETg (www.netg.com) **Corporate training solutions covering topics related to business and professional development,**

↑ The Open University has been well established for over 30 years

desktop applications and information technology. Sample courses include quality management and Unix and Windows 2000 administration.

• Open University (www.open.ac.uk) **Established more than 30 years ago, the OU is a distance-learning university which offers a huge range of academic courses.**

• Premier IT (www.premierit.co.uk) **Comprehensive list of both location-based and online courses covering IT certification, network administration, web design and DTP (desktop publishing).**

CD-ROM learning



An alternative to online learning, which also puts the student in control of when, where and at what pace they learn, is the CD-ROM. CDs have been exploited as learning tools since the advent of multimedia computing. Video clips, interactive textbooks, user-controlled scientific experiments, context-sensitive dictionaries and support materials and, in the case of language learning titles, voice-recognition facilities that enable users to fine-tune pronunciation, all make the CD an ideal teaching medium.

As with internet-based learning, it's debatable whether or not it can ever be a substitute for face-to-face teaching but,

from our experience, it is certainly a useful way of reinforcing lessons and makes an ideal revision aid. We tried Japanese and French tuition CD-ROMs from Transparent Software (www.learning-a-language.co.uk) as they contain additional teaching resources online. We also tried out BVG Software's PC Hardware four-disc training manual which uses video to illustrate the different parts of a PC and how to build, troubleshoot, repair and upgrade.

For a list of CD training publishers and to see how we rated these titles against the information we found online, turn your browser to www.pcadvisor.co.uk/printplus.

"Creating and developing the content that goes into online learning courses can be costly and this has to be taken into consideration when pricing the end product," says Premier IT's Bodley-Scott.

Although online course are cheaper to set up and have fewer fixed costs than their attendance-based counterparts, teachers need to be on call seven days a week to answer student's questions and mark papers, which pushes up prices. An average full-time course costs between £200 and £300, which is pretty much on a par with the equivalent attendance-based course.

But there are cheaper alternatives. CD-based learning, for example, offers many of the benefits of online schemes – such as working from home and at one's own pace – but users may miss the interaction online courses offer. There are also online research facilities, such as Britannica Online. Used in conjunction with distance learning programmes or attendance-based schemes, internet research provides users with a wider and more easily usable reference facility than, say, a library.

Course providers need to consider visually impaired people who have difficulty attending courses and are neglected in the online course market

Incentive scheme

But online learning schemes aren't perfect either and this form of education is still in its infancy. Dropout is still a problem for many course providers. Left to their own devices to work at home and with the added pressure of a full-time job, many people find self-study takes a lot of willpower.

"People beginning courses and failing to complete is as much a problem for traditional learning as for online-based learning," says BBC's McGuire. A Niace (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, www.niace.org.uk) spokesman says: "The OU has always had to address this problem, since its launch in 1969. It overcomes this by setting assessment tasks for learners at regular intervals and giving plenty of support and feedback.

"People need varying levels of interaction and entertainment to keep them involved in the course. Regular emails and a one-to-one relationship with tutors often helps to decrease this dropout rate."

Pace of change

As time goes by the format of online courses will greatly improve. As with most things a certain amount of trial and error is required before a successful formula is hit upon. The next major step to improving this learning medium is the widespread availability of broadband technology.

Slow download speeds coupled with time wasted trying to open pages or documents is as frustrating to an experienced IT user as it is to a novice. Broadband will bring instantaneous communication so online conversations will be as quick as talking on

the phone and downloading documents will take minutes rather than hours.

Although the broadband rollout process has been lengthy, BT has enabled about another 100 telephone exchanges since this time last year, bringing the total to just over 1,100. But course providers must focus on making content support these fast connection speeds.

"Interactivity is the key to online courses – providing download times are not too long. Video and complex simulations are appreciated by those who are currently willing to wait [for images to download]. There is no doubt that adding high-speed delivery of rich content to our existing online resources will be popular with audiences," says BBC's McGuire.

Service provider Telewest agrees that broadband will give online learning a more exciting spin. "As long as providers realise that they need to stream fast content to users then courses have to improve for the better. The more interactive and interesting courses become, the more people will sign up," says a Telewest spokesperson.

But course providers would be wise to remember that: "Technology is no panacea. It has to be applied intelligently and in ways so that teaching and learning, not technology, is at the centre of the process," according to Tom Panelas, director of Britannica Online.

Rogue trainers

Better content and faster connection speeds aren't enough on their own. Government funding and wider access to IT equipment are also crucial. ILAs (individual learning accounts) were the government's

attempt to offer access to online learning to people who were willing to stump up part of the cost. The idea was that training centres throughout the country ran government-endorsed schemes, mainly IT-based, to provide people who were already in employment with new skills.

Unfortunately, the schemes were withdrawn at the end of last year after a number of training centres were found to have acted fraudulently. Each student was given a virtual £150 towards the cost of their course, which training centres claimed directly from the government. But some training centres, in turn, came up with virtual students in whose names they claimed fees for their non-existent courses. The knock-on effect was that thousands of people who genuinely wanted to take part in the scheme lost out, either because the courses they wanted to sign up for were apparently oversubscribed or because ILAs were withdrawn.

The government has since been working on a replacement scheme, but

→ Daily online video conversations enhance language lessons for students at Montgomery Combined School, Exeter and their peers in Brittany



this time its focus will be on security.

"We trusted the centres and that didn't work," says a spokesman at the DfES (Department for Education and Skills, www.dfes.gov.uk) which orchestrated the scheme. "This time we will need to keep tighter reins on providers or individuals and make regular checks on how money is being spent."

An announcement providing details of the replacement scheme is expected later this year. In the meantime, the BBC is working with the DfES to discuss how best to promote online courses. It will be running a campaign, Becoming Webwise, with UK Online, the government's online portal, in the autumn.

Any which way you can

There's a diversity of teaching media available and, increasingly, it is putting study back in the hands of the student. This encompasses everything from multimedia CDs and touchscreens to interactive whiteboards and students collaborating globally via the internet.

Online learning is merely an extension of this student-led revolution. To sign up you simply need to trawl the web for a course of interest and pay your dues. But lazy learners beware: self-study requires a lot of self-discipline. If you can't motivate yourself, an online course will be as much of a waste of money as the gym membership you never use. ■