ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

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Formal, non-formal and informal learning

How are academic training, in-company training and experiences implemented in eLearning?

Learning is a process that can take place in different ways and places. It may be voluntary or involuntary, culminating in the award of a certificate or not, it may be carried out independently or with the guidance of a teacher or trainer, it may be theoretical, practical or both. To simplify, we tend to draw a clear distinction between formal, informal and non-formal learning and consequently, between **academic and corporate training**. Starting from the European guidelines on learning developed by Cedefop, let us try to understand what are the characteristics, differences and points of contact between these forms of learning and how e-learning fits into each of them.

Formal training: characteristics and role of eLearning

Formal training is defined as a structured and mostly compulsory learning pathway in which the **learning objectives** are set by an institution and delivered by professionals. The knowledge acquired is monitored and measured through checks and individual work, at the end of which a certificate or diploma is issued which is recognised by a public or private body accredited at national and international level. In this sense, formal training is not limited to education provided by schools and universities, but also includes the corporate environment, with mandatory compliance training, for example.

eLearning and academic training

Since the **emergence of eLearning** as distance learning and even more so with its development as fourth generation 'electronic learning' via the Internet, formal training has always played a central role. Universities around the world have taken advantage of the flexible and scalable nature of eLearning to open up the boundaries of formal education to all through **MOOCs**, massive open online courses, or courses for academics of all degrees, entirely online.

Corporate training and eLearning

In the corporate environment, eLearning makes it possible to fulfil the legally required training and continuous professional development of employees, even if they are located in different geographical areas. Flexibility, cost-effectiveness and accessibility are just some of the benefits of eLearning.

Informal learning: what is it and how is it realised in the eLearning environment?

In informal learning the learner learns involuntarily and autonomously outside the physical or virtual classroom and from non-work or school contexts. Informal learning occurs when one learns unconsciously and from any experience even without having decided on the learning objectives beforehand. For example, I watch a film for entertainment, but because it is a historical film I learn more about the facts.

In eLearning, informal learning is used to enhance learner engagement. This can be done using, **social learning** (learning from others, interacting via forums, for example) and experiential learning (learning by doing, in the workplace).

Non-formal learning through online courses

Non-formal learning is a form of planned learning but, unlike formal training, the objectives are not defined externally by an institution, but by the trainer or the company, while learner participation is voluntary. A typical example of non-formal learning is a sports or music course for amateurs. In eLearning the learner learns in a non-formal way when, for example, he/she can

choose autonomously the training contents to be followed through the course catalogue in his/her LMS. Even though it is voluntary training, eLearning makes it possible to track and measure student performance, even if it is not in a formal learning context.

From the learner's point of view, the major differences between formal, non-formal and informal learning are whether participation is **compulsory** or not, whether the learner is free to choose the content, whether the learner is aware of the learning or not. However, the borderline is not always so clear-cut, especially in the corporate sector. From a safety compliance course, an employee can switch from formal to non-formal learning by choosing other courses freely from their LMS and learn informally through discussions, games and interactions with colleagues.

The merit of eLearning is that it combines formal, non-formal and informal learning within the same learning environment, thus contributing to the **lifelong learning** that is essential for any company looking to the future.

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