eLearning, a Definition

eLearning is a term that means something different to almost everyone who uses it. Some use the term to refer to packaged content pieces and others to technical infrastructures. Some think only of web-based self-study while others realize eLearning can encompass real-time learning and collaboration. Almost all agree that eLearning is of strategic importance. Almost all also agree that eLearning is an effective method that should be blended into a corporation's current learning mix.

eLearning refers to the use of internet or wireless technologies to deliver a broad array of training solutions. eLearners access the learning from a computers via the internet or an intranet, or through a hand held device like a palm pilot. In 2001 Marc Rosenberg suggested the following definition of eLearning: "the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance." (p. 28). In less than two short years this definition has expanded to include wireless as well as internet technologies with the two technologies often working together to delivery focused learning to the job-site.

We are all familiar with classroom-based learning (cLearning) which is face-to-face group learning led by an instructor or subject matter expert. In eLearning environments learners interact with learning materials, their instructors and other learners from various locations and often at various times using network technologies. So by its nature, e-learning offers significant flexibility as to when and how learning occurs. E-learning can include independent, facilitated, or

collaborative approaches to learning. Independent learning refers to each individual learner completing learning activities or modules on their own, in their own environment, on their own schedule. The learner is independent of a facilitator and the other learners. This does not mean that the learner does not have access to other resources such as a facilitator or coach, but the learner is in control of whether they contact them, when they contact them, and for what.

Facilitated learning is designed to be completed through interaction with instructors or coaches. There are several ways this can work, for example, a learner might complete a section of learning on-line then discuss key concepts via e-mail with the instructor or with classmates.   Collaborative learning relates to working with other learners in an on-line environment. For example: an e-mail discussion with other learners on a particular topic or everyone posting to a bulletin board or courseroom.

eLearning can be asynchronous (meaning learners are experiencing the learning at different times) or synchronous (meaning learners are experiencing the learning at the same time) or it can incorporate both drawing on the strengths of each.   Independent learning is, by definition, asynchronous. Facilitated and collaborative can be either asynchronous or synchronous.

Some of the more obvious benefits of e-Learning include consistency of content, ease of customization, learner control, and reduction or elimination of travel costs to attend learning events. Consistency of content is achieved by the same learning being made available to anyone, anywhere, anytime with no degradation to the quality or effectiveness of the content or presentation. Learner control lets each learner complete just the sections of the learning they

need leaving them free to come back at any time for more or to review what they have already covered. As Marc Rosenberg puts it, "E-learning can reach an unlimited number or people virtually simultaneously… Everyone gets the same content, presented the same way. Yet the programs can also be customized for different learning needs or different groups of people." (p. 30)

Because of its digital nature, eLearning can be cost and time-effectively customized to individuals or small groups. The same content can be offered in a multitude of formats: self-paced, facilitated, in the classroom, blended. Also because of its digital nature and the flexibility provided by intranets and the internet, travel costs are greatly reduced or eliminated since learners do not have to congregate in one spot for a learning event. "It cuts travel expenses, reduces the time it takes to train people, and eliminates or significantly reduces the need for a classroom/instructor infrastructure." (Rosenberg, 2001, p. 30)