E-LEARNING—or electronic learning—means using the Internet to access and participate in online modules or courses. Most nurses who participate in e-learning use it to earn continuing education (CE) credit, receive a certificate in a particular topic, or even obtain an academic degree.

E-learning courses are offered online using course-management software, such as WebCT or Blackboard. Schools select which one to use and let you access your course through it. Such software programs use e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, and testing tools to organize information and support online communication.

Some instructors may use all of those features to promote interaction and collaborative online work. For example, they may require students to discuss readings in a discussion forum, where each student posts her comments for others to read when they have time and add a response. Or students may be expected to collaborate with each other in group work using chat rooms, where everyone is online at the same time, typing in comments to create a virtual conversation. Other instructors (or programs) may structure their coursework so it’s more self-paced with little interaction with other students.

E-learning programs may offer all courses online or blend online work with on-site or in-class sessions. For example, one course might include online lectures plus a clinical practicum that a preceptor can supervise.

**Pros and cons of e-learning**

The greatest advantage of e-learning is convenience—the ability to access courses any time on almost any computer. With courses that are offered entirely online, distance becomes a non-issue—you can sign up for a course offered by a college across the country because your presence isn’t required on-campus. Scheduling may be crucial, though, as courses might be scheduled within semesters or have specific start and stop dates you need to know. But many are continuously available, and you can tap into them when you need to learn something or when you’re ready to advance your career through academic studies.

The major disadvantages of e-learning are that you’ll need computer access and you’ll need to devote time and effort to learning how to use the computer and course management software.

**An array of choices**

You may already be familiar with e-learning systems available in your facility that you use for mandatory education, such as OSHA training. Courses conferring CE credits are available in almost any area of interest. Certificate programs, a series of modules or courses that award a certificate when you complete competencies associated with the course content, are also available to prepare nurses for various roles—for example, as nurse educators.

The most popular and readily available are the RN-to-BSN programs. Next in popularity are MSN programs, and with increasing frequency, doctoral programs.

If you’re interested in enrolling in an online nursing program, investigate the provider’s and program’s reputation and credentials. Is the provider accredited? Is the program validated by official agencies? Will you be able to transfer credits earned to another school?

**Locating courses**

The most efficient way to locate courses you’re interested in is to search online. Start by checking the list of programs at the American Association of Colleges of Nursing site (http://www.aacn.nche.edu). Check related Web sites, such as other nursing organizations—the American Nurses Association (http://www.nursingworld.org) and Sigma Theta Tau International (http://www.stti.org) sites, for example—as well as organizations in your specialty area of nursing.

**Is e-learning right for you?**

Everyone learns in different ways. For example, some prefer to be in a classroom where the instructor guides learn-
ing; others are much more self-directed and can learn independently. Although everyone can adapt to learning in an online environment, some people simply manage e-learning better than others. Self-discipline, good time management, and solid computer skills will greatly help you cope with online work.

Besides thinking about your learning style preferences, consider the technology issues. Do you have access to a good computer with an Internet connection? Are you willing to tackle the course management system and learn how to navigate within the course? Typically, you’ll have access to a tutorial about the system when you sign up.

E-learning, like classroom education, can be expensive. Are you willing to invest in a good computer if you don’t have one now? Some schools require specific computers and applications, so check with the university before spending any money (its Web site should list this information for all incoming students). Will your employer reimburse you for successfully completed courses? Are scholarships or other funding possibilities available?

Finally, e-learning requires a substantial time commitment. It’s not easier than the traditional classroom approach and it requires just as much time. Be flexible—with many courses, you may have weekly assignments that you can do at any time during the week; other courses may require your presence online at a specific day and time for group chats, much as a regular class would.

As with any course or program of study, before you decide to enroll, identify your career goals. Do you want to learn a specific skill? Is your object to become certified in a particular area? Do you need information about taking care of a certain patient population or cross-training for a particular area of nursing? Are you seeking an academic degree to prepare for your next level of practice? Once you’ve answered these questions, you’re better prepared to decide about investing your time, energy, and money.

E-learning offers many opportunities and benefits for career enrichment and advancement. If you believe it’s the right learning environment for you and you can commit the time and resources needed, e-learning can offer you a rich world of educational opportunities beyond the traditional classroom.

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