

Levels of eLearning:

*A Discussion to Help Determine
the Cost of eLearning*



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Classifying the level of training is a flexible metric. It is important to have a general framework for such levels, however, so both the project sponsor and the developer have a standard reference point to ensure scope and requirements are aligned. For example, when a company requests a bid on an eLearning project, everyone should have the same point of reference to determine what is being requested – resulting in pricing that is accurate and comparable.

We therefore need fairly strict definitions of what the levels are, or else they are not of any practical value. One such attempt is known as “CBT Levels”, a term reflecting its age since ‘CBT’ is somewhat dated terminology these days. So while perhaps better titled “Levels of eLearning” (or “Levels of e-Learning”, depending on your hyphenated preference), the concept remains the same: how can training be classified for purposes of style, presentation, depth and, perhaps most importantly, cost?

As applied to eLearning, such classifications are impacted by general complexity, range and richness of multimedia, and – perhaps most dramatically – the depth of interactivity. Of course, [defining “interactivity”](#) can be a nebulous quest in itself! Clicking on a ‘Next button’ requires the user to interact with the lesson, but that’s a pretty tame definition. On the other hand, it is generally accepted that the more interactive the module, the more effective it will be in achieving the objectives.

Interestingly, the actual levels defined within this class are somewhat arbitrary. Some sources suggest there are three levels of interactivity, others say four, and still other specify five! For customers looking to work with our group of eLearning experts, we’ve settled on a simple 3-level definition focused on the interactive complexity as well as the range of potential media, from simple images and photography to video and complex 3D animation.

Level 1: What are commonly referred to as ‘page-turners’, purists grumble that such courseware shouldn’t even be considered ‘eLearning’ as its efficacy is questionable. However, in our experience, such modules can be effective for communicating simple concepts and rules, and are indeed relatively inexpensive to develop. Most current ‘authoring tools’ publish these (Level 1) types of modules by default – commonly through simple PowerPoint conversions – though how truly effective they are depends on the author, the presentation, and the content. Overall, such Level 1 eLearning titles offer very little interactivity beyond

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'clicking Next' and basic quiz questions, and simple media elements like stock images, transitions, and general narration.

Level 2: At this level, courseware starts to get a bit more complex with a moderate level of interactivity and multimedia assets (such as audio, video, and animation). Often the objectives are geared more toward more involved concepts, single-path simulation, and procedural tasks. Many customers shoot for Level 2 courseware as a compromise providing an effective course at a moderate cost. Aside from some content-related interaction, the lesson navigation expands to menus, submenus, branching, glossaries, and links to outside resources. The actual learning content within these lessons is somewhat static, aside simple transitions and animation, and often accompanied by simple exercises (i.e. drag-and-drop, matching, and identification components) and professional narration. Multilingual versions of the courseware are also a consideration at this level.

Level 3: Level 3 eLearning courseware includes sophisticated exercises, such as software or hardware simulation, a variety of 'branching' to reflect and provide feedback at decision points, and serious games. These highly-interactive modules may include very complex simulation with multiple response and feedback pathways, and most certainly include a liberal assembly of multimedia assets from pre-recorded or live video to interactive 3D objects, and perhaps the use of digital 'avatars'. Such courseware could be defined as a '[serious game](#)'. The oft-referenced 'flight simulator' remains a good example of Level 3 training.

Those three levels generally suffice as general guidelines, but variations are easily configured. A 'Level 1' page-turner could quickly reach the 'Level 3' price-point with addition of custom video. A 'Level 3' piece with complex navigation could have a lower cost by using simple stock art resources. As noted above, content, style, presentation, images, animation, audio, video, and overall instructional design - all are crucial factors in creating 'good' training material, as well as factors that will affect the development effort (cost) of the courseware.

With so many potential components of an eLearning courseware, it can be difficult to estimate the pricing for such development; the more that is known up-front on the style, media, presentation, and interactive components of the desired modules, the more accurate the cost estimate will be. As mentioned, while the levels of e-Learning provide solid guidelines for initial approach and pricing, each level can contain its own set of variation, requiring a clear definition of the project.

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Splitting the project's development into two phases facilitates this process. The first [Instructional Design](#) analysis phase helps to identify the style, audience, content, media, etc. of the desired courseware – not only making the final development costs more accurate, but also identifying key objectives and processes that may be enhanced through multimedia and interactivity. The results are generally detailed in a Design Document deliverable, including the scope, tasks, and pricing for the subsequent Development phase.

While the goal of this paper is to better define the levels of eLearning, other considerations must be considered in defining the project's scope and timeline, such as:

- Availability of subject matter experts (SMEs); can the customer provide the SME or should the developer find and price an outside party into the project?
- What is the customer's expected response time for discussions and product review?
- Is a project site required to manage the assets and deliverables?
- What are the overall 'seat time' minimum or maximum requirements?
- Are government requirements, such as [Section 508 specifications](#), a factor?
- How will the courseware be delivered – via CD, Kiosk, web, or a [SCORM-compliant learning management system](#) (LMS)?
- Does the delivery method impose any restrictions on the types of preferred media or the development approach?

Understanding these factors, along with the overall required 'level' of your eLearning courseware will assure accurate pricing, a streamlined design and development process, and an effective training product. With over a decade in the eLearning field and extensive experience with custom content design, development, and SCORM implementations, ICS Learning Group can assist with all these components. [Contact us](#) for discussion, industry resources, and reference papers to help quantify your project.