Rico Eberle · LEARNING NUGGETS

LEARNING NUGGET E-LEARNING & AI 19 SEPTEMBER 2026

Online is not the same as online

"Online" says little about a course. Three dimensions show which balance of flexibility, guidance and self-regulation fits whom.

By Rico Eberle, e-learning expert for continuing education and municipal councillor in Dübendorf

Video for this post

This learning nugget is also available as a video with transcript (1:32 min). Scan the QR code or open the link:

ricoeberle.ch/en/blog/online-is-not-the-same-as-online/

Three courses, one label: a live lesson in a video call, a classroom course backed by a digital learning platform, and a learning path you work through entirely on your own. All three are called “online”. In terms of teaching, they are worlds apart, and for learners they feel completely different.

A timetable is still a timetable

The usual question, “classroom or online?”, only looks at location. But location is not what defines a learning offer from a teaching perspective. Teaching with fixed times is still a timetable, even in a video call. Learners save the commute. The school still decides when and at what pace they learn.

Three dimensions instead of one

That is why I look at three dimensions:

1. **Flexibility:** Who decides place, time and pace?
2. **Guidance and commitment:** How much does the school structure and accompany learning?
3. **Self-regulation:** How much planning and stamina does the model demand from learners?

Together they give four types: the online classroom, the school with a digital learning ecosystem, the digital self-study model, and the modular system that offers several formats side by side. The typology is a conceptual model for commercial continuing education, not a rating of individual schools.

These dimensions did not come out of nowhere. The Community of Inquiry model by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) describes, alongside social and cognitive presence, a teaching presence in online learning: the way teachers design and guide the learning process. That is close to my second dimension.

Flexibility comes at a price

More flexibility shifts responsibility to the learners. If you choose your own place, time and pace, you also have to plan, keep going and track your own progress. A review by Broadbent and Poon (2015) found that such self-regulation strategies, time management among them, are linked to achievement in online learning.

So the most flexible model is not automatically the best. It comes down to the fit with the target group.

Placing your own course

A team meeting is a good place to test this on one of your own courses. First rate it on the three dimensions, from “low” to “high”. Then come three questions:

- **Is the description accurate?** Would someone from the target group place the course the same way based on the brochure?
- **Does the demand for self-regulation match the target group?** People learning alongside work and family may want flexibility, but also clear milestones.
- **Where is support missing?** If you offer a lot of flexibility, what do you give learners so they can handle it?

Not: classroom or online?
But: which balance fits whom?

The answers usually lead to the real question: do we need more flexible offers, or better support for handling flexibility? The label “online” does not answer it.

Sources

1. Garrison, Anderson & Archer: Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment (2000)
   https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6
2. Broadbent & Poon: Self-regulated learning strategies & academic achievement in online higher education learning environments (2015)
   https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2015.04.007

ABOUT ME

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I work in e-learning, hold a degree in business economics (FH) and sit on the municipal council of Dübendorf, Switzerland. I also chair the foundation board of WBK Dübendorf, a continuing education foundation. I make the learning nuggets on my own: topic, research, text and video. Questions and disagreement are welcome.

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LICENCE

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