Lifesteps

Using the Internet for...
E-Learning

Using the Internet for **E-Learning**

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Lifesteps offers you a range of online and printed guides. Written by
staff from Irish public libraries, each guide contains easy to follow, step
by step explanations of how to use the Internet to achieve a specific goal
or 'life step.'

Lifesteps is an initiative of Irish public libraries, managed by An Chomhairle
Leabharlanna and funded by the Department of the Environment, Heritage
and Local Government through the Information Society Fund.

For updates, news on the project and for a full listing of all the guides,
log on to *www.lifesteps.ie*

You can contact the Lifesteps team at *lifesteps@librarycouncil.ie*

Contents

Note: words in red appear in the glossary at the end of this module.

Introduction

This guide will introduce you to e-learning – an exciting new way to find and undertake education and learning programs using the Internet. What exactly is e-learning? E-learning is another form of distance learning where education and training courses are delivered using computer technology. Typically, this means that courses are delivered either via the Internet, or on computer networks (linked computers). With the increased availability of PCs and Internet access, e-learning is becoming more and more popular. Courses offered on the Internet are varied and you can access training programs, certified and non-certified, from all over the world.

There are lots of advantages to taking an online training course. One main advantage of this type of study is that you don't have to travel to lectures and you can study in your own time, at your own pace. It gives you access to a wide choice of courses that may not be available where you live. Some courses commence with the academic year but others can be started at any time allowing you to fit your study in between work or family commitments. However, you should know that both e-learning and other distance-learning courses do have a very high drop out rate. Some people find that the unstructured nature of e-learning does not suit them and prefer regular class times, while others enjoy meeting new people and the social aspect of a training course. Online learners need to be highly motivated to ensure they meet their goals. They also need to be good self-managers, to ensure that they leave sufficient time for their studies.

Before registering for a course and paying the fees, make sure you are choosing a reputable training provider. If you are doing a certified course, you can check with the awarding body to make sure your provider is registered with them. You can check to see if providers of higher education courses, such as diplomas and degrees, are registered with the relevant government department in their country of origin. It is also a good idea to shop around as many providers offer similar courses at different prices. It is also possible to source completely free courses – for example **Introduction to Web Design** or **Introduction to the Spanish**.

The LifeSteps project has recently added a large collection of Web pages about eLearning. This builds of an initiative by Wexford Public Library Service. On this website, you will find a lot of helpful information on e-learning, as well as an extensive listing of e-learning and distance learning courses. The website also gives information on how your local library service can help and support you while you are studying.

Need to Know

As you will be using a computer to access your course, you do need to have basic computer skills. But don't worry – you don't have to be a genius with computers to use e-learning very successfully! Once you are able to access and browse the Internet you are off to a good start. For some courses you may need to send and receive e-mail. If you are doing a course that requires you to send in essays or other work for assessment, it may be useful to have basic typing skills and knowledge of word-processing, however, for many courses, this is not essential.

Need to Have

- A computer.
- A connection to the Internet or computer network where your course is stored.
- To access some courses you may need a broadband connection.
- An Internet web browser program (e.g. Internet Explorer) and E-mail program (e.g. Outlook Express).
- For some courses you may also need office programs, such as word-processing, loaded on your computer.

Related Guides

Internet Basics covers essential Internet skills that will help you with e-learning.

E-learning Checklist

Before you embark on your course, make sure you have the following information.

Is this course accredited? ☐

Which organisation accredits the program? ☐

Is the qualification recognised where I plan on working? ☐

Are the costs of exams included in the course fee? ☐

Are exams available online or do I have to travel to sit them? ☐

Is the full course online or will I have to travel to seminars? ☐

How is the course delivered? Is there a demo course available? ☐

Do I need to log into the site at specific times for lectures? ☐

Is there tutor support? ☐

Is there contact with others on the course in chat rooms or by e-mail? ☐

Do I need special computer equipment or software programs? ☐

Do I have the right Internet connection (broadband, ISDN)? ☐

Does the provider offer technical support? ☐

When is it on offer? ☐

Step-by-Step Guide

The following section will guide you through how to navigate a typical e-learning course. The course chosen for this example is a free access demo course provided by the FÁS eCollege available at www.fas-netcollege.com. However, you should remember that different providers might use different software programs to create their courses, so screens may not be identical to those shown below.

Many courses on the FÁS eCollege require a broadband Internet connection.

Step 1 - Getting Started

Finding an e-learning course

You can contact a college or education provider and ask if they do e-learning courses and if they can send you a list, or you can use one of the many educational search engines listed at the back of this guide to search for courses in Ireland and abroad.

Another good starting point is the convenient database of e-learning and distance-learning courses, available on the LifeSteps project website. Power up your computer and log onto the Internet as normal. Go to www.lifesteps.ie/elearning.
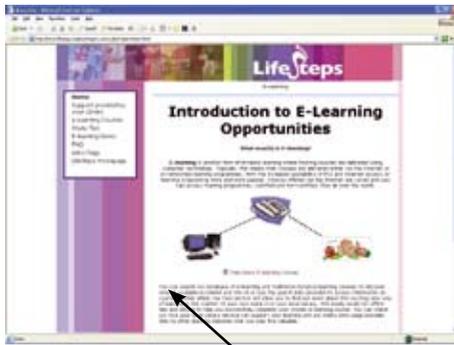

Figure 1. E-Learning page on the LifeSteps web site.

On this page there is a link providing access to a free demo of an E-learning course provided by FÁS - the Irish National Training and Employment Authority.

You are now at the FÁS eCollege website, which can also be reached directly by typing in the web address www.fas-netcollege.com into the address bar and pressing the Enter key once (or clicking on 'Go').

Click on the link **Courses** at the top of the screen and you will access a drop-down menu with the words **Course Options** at the top of the menu. Use this link to view all course categories. By clicking on each category, you can see details of individual courses. From the **Courses** menu, you can also find out about exam certification, course prices and how to apply for an e-learning course. You can even access a **Free Course Trial**. Please note the demo courses available at this link will change from time to time. The example used here is EDCL course with sound for Word Processing using Microsoft Office 2000 Word.

Step 2

Click the link to load the ECDL Course
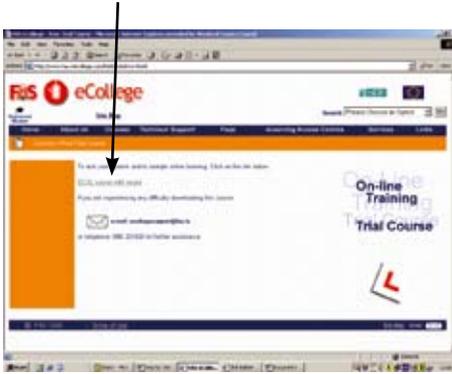
You should get a series of screens displayed as the course downloads to your PC. Although this course has a sound element, all the spoken words are simultaneously displayed on screen.
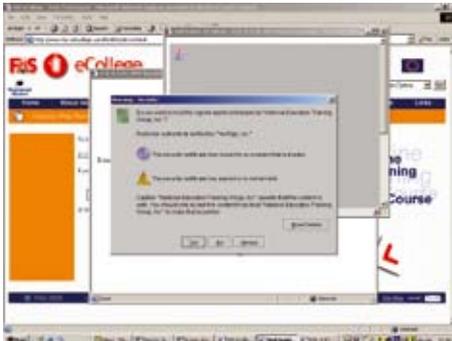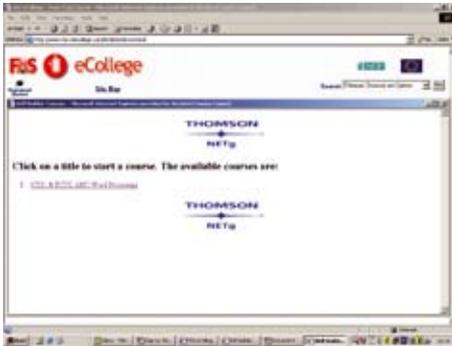

Figure 2: FÁS eCollege free Demo pages

Step 3

Click the link *How to use this course* and the on-screen tutorial will explain in 6 easy steps

- how to navigate through the course
- how to assess your current knowledge
- how to view your assessment results on screen
- how to use your personalized Learning Track
- how to download course content about Post Assessment and viewing your results

Step 4

You can assess your current knowledge with the Pre-Assessment test. Optional pre-assessment tests are available that use performance-based testing techniques to assess your current skills and knowledge of the topics covered in the course.

Taking the pre-assessment tests is recommended as it may enable you to reduce your total learning time. Results from each pre-assessment will generate a personalised Learning Track focusing only on the topics for which you need additional attention. However, if you have no prior knowledge of the content of the course you may want to begin learning immediately.

To do so click the button Begin Course.
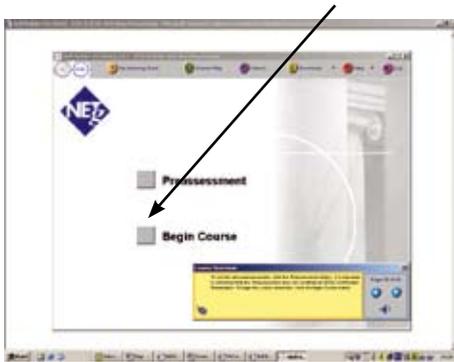
Figure 3: Begin Course button

Step 5

Once the course material has downloaded you will be given a course overview on the particular module you have chosen to begin with.
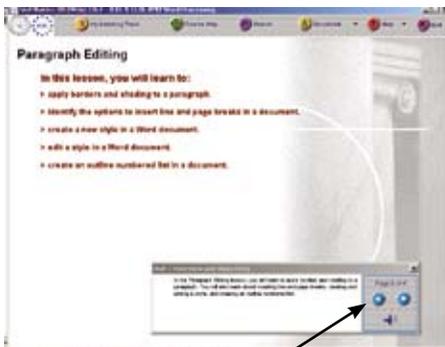
Using the module control panel you can click to advance the pages or have the audio repeated before you go on to the next page. You can also click back to repeat any instructions. When you begin the course you will get an Overview and Objectives for each Unit of the course.

Figure 4: Overview and Objectives Screens

Once you begin the course you will receive detailed and easy to follow on-screen instructions on each topic, which will take you through the learning unit.

Figure 5: Control Panel.

Step 6

At the end of each unit there is a Post Assessment test, so that you can assess how much you have learned.
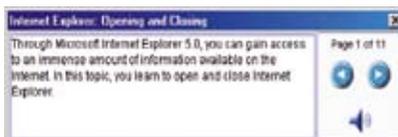
Read the instructions carefully before starting. The test results will be updated to your Personal Learning Track for you to review at any time

Figure 6: Post Assessment Rules Screen

Figure 7: Personal Learning Track Screen

If you decide to enrol for any of the courses available through the FÁS eCollege follow these instructions.

1. Click the **Apply now** link at the bottom right of the screen to enrol for your course. You can apply online and use a credit card to pay your course fees (if applicable) or print out forms to fill-in and post to FÁS along with your payment. During registration, you will be asked to choose a **user name** and **password** so that you can access your course in future.

2. Click this link on the FÁS eCollege Homepage to access your e-learning course and login using your username and password.

   Registered Students
   Click Here to Login

3. The Course Account page gives you details of your registration, course duration and the total amount of time you have spent learning so far. Click the course title you have chosen to commence the course.
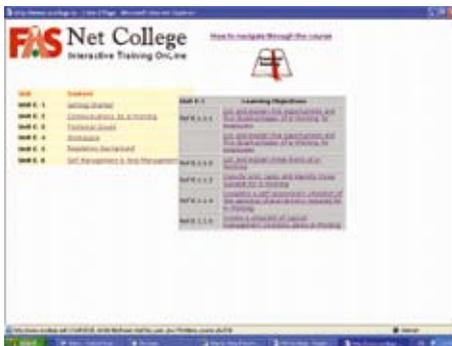

Figure 8: Your Course Account Page

Figure 9: Course Contents and Assistance Screen

4. Click on the Essential Reading icon at the top of the screen for instructions on how to navigate through the e-learning program. Once you are happy that you are familiar with how the program works, click the Getting Started link to access a list of learning objectives for the first Unit. Select the first objective from the Learning Objectives menu.

Figure 10: Unit.1 Opening Screen

5. Now you are ready to start learning! Read each screen carefully and resist the temptation to skim through the text so that you give yourself time to take all this new information onboard.

- Use the red arrow to move forward through each page.

- You can access Unit pages in any order by selecting them from the Unit Map dropdown menu.

- Click the Course Menu icon to return to the Course Contents page and access other areas of the course.

- Clicking the Objectives link gives you an onscreen box stating the key objectives of the lesson.

- Click the Learning Points icon will give you an onscreen summary of the main points contained on the page.

- Some sections of your course may include practice exercises. Click on the link to access the exercises

- Some courses also incorporate self-tests or assessments. These can be used as part of certification or as a self-test to see how well you are doing on the course. Click the icon to access the test.

• Finally, clicking to the right of the red and green arrows actually activates the arrows so that a hidden message will appear.

6. You must work your way through all Units within the course in order to meet all course objectives. *Remember* that until your course deadline expires (6 months from the registration date for a FÁS e-learning course), you can access the course as many times as you like and spend as long as you like reading and re-reading each screen.

General Notes

If there is certification with the course you choose, you must contact a test centre directly to make arrangements for your exam. Click on the Certification link (you will find this in the Courses menu on the FÁS eCollege Homepage) to access information on how you can book specific exams. Certification costs are not included in the FÁS e-learning course cost.

Getting the most from your E-learning Course

Check you have everything you need in place

Before embarking on any course, make sure you have all the details and know exactly what is expected of you in order to successfully complete the programme. Check that you have the right computer equipment and programs and anything else you require.

Manage your Time

Many people choose e-learning courses so that they can study at a time that best suits them. Remember though that you cannot conjure up additional hours in the day! You need to set aside time for your e-learning course. How much time you will need will vary from course to course and person to person. You may find it easier if you create a schedule for your study time – it can be as flexible as you like. Allocate a specific amount of time each week for your work.

Negotiate

Study time inevitably reduces the free time you have to spend with family and friends. Try to negotiate household duties with family or housemates so that they will support your learning and give you the time and space you need to bring your course to a successful conclusion.

Be Realistic

Before you embark on an e-learning course, make sure you have done your research and that you are selecting the right course. If you know you have limited ICT skills and can only manage two hours study per week then don't choose a Masters Degree in ICT! Set achievable learning targets and gradually build your knowledge to reach your ultimate goal.

Environment

Find a comfortable place to study. In general most people study better in a quiet, clutter-free environment with plenty of space for study materials and good lighting. Avoid distractions like the TV and ringing phones. Check your local library for a suitable study place also.

Communication

Many e-learning courses will involve you in frequent communication with your fellow learners and your course tutor. Keep in touch regularly. This will ensure that you do not miss out on new issues and also help you to get to know others taking the course. It can be a little funny 'talking' to strangers online at first, but you will feel less alone and should enjoy this social aspect of e-learning. Many higher-level courses use a VLE – Virtual Learning Environment – which is a program that allows you to easily leave messages for tutors and fellow learners, download course notes and upload your own work for assessment.

For an example of how VLEs work, use the following link to access a demo version of a popular VLE program: http://www.webct.com/software/viewpage?name=software_demo_webinars

Organise

For courses that involve studying over a long period of time, try creating a filing system for your work and resource materials so that you can always find what you need. You can also create filing systems to organise work stored on your PC as well as course e-mails. Always take back-up copies of all course work and assignments.

Keep up with Course Work

As a distance learner, you can feel very isolated if you fall behind with your course-work. Try to set regular goals and give yourself enough time to achieve them. If you do fall behind, talk to your tutor as soon as possible. Most are understanding and will be happy to discuss problems with you.

Evaluate your own progress

Although your tutors will provide you with feedback on how you are progressing, it is useful to evaluate your own progress also. If you feel you are having any problems – discuss these with your tutor and act on the advice given.

Enjoy

You are embarking on a new experience in learning. Relax and enjoy working in a cyber classroom!

How your Library can help you study

Your local public library is a gateway to a world of information.

Learning Materials

Your local public library has or can get you learning materials to back up your studies. Find your nearest local library by searching www.library.ie/public

Most public libraries have their holdings listed in an electronic library catalogue that can be searched online via the Internet. Go to your Library Authority website via www.library.ie/public and click on the library catalogue. You will probably find a guide to searching the catalogue there.

Many libraries have electronic services. Materials listed can be reserved for your use. Search the catalogue, renew your loans, order materials. The service is easy to use. You will need to register as a member of the library to use borrowing services. Your library personal identification number (PIN) is the key to their use. If you do not have a library PIN, contact your local library to get one.

www.borrowbooks.ie allows you search all the online catalogues and websites of Irish public libraries simultaneously. You can then request the books, CDs, DVDs or other material you need via the Inter-Library Loan service of your local library.

Increasingly public libraries are digitising their collections, particularly their collections of local materials. Look out for an online library or media library collection within the catalogue. Otherwise there may be a symbol within catalogue records that indicates the full document is available.

Just Ask A Librarian!

While public libraries countrywide are still growing into a seamless national resource, there is variety locally in the range of services available to help you and the manner in which they are delivered. Before or at the beginning of your studies, a meeting with your local librarian or a specialist in the nearest large library will benefit you throughout your studies. Get a sense of what the library service can do for you and the best way to avail of the services.

You may be surprised at the range of their contacts. Librarians may know other researchers locally who have worked in an area of interest to you.

Libraries can offer study spaces. Libraries can be meeting places for group work and supported research.

A brief meeting with a Librarian early on can save you time and extend the scope and depth of your work.

You will receive better service when library staff understand your work and your research needs well.

Payback Time

Your Public Library Service strives to collect all materials published about the locality, in it and by produced by local writers. This includes YOU!

Please deposit one copy of your thesis, research or other work, in print, in electronic or other form with the Local Studies Service of your library service. Your contribution helps to grow the cultural heritage of the area as a resource for future generations.

Glossary

Address Bar: The long narrow window at the top of the browser, which shows the Web address (URL) of the site you are currently viewing. In Internet Explorer, the word 'Address' appears just to the left of the window. The address bar is automatically filled when you visit a web page. Alternatively, you can type in the address of a web page you wish to visit, and click the 'Go' button at the right-hand end of the window, to view that web page.

Broadband: A type of Internet connection. A broadband connection provides very rapid connection to the Internet with fast download and viewing of web pages, online forms, etc. Broadband connections may use the telephone line, but in any case do not block the line for other types of use (e.g. phone calls).

Browse: This is another way to find what you are looking for online. Browsing a website is like browsing in a shop – you look at what is displayed, and see if it fits your requirements. Browsing does not require that you can describe what you are looking for; instead you take advantage of the layout of the website to find out what you are looking for. Websites may use categories, headings and site maps to help you to browse successfully.

Browser or Web Browser: A computer program, running on the human user's PC, which gets information from Web servers and displays it on the screen. These instructions are usually in the computer language HTML.

Download: The process of copying a computer file from the Internet onto your own PC is called downloading. A file such as a music (MP3) file or a document is made available to the Internet by storing it on a server. To download the file, you usually click on a link to it, or else right-click and choose 'save target as' (in Internet Explorer) or 'save link as' (Mozilla Firefox). A box pops up asking you where on your hard disk you want to store the file; you choose the location for storage, click the button and the file is copied onto your hard disk (or downloaded).

E-Learning: E-Learning or online learning is an increasingly popular new type of studying. It can result in class teaching, coursework, tutorials, assignments, and or examination results, to be all conducted via the Internet.

Email: Email or electronic mail is a service that sends messages across the Internet from one human user to another. Like a letter, email is person-to-person and it stores messages until they are read.

Internet: A large collection of computers, connected together to allow them to share information with one another.

ISDN: A high-speed telephone line service. ISDN allows you to connect to the Internet while still having the telephone free for other use. It also allows faster Internet downloads (about twice as fast as a dial-up connection).

Link: A link, or hyperlink, is a part of a web page that, if clicked with a mouse, opens a different web page. Links are usually shown in blue and underlined on a webpage.

Online: A word used as shorthand for 'on the Internet' or 'connected to the Internet'.

Portal website: A website that acts as a directory, providing links to many related sites.

Website: A website is a collection of web pages which displays information on a particular topic. Common types of websites include company websites (all about a company), online shops (where you buy goods and services and pay by credit card) and personal websites (where individuals share their interests). A website may consist of just one page of information, but will usually contain several pages, all linked together. All the pages in a website usually share the same 'domain' name. For example, all the pages in the large online shop 'Amazon' have an address (URL) that starts with 'www.amazon.com'.

Links

E-learning Course Databases & Search Engines

Wexford Public Library E-learning Pages www.lifesteps.ie
Google Education Directory
http://www.google.com/Top/Reference/Education/Distance_Learning/Online_Courses
Qualifax www.qualifax.ie
Yahoo Education Directory http://degrees.education.yahoo.com
BBC Learning http://www.bbclearning.com

Irish Education & Certification Bodies

Department of Education & Science www.education.ie
Further Education Training & Awards Council www.fetac.ie
Higher Education & Awards Council www.hetac.ie
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland www.nqi.ie
National Frame-Work of Qualifications www.nfq.ie
FÁS www.fas.ie
Education Ireland www.educationireland.ie
AONTAS www.aontas.com
National University of Ireland (NUI) www.nui.ie

Study Tips and Assistance

Study Guides and Strategies www.studygs.net
Mature Student www.maturestudent.ie

Website Evaluation Guides

Quick Guides www.quick.org.uk/menu.htm
University Libraries http://library.albany.edu/internet/evaluate.html
Cyberbee www.cyberbee.com/guides.html

Search Engines

Google www.google.ie
Yahoo www.yahoo.ie
Alta Vista www.altavista.com
Mamma Mettasearch www.mamma.com
Dogpile www.dogpile.com
Excite www.excite.com

Educational Search Engines/Reference Sites

Education World www.education-world.com
EduHound www.eduhound.com
RefDesk www.refdesk.com/edusrch.html
Education Resource Information Centre www.eric.ed.gov

Final Notes

There are a wide variety of e-learning courses available worldwide that can offer you opportunities to expand your knowledge and gain valuable new qualifications. There are also many e-learning courses that you can take for general interest and fun. By following the straightforward guidelines and advice in this LifeSteps booklet, you should enjoy this exciting new way of learning. Remember to check that your e-learning provider is offering a recognised certification before handing over your hard earned cash. Your local librarian is on hand to offer assistance and advice when you need it. So go on – take the first step on the road to lifelong learning today!