

Making eLearning Engaging

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Over the past decade, eLearning has become a fact of life. The challenge today is not just to train people electronically, but to create more engaging e-tools so people want to use them and are even so engaged that they finish programs on their own and look forward to what's coming next. So how do we do that?

The objective of any learning experience is to engage the audience in learning and encourage their active participation through thought, creativity, and experimentation. Learners should be encouraged to think, challenge their own assumptions, consider all of the data, and come to their own conclusions.

The three keys to creating the most engaging learning are the learners, the content, and the delivery method. Start with "Who is the audience, and what do I want them to learn?" Only after you know that should you determine a delivery method. To add clarity, further information can be gathered from the answers to these questions:

Who is the audience?

- Who are your learners?
- What is their learning style?
- What do they already know?
- How comfortable are they with technology?

What do I want them to learn?

- What information do I need to present?
- What do I want them to do or do differently?
- How long will they need or use this information?
- What is the best way to communicate this message?

What is the best delivery method?

- What resources are available for this project?
- How will this tool fit into existing programs?
- How can existing programs enhance this program or be enhanced by this program?
- What are your technological capabilities?
- Where are the learners located?

eLearning = Engaging Learning

Once you have the answers to these questions, there are many elements that can make an eLearning session engaging. The effective implementation of content into the new medium requires new skills and approaches. Good content will lose its effectiveness if not properly and creatively adapted. In cooking, starting with poor-quality ingredients will guarantee bad results. A bad story will be bad no matter what the medium, and bad content won't magically be made good just by putting it on a computer. Also like cooking, it's not necessary to use all of the ingredients at the same time. You can mix and match. Here are a few of the basics.

Visual Environment

We know that people learn visually. Through our extensive experience in business learning solutions, we have learned that visualizing issues allows individuals and organizations to think systematically, speeding up the "aha" process. It also creates focused thinking, allowing everyone to build a shared understanding of the topics at hand. In eLearning, the picture on the screen is a key factor. If the image is

compelling, interesting, and fun to look at, people are more likely to become engaged quickly in the process.

The visual is also important because it helps to tell the story. In movies, visual cues are as important to the story as the script. Think about *Jaws* in 1977. Who doesn't remember the unique score and the shark fin off Amity Island? The emotional connection the audience had with the story was greatly enhanced by powerful imagery.

Not only does a powerful visual environment help engage participants, but it also aids in recall. Many offline tools have used powerful visual elements for many years, but few online tools have made effective use of this opportunity.

Interactivity

Well-designed interactivity takes learners from "Don't make me read another screen" to "I can't wait to see what happens next!" Interactivity includes things like:

- **Matching, Ranking, and Sorting.**

Self-discovery exercises that introduce key data and information into the process so people learn based on facts, not their own opinions. Self-discovery also harnesses one of the most effective ways people learn — by making mistakes.

- **Searching.** "I spy" experiences geared to a learning objective. In an electronic learning tool created for employees of a large department store chain, learners were shown a cutaway of a consumer's home and were asked to click on all the products sold by any subsidiary of the company. When many items in every room were highlighted, learners discovered the extent of the company's

reach. Learners found this far more entertaining than studying a long list of items offered to customers.

- **Typing.** When learners are asked to type in their thoughts, it forces them to organize their ideas and reflect on what they have learned before they answer. In test after test, we found that this approach provided value for learner engagement and retention.

- **Case Studies.** Using actual business situations to provide experience is a great way to allow people to consider how business decisions are made. A real-world scenario is presented and learners choose an appropriate solution. When they discover how the real situation was handled, they more genuinely consider the effect of the decision. Many times situations do not have "right" answers, or they have a series of complex answers. These lead to difficult decisions that help reflect the complexity of issues that can occur in everyday life.

- **Role Playing.** By trying new skills, processes, or ideas, learners can "be" the CEO or the customer and try out decision-making in a consequence-free environment.

- **Simulations.** Exploring the complex relationships between critical business drivers, learners get an appreciation of the impact of decisions as they discover results of actions and safely experiment with strategies.

- **Gaming.** We will know we have arrived as eLearning designers when we create the same level of engagement with business issues in a corporate

environment as game designers do for the home. In most current educational games for adults, you play the game and stop to do the learning activity. The "Holy Grail" of games for a business-learning environment is when the learning is totally integrated into the game and not just an interruption.



- **Virtual Facilitator.** In a traditional classroom environment, the facilitator is "the sage on the stage." In an effective eLearning application, the facilitator becomes "the guide on the side." The virtual facilitator gently steers the learner through the activity, introducing and summarizing concepts, challenging ideas, and tying the whole package together.



- **Dialogue.** Learning is about asking the right questions, not just giving the right answers. Carefully crafted, discovery-based questions not only lead people through the learning process but also allow the group to create a forum for exploring critical business issues. In this way, people learn from their peers and can come to their own conclusions rather than being told what to think. In an eLearning environment, dialogue can occur through synchronous web meeting tools or simple phone conference calls.

- **Storytelling.** Facts alone don't tell the story. Reading facts on a screen will not result in a well-informed organization. But if people are led to tell a story *themselves*, given the data presented, they become deeply engaged and are more likely to understand the context in which the facts are presented. The story provides the context.

In an effective eLearning tool, you can present a story that involves a learner's emotions, creating realistic characters and a plot. The audience is brought into the story and is compelled to consider how an idea might play out.

eLearning Will Not Solve All Learning Needs

The best solution is often not just traditional learning or just eLearning, but a combination of both. In deciding what makes the most sense for your learners and your organization, think about a blended approach. The use of web-conferencing and online learning combined with traditional methods can draw out the best of each experience.

eLearning is a good choice if your employees work in widely dispersed locations, have access to a computer infrastructure that can support it, and have content to be learned that is appropriate for the tool.

Traditional learning is a good choice if the content requires live discussion and face-to-face conversations, such as for a diversity initiative, or those that involve emotional responses and interpersonal relationships.

Two Examples

To illustrate how the blended learning processes work, consider two cases. Over the past several years, a large financial company watched its once-strong brand slip down the international rankings, eventually falling off the chart. The future of the company depended on the commitment of its employees to enhance the brand's image. They needed an effective, engaging, and informative way to help educate its large employee base and its partners on the importance of brand and their part in reviving the brand. About 20% of the workers were so widely dispersed geographically that it would be cost-prohibitive to bring them together for any type of traditional group session. They needed a solution that would communicate the key concepts, but would allow some of

the learners to use it at their own desks. They wanted a product that was fun, interactive, and easily transported. The solution was a combination of eLearning and traditional learning.

To reach the largest group of employees — those in large, centralized facilities — they used a learning process that involved facilitated small group discussion and a visual metaphor that linked the ideas as well as the learners. This tool, designed for synchronous interaction, was available online, offline, and in combination. For far-flung employees, they created an electronic application redesigned for individuals. The element of group discussion was adapted through exercises designed to challenge assumptions and present thought-provoking questions. Survey-type questions allowed learners to compare themselves to colleagues who had already taken the session. The application was available on both CD and through the company's Learning Management System to allow the broadest flexibility for distribution.

This blended solution was an effective combination. Pre-and post-learning surveys showed that employees better understood their role in improving the brand. The employees' satisfaction levels were very high, and each employee came away with enthusiasm and a resolve for specific actions to improve the brand.

Whether online, offline, or in combination, statistically significant positive movement was shown on each of the key learning objectives. No statistically significant differences were found between the different delivery mechanisms.

Now, consider a different approach to blended learning. A large Midwestern utility wanted to provide a learning experience for its leadership team on the complexities of its financial and operational environment. Most of the leaders were very effective engineers who were technically and operationally excellent in each of their individual areas. But many lacked the expertise in how their operational decisions impacted other areas of the business and how the decisions impacted the overall financial performance of the company.

The Organizational Development and Finance departments designed a two-part solution. First, it was necessary to provide each leader with a common framework and language with which to discuss the financial results of the company. They

used a learning process that involved facilitated discussions with 8 to 10 people and a large-format visual metaphor. The first part of the session provided the leaders with the ability to compare and contrast complex topics such as free cash flow, earnings per share, net income, net operating profit, and stock price with a focus of improving shareholder value.

The second part of the session allowed the leaders to discover a deeper understanding of the relationships between their operational decisions and actual corporate performance. The small groups were further divided into groups of 3 or 4, gathered around a computer to experience the simulation. The groups were presented scenarios in which they had to develop a strategic response, predict the expected

outcomes, test their theories using the simulation, discuss the actual results, and determine next steps.

The blending of an online tool with a traditional classroom setting provided significant results. Satisfaction ratings were over 95% of the session. Each of the learning objectives were moved at least 1.5 points on the scale, according to pre- and post-event surveys. The greatest impact, however, was revealed in interviews with participants months after the session. Participants said that the session had changed their decision-making processes, and they could point to significant bottom-line results from this session.

Summary

For eLearning to really succeed:

- Delivery methods need to be more engaging and interactive.
- Designers must determine the audience and the content before determining a delivery method.
- Content will become more and more important. Cost savings remains irrelevant if the tools are ineffective at conveying critical content.
- Learning designers must use a more blended approach, where the right delivery mechanism is deployed at the right time.
- Engaging content does not need special effects. Flash won't enhance learning.



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