FOSTER LEARNING THROUGH ENGAGING CONTENT

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Printed in the United States of America.

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Have you ever started an e-learning course with enthusiasm only to find yourself browsing the Internet or checking your email after the first five minutes? Or have you enrolled in an instructor-led class where, after the first hour, you feel like you need a nap? If your answer is yes, then you already know why there is a need to create and deliver courses that engage the audience.

With the fast pace of innovation and job roles continuously changing, today’s workforce must constantly strive to keep skills updated to stay relevant. With competing priorities and limited time to develop themselves, workers also face reduced attention span.

How can training organizations support the workforce to meet the skills gap despite employees having so much on their plates and reduced attention span? By building a culture of engaged, continuous learning that motivates employees to keep their skills updated. Creating, deploying, and delivering engaging content is the key to building a continuous learning culture.

The mistake that most training organizations make is that they rely on the delivery techniques to engage with the audience. The reality: To retain learners’ attention, you need to go beyond simply delivery techniques and take a holistic approach. Use development and delivery techniques and the correct deployment platforms that enable learners to engage, collaborate, exchange ideas, and interact in a safe, nonjudgmental environment, leading to an ecosystem that fosters continuous learning.

In this issue of TD at Work, you will learn about:
- adult learning that sets the stage for creating engaging content
- current methods for designing and developing engaging learning courses
- platforms for deploying your training sessions
- guidelines for when to use each method or platform.

### THE ART OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Driving learner engagement is challenging, given the number of distractions, short attention spans, and heavy workloads that learners have today. In the past, instructor-led training was the primary mode of delivery, and the responsibility of keeping the learner engaged fell on the instructor. With e-learning, virtual instructor-led training, webcasts, and other modalities of training rising in popularity, that responsibility now falls on both the training development and delivery teams.

### DESIGNING ENGAGING CONTENT

The thought process around learner engagement needs to start during the design phase. That’s because the content doesn’t teach itself. Analyzing the content to identify what is suitable for the audience and creating a content structure that will lend itself to learning is a vital part of content design. This involves identifying both relevant and irrelevant content, setting objectives, identifying content gaps, creating a logical flow for the content, and incorporating elements that will engage the audience—such as storytelling, visual elements,
test different methods to determine which one works best for your audience. Factor into your engagement strategy how frequently you will update or refresh the training content and whether the content needs to be localized. For instance, how much work will it take to refresh content or tweak it for the localized audience? Is the format you intend to use worth the time and effort? Would a different modality make more sense given these parameters? Build this into your training budget.

DEVELOPING ENGAGING CONTENT

While designing and creating courses, think about how you can make the content engaging. Instructional designers have long used simulations, hands-on activities, interactions, and animations to convey content. In the past few years, microlearning, gamification, and storytelling methodologies have gained traction as development techniques for creating engaging content. Let’s look more closely at each and how you can use these formats to better engage learners.

Role Play vs. Simulations

Role play—like simulations—is an effective way to engage learners. You can enact both, either individually or in a group setting with interactions between the group members. And although facilitator intervention should be minimized for both, a feedback mechanism is mandatory.

However, while the two are similar and offer a safe environment for learners to try out something on their own, they are different methods. For example, in simulations, learners represent and play as themselves, and they try to solve a specific problem using different tools, skills, and concepts previously learned.

In role play, learners take on different characters. They are required to use their imagination and creativity to a large extent. And role play is more limited to a skill and is popular in developing communications skills.

Before selecting which method to use in your course, consider the differences and which is ideal for your specific training material.
Simulations
Simulations imitate working with a real-world process or system and provide learners the chance to assimilate concepts through practice and repetition. They provide an opportunity for individuals to learn through experience and see instant results, and they have been used in various industries—including high-tech and retail—with success. Using simulations in a course enables learners to see the outcome of the task or concept they have learned.

When you start designing your course content structure, look for opportunities where you can include simulations to make your training program engaging. For example, you can teach the concept and then, if your content has step-by-step instructions, use a simulation as an engagement and retention strategy.

Simulations give learners the opportunity to practice a process or procedure, such as adding a record to a database or creating an insurance claim. Avoid creating simulations when there is no immediate takeaway for the learners.

Guidelines for creating simulations
A simulation re-creates a real-life situation where learners need to study the problem at hand, analyze the data, and solve the problem. Here are three tasks to ensure you complete when designing a simulation.

Provide real-world examples. Pick topics that are better explained with examples and that learners can relate to and that pertain to the topic at hand. Present the scenario and enable learners to perform some tasks in the simulation.

Incorporate real-time feedback. Provide just-in-time feedback and enable participants to learn from mistakes in a safe environment.

Provide postsimulation feedback. The postsimulation debrief or feedback is an important aspect of a simulation that enables you to discuss all the simulation activities, encourage learners to reflect on how they responded to the challenges, and provide feedback on their performance. It is important to provide feedback that goes beyond just the correct answers and helps learners tie up any loose ends and achieve the goals and learning outcomes for the simulation.

Simulation example
Consider a situation where you need to design an e-learning training module to show procurement managers how to open a purchase order using the procurement system. You could create an instructional document with text and screenshots. Although this method covers all the steps, it doesn’t give learners the ability to visualize the steps as a process flow. Also, learner may get lost in the text and become quickly disengaged.

Alternatively, you could use a simulation to show procurement managers how to create the purchase order. First, explain the concept of the purchase order in a few paragraphs. Then, create a simulation that prompts learner to create a purchase order of $50,000 in the system. Make the simulation guided, so that at each step, learners know where to click and what values to enter. If they miss a step, the simulation should give learners instant feedback and prompt them to correct the mistake before moving forward.

Essentially, this simulation enables procurement managers to explore the process in a guided, controlled environment, engaging them as they perform each step. The instant feedback provides an opportunity for users to learn from mistakes. By the end, they will have a sense of achievement because they are able to create a purchase order.

Hands-on Labs
Hands-on labs are another effective way to drive learner engagement and retention. Most technical,