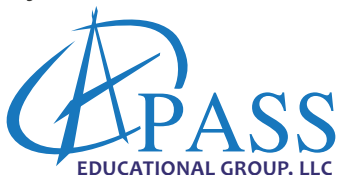




Supporting Active Learners Through E-Learning

by Robert Weisser



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The Teacher and the book are no longer the only instructors; the hands, the eyes, the ears, in fact the whole body, become sources of information, while teacher and textbook become respectively the starter and the tester. No book or map is a substitute for personal experience; they cannot take the place of the actual journey. The mathematical formula for a falling body does not take the place of throwing stones or shaking apples from a tree.

—John Dewey

This century-old quote from the most famous advocate of modern mass education remains, with only slight adjustment, applicable to 21st century educational practice. At the K-12 level, there has been a steady growth in school districts using student-centered teaching techniques that are often technology-enhanced. This growth is mirrored in higher learning, and is perhaps finding its greatest use in adult education for corporate, professional, and technical settings.

Too frequently, however, sheer quantity of e-learning courses does not equate to quality of learning experience. Most people who have used e-learning—either as a classroom add-on or via an independent online source—recognize this. In a 2016 blog post, Renota Dennard, an

instructional designer with more than a decade of experience, related that “a few years ago I took an hour-long, text-filled, next-button driven disaster. I often reflect on features in that program as examples of what not to include in my courses.” It is in creating e-learning courses that engage learners and lead them to take an active role in their learning that instructional designers find their most important challenge.

Benefits of Creating Active Learners

In a 1996 paper, Richard Felder and Rebecca Brent made this statement about the results of active learning techniques based on their own teaching experiences:

“Most students have never been taught to solve open-ended problems or think critically or formulate problems, so that the first time you assign such an exercise they will probably do it poorly. Collect their products and provide constructive comments ... After several similar assignments and feedback sessions, students will start giving you the kind of results you’re looking for and they will also begin giving one another meaningful feedback in group work. This approach serves a double purpose: the students gain more skill and confidence and you gain a classroom of teaching assistants who can help each other learn. By the end of the course, some of them may be performing at a surprisingly high level.”

Felder and Brent were reporting on the effects for college students, but similar results are found at all levels. (See the comments by Susan Blaesing, whose K-2 group was featured in “Personalized Learning,” the fourth installment

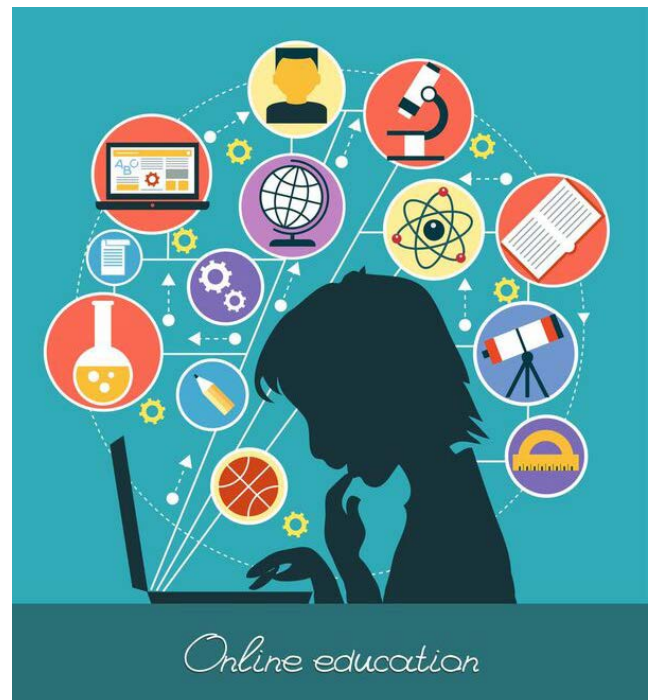
in the Instructional Design Angles series.) Corporate instructors indicate the same results. Staff members who are actively engaged in their learning rather than simply clicking on the next slide in a series have a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the subject matter, and are more apt to use their knowledge to good advantage with co-workers and clients. In addition, they are more likely to take the next step—to begin wondering about how they can improve on corporate products and procedures. Having such motivated employees helps a company be more creative and nimble in the modern, ever-changing business environment.

Harnessing Technology for Active Learning

How can instructional designers ensure that learners are engaged? Dennard (2016) claims that “today’s learners expect more engaging and exciting programs,” and instructional designers must “make eLearning programs that revolutionize the learning experience.” Dennard starts her planning with three essential steps:

- 1. Recall.** Think about poor e-learning courses you know. List the features you feel added little value to the courses, and then use the list as a resource of what *not* to include in your course.
- 2. Set a theme.** Based on your course content and objectives, figure out the most effective way to deliver information to learners. Will the program teach how to use something or some program? In that case, you should consider using an interactive diagram of the

device or screen-grab of the program. An immersive environment will help learners relate to the object or program in a real-world setting. Such an environment is present in “The Blood Typing Game” from Nobelprize.org (you can try the game at <http://www.nobelprize.org/educational/medicine/bloodtypinggame/gamev2/index.html>):



- 3. Plan activities/interactions.** Choose what interactions can help learners meet training objectives. Knowledge checks should be activities that enrich learning (such as drag-and-drop or matching) instead of multiple-choice items.

Kenneth Waldman (2016) summarizes ways that instructional designers should include improved technology in their courses:

- **Create better visual representations and models of ideas.** Incorporate more interactive and visually engaging graphics. Let technology function as intelligent tools so learners can build their own interpretations and representations of information.
- **Use social platforms to support collaboration and conversation.** Use social media to support dialogue and collaboration amongst teachers, learners, and other knowledgeable sources.
- **Investigate information and support learning by building perspectives.** Use technology as an information vehicle so learners can more easily access and compare perspectives and obtain pertinent information.
- **Foster critical thinking and better assess analytical skills.** Use technology to engage

learners in a variety of critical-thinking roles that focus on each individual's skills and needs.

- **Fill a learning gap or specific need.** Use technology to improve functional capabilities for persons with special needs, such as people with vision or hearing impairments. This will assist these learners to interact with the material.
- **Create a fun and effective experience for trainees.** Use technology to turn lessons into interactive challenges and games so the audience will retain more of the information. Simulations can help train individuals to learn by doing. Here is what the "Design a Cell Phone" lesson from Edheads.org looks like (access the game at http://www.edheads.org/activities/eng_cell/):



- **Stay relative and connected to provide better opportunities.** Think creatively about new technology to find new ways to support mindful, interactive, collaborative learning.
- **Cover more than one skill at a time and create a smoother learning model.** Use technology to foster learning through complex thinking while at the same time building teamwork and analysis skills.
- **More storage for more information.** Use mass-memory facilities to store and organize information to make recalling data more intuitive and faster. Working collaboratively in one online file is more efficient than sending files back and forth.

Characteristics of Engaging E-Learning

In a 2015 blog post, Raf Dolanowski, head of client solutions at Pure Learning, opens a discussion of what makes good e-learning by posing this question: “If your learner didn’t have to complete the eLearning, would they [sic] do it anyway?” He then mentions characteristics of good e-learning:

- Provides an enjoyable learning experience
- Treats the learner as an adult
- Delivers relatable and relevant information
- Puts the learner in control
- Looks outside of “eLearning” for inspiration on design, user experience, and engagement

- Purposefully and strategically uses gamification, interactivity, and rich media to build learner engagement, rather than as a distraction

Dolanowski notes that these characteristics apply to the introduction of the course, as well, and includes a trailer sent as an invitation to a corporate course on privacy law. (See <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/types-elearning-part-iii-good-raf-dolanowski> to watch the trailer.)



You can see that the trailer, which shows features of the course, incorporates all of the points that Dolanowski makes about good e-learning courses. Think about the other examples noted earlier in the paper. How many of Dolanowski's characteristics do they include?

Conclusion

Educators at all levels must prepare learners for school and work in a future world that is not known. Because of the speed at which change occurs in modern society, learners must know not only facts and fundamental knowledge, but also how to analyze, communicate, and collaborate. Good e-learning is a prime avenue to help equip people from all walks of life with the tools they need for lifelong learning.

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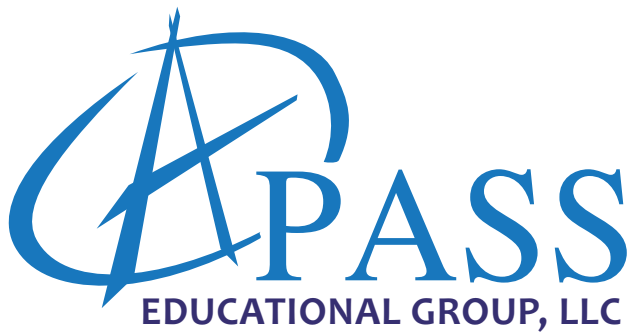
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