

FEATURE

Building Interactivity Into E-Learning

Research shows that adding interactivity to training programs can result in dramatic increases in retention rates. Here's how.

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By Bill Bruck

People like to learn from people. In training courses, we like to ask an instructor how to apply a theoretical concept in our specific situation. We like the give and take of small group exercises. Most of all, back at the office, we like to prairie dog over our cubes and ask a colleague to help us out.



We like this style of learning because it's effective. Interactive learning adapts to our situation; it allows us to actively process and apply concepts; it allows us to access an expert to help sort the wheat from the chaff. And, research from the National Training Laboratory bears this out. While retention rates from non-interactive methods ranged from 5% to 30%, interactive methods provided rates from 50% to 90%.

Unfortunately, the e-learning industry today has a problem. Specifically, Most e-learning replicates the worst practices of education electronically.

An extremely large number of e-learning course modules consist of simple content presentation via text, audio or graphics, with a few stories, video clips of experts or case studies with pre-programmed choice points. High-end e-learning adds simple or sophisticated games and simulations. Even when the courses are not mere page-turners, "interactive" is defined as choice points in the software, with pre-defined answers provided for pre-defined choices. "Evaluation" most often consists of is simple recall/recognition quizzes - the lowest skills in the learning hierarchy.

This is an extremely impoverished model, compared with what we are used to in high quality, face-to-face education.

A Five-Step Model for High Impact Learning

There is good news, however. Collaboration technologies now permit the creation of high impact blended learning programs that map to best practices in learning. The five-step model here illustrates how blended learning that uses these new technologies to support learners in mastering complex skills and knowledge domains programs can be developed.

1 Content: Content can be effectively communicated via a number of current technologies, from complex web-based training modules to rapid development in Flash or similar technologies.

2 Q&A: Adult learners need to map conceptual content to their own frameworks and understand how it works in their situations. This is true in a wide variety of situations from end-user technology to soft skill training. Q&A can be supported by a simple conference call, a web meeting, or asynchronously through threaded discussion forums.

3 Practice: Many skills are best learned when they can be practiced in a safe training environment. If a skill involves critical thinking or written documentation, it can be effectively practiced in small groups within discussion forums that are optimized for learning, and coaching can be provided in this same manner. Learners can be brought together synchronously to “wrap-up” this phase of a learning program via conference call or web meeting. These techniques can be very effective in such areas as performance management or technical skills such as claim processing.

4 Apprenticing: Many skills benefit from ongoing coaching over time, for example, account executives mastering a new solution sell approach. Group action learning projects are often used as stretch assignments in leadership training. Team workspaces can now effectively support such especially when they integrate discussion boards with email for collaboration, and tracking mechanisms for participation.

5 Teaching: All of these techniques and technologies lend themselves to graduates serving as coaches and mentors of successive cohorts of learners, to hone their own skills and prepare for career advancement where coaching others is a critical skill, as often is the case at various levels of management.

THE KEY: FIRM INTERACTIONS

The key to creating effective interactions in e-learning is to ensure that they are FIRM: Focused, Interactive, Relevant and Managed.

Focused: One of the first and most important lessons we learned in creating hundreds of blended learning programs was that online interaction has to be focused. Corporate learners are not graduate students who can talk a subject to death over time. We found that threaded discussions can be one of the most effective tools for interaction, but only if requests were specific and time-limited.

For instance, after presenting a case using Flash or simple text, we found that it was ineffective to ask learners to discuss it for the next week in a threaded discussion. Using that same tool, however, we have found it to be extremely effective to create several discussion items (threads) each of which asks a focused question with specific requirements. For instance, we might ask, “Before Friday, post three pieces of information you need to know about before suggesting a strategy.”

Interactive: Unfortunately, web meetings are not designed to be interactive. Even worse, they are the primary medium of “interaction” used in e-learning. Web meetings suffer from two fundamental faults. First, they are serial in nature. If everyone posts at once in threaded discussion boards, you get rich interactions. If everyone talks at once in a web meeting, you get cacophony. Since only one person can talk at a time, you often get a “democracy of the loudest” where only 5 out of 25 people speak at all. Second, a lecture-hall metaphor is replicated, where one person uploads a PowerPoint ahead of time and naturally segues into a lecture — with 10 minutes saved at the end for Q&A.

Ensure that your program is interactive. First, weave asynchronous and synchronous media together — use threaded discussions as well as web meetings. Second, use trained facilitators, not subject matter experts, to lead web meetings, and ensure that breakouts are planned as a way to get everyone talking. Third, consider using web meetings for simple Q&A rather than presentations.

Relevant: Interaction is not limited to open discussion. Consider embedding coached work samples, planners & report-outs, round tables around learner-selected cases and private mentoring over time. The interactive components, if designed well, can be the most relevant portions of a program.

Managed: Often the most critical success factor in a blended learning program is the effectiveness of the coaches. Coaches who don’t do their job or give “attaboy” feedback can kill a program’s effectiveness, while coaches who make a learner think and take their skills to the next level create a memorable and

high impact learning experience. Select collaboration tools that allow you to track coaches' performance as well as that of learners.

Bill Bruck, Ph.D. is the lead solutions architect at Q2Learning, LLC (www.q2learning.com), which has created over 200 successful blended learning programs for Fortune 500 companies using the xPERT eCampus, winner of the gold 2004 Brandon Hall Award for innovative technology.