Increasing Motivation and Learner Engagement in E-Learning

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**Abstract**

E-Learning can be a strong alternative to face-to-face learning, but presents some challenges as trainers cannot physically connect with the learner. Instead, instructional designers must provide thoughtful ways to motivate and engage with learners no matter where the learner may be completing a course. This proposes some limitations, and the displayed research will explain in detail those exact obstacles as well as showcase some ways to increase motivation and learner engagement, specifically in an e-learning setting. This information will focus more on designing and facilitating in an adult learner setting, such as a corporation. While the purpose of this research is to extract definite ways to increase motivation and engagement, it is vital as instructional designers we bring to light the challenges faced when designing e-learning courses for adults.

**E-Learning History**

E-Learning, according to the Oxford Dictionary is described as “learning conducted via electronic media, typically on the internet,” ([www.OxfordDictionary.com](http://www.OxfordDictionary.com) ). This type of learning has transformed throughout the years, and taken on many focuses. For instance, Dempsey and Reiser discuss how e-learning has described itself based on the location of learning, the mode of how the learning is made, and even the time of when learning takes place (Dempsey & Reiser, 2012,). Today, learners can gain knowledge and new skills through connecting with their peers or co-workers. On the other hand, learning can take place through an individual experience, with the help of a learning management system. Furthermore; e-learning can happen on a wide range of systems now thanks to new technology, including the ability to complete courses practically anywhere using a smart phone or tablet.



Since technology is constantly changing and gaining momentum, as instructional designers, it is critical for our field to stay current with new technologies, as learners will expect a more innovative learning experience each time they complete trainings. Learners expect their e-learning session to be smooth and easy to use. Despite the transformation e-learning has experienced over the years, Dempsey & Reiser make a strong statement on what e-learning is today when they state “e-learning has emerged as a broad term that encompasses all learning involving technology in any way whatsoever,” (Dempsey & Reiser, 2012, pg. 287). What will e-learning look like in five years? How can instructional designers take hold of the current and future technologies, and introduce them to users in a simple manner? Technology will continue to advance, and instructional designers will be tested to keep learners engaged and motivated as new technologies become available. Since there is no physical connection to learners in e-learning, how can designers keep learners engaged, and highly motivated during their learning experience?

**Current Challenges in E-Learning**

There are challenges instructional designers face when developing e-learning courses including obstacles on the design side, as well as challenges for the learner. In addition, since the material is technology based, there are bound to be some issues that come up during development. Furthermore; e-learning can be a challenging form of learning to use as there is no physical connection between the learner and facilitator. This can cause a lack of motivation from the learner, and the need to constantly assess the engagement within the course becomes apparent.

When connecting with learners through online learning, it can be cumbersome to find on-line learning software that will work for every computer or device, (Chiripalli & Bhargavi, 2012). Even virus software and certain internet settings can prevent learners from accessing online courses with ease. This could stall a learner’s motivation to engage in the course if they are experiencing technological difficulties. As instructional designers, what information should be armed in our technological toolkit, and could this knowledge help learners navigate through courses easily? How can we help learners’ access course information quickly, and boost their confidence in technology?

Another challenge with e-learning is the software can be is costly, and requires frequent updates. This means companies will only relate to current technologies for a short period of time, before needing to invest in updates. Furthermore; as designers, we are likely to learn new software programs more frequently, which can cost companies more time and money. From the learner’s standpoint, with these constant shifts in technology, they must be flexible with new technologies and rely on their prior knowledge to help them make those needed connections. Could instructional designers help make these transitions smoother?

Since e-learning has become a strong force in the corporate arena, it has become apparent the critical nature of “quality control” within the courses, (Kidd, 2010). Instructional design is more than checking grammar in a resource. Instead, it is more about sharing new information to learners in a thoughtful and innovative manner. As designers, our priorities are bigger when designing, and require an extensive amount of time and attention to detail. This evidence drives the importance of properly motivating and encouraging learners throughout the e-learning experience. Designers must show the worth of proper learner motivation and engagement.

**Current Challenges in Teaching Adults**

Piriani explains how instructional designers are experiencing difficulties when executing an online course for adult learners, focusing mainly on the time it takes to explain their desired thoughts in written word, construct engaging activities for learners and update future courses, (Piriani, 2004). When facilitating a course in a face-to-face model, facilitators can touch on all material, answer questions, and add any missed information since all learners are in front of them. Whereas, during an online learning experience, designers must be thoughtful in determining what the course goals are and the expected learning objectives. All points must be made through online interactions, and give the opportunity to follow up with additional questions during the post-assessment.

Keller shares a challenge from the learner’s perspective, a disconnection from the instructor (Keller, 1987). How can instructional designers make that needed connection to their learners in an online format? Could a short video bio on the instructor help learners see who is behind the course, and establish the needed link?

In our current society, especially younger generations, these learners rely on electronic devices such as smart phones, email, and tablets to communicate so an e-learning experience might be fitting for their learning style in a corporate setting. Whereas, some seasoned employees could find e-learning courses problematic, and may be apprehensive to join this new learning style. As instructional designers, how can the gap be bridged for the learners, and in turn motivate learners no matter their generational background?

Motivating adults to complete e-learning courses in their work life can be perplexing, as employees may see these courses as additional work on top of their current duties and responsibilities. The learners may not see the individual benefit of completing the course. How can these courses benefit their current position and make them stronger in their field?

Schunk, Meece, and Pintrich state “individuals who are extrinsically motivated work on tasks because they believe that participation will result in desirable outcomes”, (Schunk, Meece, and Pintrich, 2014, pg. 238). For these individuals, instructional designers will need to connect with them on their career goals or potential rewards. If designers can share the course importance with learners at the beginning, they may be more likely to be motivated and engaged.

When facilitating in a corporate setting, learners may be physically attending, but lack engagement in the physical learning experience. Furthermore; some adults in the corporate setting may not feel confident in completing an online course due to the lack of confidence in their technology skills. As instructional designers, how can we make courses easy to navigate, and explain the simplicity of this learning experience?

**Increasing Motivation within E-Learning**

A learner’s motivation at the start of the training comes from their attitude upon their initial arrival, according to Jones (Jones, 2013). This statement is not surprising, as learners can often times bring their current attitude or frame of mind into a training course, which can become a challenge if they are not able to move forward with the content. Should the facilitator share during the onset of a course to leave personal dealings “outside” prior to the course starting? What activity could help support this goal, especially in an e-learning setting?

As a learner begins the course, they can often feel the burden of engaging and participating in the upcoming session. Jones discusses how learners can be motivated when the amount of information given is decreased (Jones, 2013). This feedback can be used during the analysis and design stages of creating course content as it can become apparent the large amount of knowledge and skills needed to be covered during the desired course.

In addition, the e-learning content can display a course timeline, so learners know how many sections and what sections will be covered in the course, along with how much time will be expected to complete the course. Some learners may be motivated by the option of stopping the lesson, and coming back to the content when they have more time. This way, employees may be able to break up the e-learning session over a few days verse one sitting.

Chen and Lewis share the importance of instructors creating engaging activities to help support the “pursuit of learning…and stir up their curiosity,” (Chen & Lewis, 2010, pg. 103). When creating an e-learning course, those engaging activities must be intertwined throughout the entire session, and not just sprinkled here and there. Instructional designers must focus on the client and help learners feel engaged during the entire session.

Rodriguez notes in a corporate setting, “e-learners want to acquire skills and knowledge that improve or speeds up their work,” (Rodriguez, 2009, pg. 1). When analyzing the purpose of corporate trainings, employees want to see that connection between the displayed information, and how it can be applied to their current position, or future positions. For example, in a customer service role, if the employee completed an e-learning course on *dealing with difficult customers*, they will probably look for some quick and easy ways to calm a customer and salvage the relationship by the end of the call. Since this information pertains to their current position, they will be motivated to stay connected to the course as it will help with their role at the company.

In the instructional designer’s role, the following motivational factors should be considered such as understanding what the employees “want to learn, their aspirations, hopes and expectations, and how the program can relate to their lives and their work,” (Chiripalli, 2012, pg. 169).

Finally, instructional designers must play into how adults learn information. Chiripalli discuss various ways adults enjoy learning information such as “self-directed learning, problem-centered learning, and learning by doing,” (Chiripalli, 2012, pg. 170). Adults do not rely as heavily on an instructor in their learning experience, and instead would prefer to learn on their own. Moreover, adults prefer to solve problems or complete tasks which are related to them or their line of work. Adults enjoy the opportunity to gain new skills through physical application such as learning by doing.

**Increasing Learner Engagement**

According to Chiripalli and Bhargavi, online learning software can give instructional designers the tools to help learners “experience their subject in a vicarious manner,” (Chiripalli & Bhargavi, 2012, pg. 167). It is critical to connect the learner to the information, and not just show them some text on a slide. Students could read the information in the book, but e-learning courses have the opportunity to help them physically see examples of the new material. Some questions come to mind though such as “how can instructional designers keep this experience alive throughout the entire training?” and “which resources can be added into a course to make it more interactive?”

Learners can become engaged in an e-learning experience when instructional designers utilize multimedia to increase the strength of the content. For instance, Ambron & Hooper state “multimedia is the process of bringing together media, technology and products to achieve a learning outcome, (Ambron & Hooper, 1998). There are a variety of new technologies that are making their way into our field, and staying up to date on these applications can help connect with learners in a variety of ways.

Some of the latest technologies available include *Powtoon* ([www.powtoon.com](http://www.powtoon.com)) , *Explain Everything* ([www.explaineverything.com](http://www.explaineverything.com)) *,* and *Bridge* ([www.getbridge.com](http://www.getbridge.com)) . *Powtoon* is a website instructional designers can use to create animated videos and presentations, including some provided templates. Another tool, *Explain Everything* is a smart whiteboard where designers can create, animate, design and share. This application can give designers the opportunity to physically show step-by-step demonstrations and engage learners in a whole new way. Finally, *Bridge* is an evaluation tool employers can utilize to engage with employees featuring micro assessments, and feedback. These tools can help instructional designers create an interactive experience for the learner, and produce a feeling of engagement with the new information.

As instructional designers, it is key for us not to consistently rely on one technology to complete a course design. Chen and Lewis discuss ways to effectively use self-regulated learning in an online setting, which include updating technology frequently which will make courses not “static, but dynamic”, using a standard course template in company e-learning so learners become familiar with the module formatting, and developing courses that can stand alone, as learners enjoy exploring e-learning courses “on their own,” (Chen & Lewis, 2010). By creating a dynamic standalone course, adult learners can become engaged quickly while successfully moving this new information throughout their memory process.

**Additional Research Needed**

Research will be continually needed as this field is in a constant phase of learning and growing. Since products are steadily coming out as tools for motivation and learning engagement, instructional designers must regularly research new opportunities and products. In addition, how can we help connect learners to the content and course purpose faster while helping them leave the session knowing their time was well spent? How can designers make learners feel valued and heard throughout the course? These pieces can be discovered using some additional evaluation research.

While motivational and learner engagement tools have been identified, there must be more research on bridging the generational gap in e-learning. Motivational tools may not work across generations especially in a corporate setting. How can instructional designers make younger generations feel the course is cutting edge, while helping older generations feel comfortable with new technologies?

**Conclusion**

Strother points out that “e-language-learning in business is a win-win proposition for all – the learner, the corporation, and the customers served by the corporation,” (Strother, 2002, pg. 13). E-learning is a benefit to the learner, corporation, and with the right motivational techniques, the content can become engaging. Adults require a different learning approach, and can benefit from a thoughtful training design involving a clear navigational panel, properly used multimedia in an effective manner, specifically when the learner’s cognitive memory process is considered, according to Hsu & Hamilton. (Hsu & Hamilton, 2010). The design should give learners the opportunity to move new information through their memory.

Moreover, Chen and Lewis state “Technological capabilities are constantly changing, so the best solution today, may not be the best solution tomorrow,” (Chen & Lewis, 2010, pg. 110). This statement should resound for instructional designers, as our field must adapt to change. If our field builds courses on the foundational learning theories, the new technologies will only produce stronger courses. Chiripalli closes his article by sharing the interactive multimedia applications should not be used just one time, and the learning stops. Instead, it must continually occur throughout the experience (Chiripalli, 2012). Our goal as instructional designers should be to create an engaging and motivating experience no matter the location.

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