

Developing E-learning Activities

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Imaginative ideas can lead to engaging, interactive, and meaningful learning experiences ... and this is equally true for learners in either the traditional classroom or the online classroom. Creative ideas are not, however, always easy for us to come up with when we are designing, developing, or teaching online courses. While most of us can see the bene-

fits of including engaging activities in our e-learning courses, the ideas (and the details) for how those can be developed and integrated often escape us (Watkins, 2005).

To introduce learners, stimulate discussions, increase interactions, challenge presumptions, and achieve a host of course objectives, e-learning activities can be used throughout most any online course. From ice breakers to informal assessments, and from online debates to guest speakers, we can use activities in our online courses to engage learners and develop active learning.

WHAT ARE E-LEARNING ACTIVITIES?

Online courses do not have to be digital correspondence courses that include few opportunities for interactivity and engagement. In contrast, online courses can effectively use Web technologies to facilitate e-learning that is exciting, interactive, purposeful, and beneficial for online learners.

E-learning activities use online technologies, such as chat rooms, discussion boards, or e-mail, to facilitate interactions among e-learners in meaningful exercises related to the course. Much like the activi-



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ties and games used in traditional classroom training, e-learning activities can be used by instructors and trainers to accomplish a variety of goals, such as introducing learners to one another, sharing experiences, benefiting from team learning, increasing participation, or encouraging learners to develop constructive online relationships throughout the course (Watkins, 2005).

For many e-learners and e-learning instructors, the online classroom is a new environment that requires a variety of technology skills and communications strategies that are not the same as those used in previous classroom experiences. Consequently, while developing and teaching online courses, we have a tendency to forget that the e-learning classroom can (and should) offer engaging and interactive learning experiences.

Many e-learning activities can be adaptations of the training games used in traditional classroom instruction, and other activities can use the unique aspects of the online environment to develop distinctive activities for online courses. By including these interactive e-learning experiences, you should be able to improve retention rates, increase learner participation, achieve your learning objectives, develop online learning communities, and ensure that your online courses engage learners, regardless of the course topic.

HOW CAN YOU DEVELOP E-LEARNING ACTIVITIES?

Developing e-learning activities does not have to be difficult or time-consuming. There are, however, a few considerations that should be made before selecting an activity to use in an online course:

- a. Are the learners in the course experienced e-learners?
- b. Am I experienced with facilitating interactive e-learning?

- c. What technologies are available for facilitating the course's activities?
- d. Do the learners have the technical skills to use these technologies effectively?
- e. What pre-activity exercises would help prepare learners?
- f. How much time do I want to use for the activity?
- g. How much time do learners set aside for participation in the course?
- h. What learning objectives do I want to achieve through an activity?
- i. What other goals do I want to achieve through an activity?

After considering these important issues, you should brainstorm the types of activities that will best achieve your goals and objectives. It is often helpful to reflect on activities you have used in traditional classroom courses to achieve similar goals, and to recall some of the positive training experiences you have been through as a learner. From these experiences you can begin to list the potential activities that would be valuable in your online course.

For example, here is a short list of e-learning activities that may be helpful in sparking some creative ideas (sample activities from Watkins, 2005):

- *Let Me Introduce*: Based on an activity that is commonly used in traditional classroom courses, this online adaptation has learners interviewing other learners and posting online introductions of their partners.
- *Websites About Myself*: Taking advantage of the unique resources available to online learners, this activity lets learners introduce themselves by identifying Websites that illustrate their interests and backgrounds.
- *Playing Roles in Groups*: By assigning group members to interesting and challenging roles within group discussions (for example, idea proposer, disagreeer, devil's advocate, questioner, naysayer,

example giver, clarifier, tension reliever, discussion leader, note taker, online resource finder, or conflict negotiator), you can use this activity to add diversity to course discussions.

- *In the News*: This activity capitalizes on the number of newspaper and magazine articles available online to bring discussions of current events into online courses.
- *Group Blogs*: Much like course journals, online blogs can be used as an effective e-learning activity for encouraging learners to work together in reflecting on course experiences.

When you have selected an activity, either one from the traditional classroom that you want to adapt for online learners or a completely new activity that uses the unique tools of the technology, you will then want to plan for successful implementation. In planning for implementation you will want to consider the following:

- a. what tasks you will have to complete as an instructor prior to starting the activity (for example, emailing out instructions, forming groups, establishing chat rooms),
- b. what learners will have to do in preparing for the activity (for example, reading course materials, downloading software, identifying partners),

- c. what are the logistical steps that will be necessary for both you and the learners to participate effectively in the activity (for example, when you will post the instructions, how often will learners participate, what will happen if a partner does not participate), and
- d. how you will assess the participation of learners in the activity (for example, will the number of postings to the discussion board be important, will you review the content of all discussion postings, will learners summarize their interactions).

SUMMARY

E-learning activities can turn rather dull online experiences into entertaining, interactive, meaningful, and valuable learning experiences for learners; and getting the creative ideas for online activities does not require hours of meditation. By using adaptations of activities you are familiar with from the traditional classroom, along with imaginative ideas that take advantage of the unique online technologies, you can create e-learning activities that will both excite and engage learners.

REFERENCE

Watkins, R. (2005). *75 e-learning activities: Making online courses more interactive*. San Francisco: Wiley/Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.