Gamification

10 practical ways to gamify corporate learning

By Robert S. Becker

Gamification has roots in marketing, where it's used to engage consumers with brands. It does this by means of game mechanics (playful moves) which induce attitudes and behaviors that are good for business.

While the term gamification is new, its meaning is familiar. The old ploy of hiding collectible toys in cereal boxes is a good example. The toy is desirable and fun; it's a reward if you buy a cereal that you may not particularly want.

When gamification is used to engage students, it works much the same way. It games people into developing competencies they were poised to ignore or resist. That's how gamification makes teaching easier. In this essay I'll explain four key benefits of gamification and 10 ways to gamify corporate learning. Before I begin I'll make three important distinctions. Please remember:

- **Game and gamification are different things. Don't mix them up.**
- **Gamification is a technique rather than a strategy or methodology.**
- **To gamify is to hustle. It's persuasive rather than edifying.**

Why gamify training?

I know four good reasons to gamify training:

1. To make training more behavioral. When people learn by doing, or from experience, gamification helps by getting them to perform without thinking too much.

2. To make training more enjoyable. Game mechanics infuse learning with the psychology of play. Playing has the power to increase attention, commitment and skill.

3. To make training more motivating. Competitive gaming incites players to go for the win. Where achievement is a relative value (me versus them), gamification stirs ambition.

4. To make training more innovative. Gamification changes training from rigid and predictable to emergent, "now and wow." It increases interactivity and makes learning more autonomous.

These are compelling benefits, but if your needs aren't reflected in them, then you probably shouldn't bother to gamify training.

How to gamify training

Here are ten practical ways to gamify training. They can be accomplished on a small scale, one course at a time, at low cost, without undermining the overarching standards of a legacy curriculum.

1. Make it fun

You make training fun by introducing the ludic principle. In other words, by designing playful activities that just happens to support learning objectives.

Play is a lever of cognitive development and dexterity. You don't need to know about that. Just accept that when students are having fun they learn better and faster. Make your training fun by encouraging students to play.

Playful activity is compatible with all traditional instruction: workbook, video, slide lecture, tutorial, coaching, practice exercise, simulation. It's compatible with synchronous and asynchronous delivery

2. Give rewards

Remember my story about the toy in a cereal box? Offer that kind of reward to gamify training. It should be earned, not just given, for doing things that require skill.

A reward is symbolic, having no intrinsic value. It may be a grade, point, badge, token, prize, certificate, privilege, title, rank or "unlockable content" (more about that later). It doesn't matter what reward you offer, so long as students want it, it requires effort to get, and it has a correlate in the real world. For example, a badge that has bragging rights in the break room has a correlate in the real world.

With no such correlate, rewards may be viewed as tricks; as in, "Ha, you tricked me into doing that!" The behavior they condition will not be sustained when training is over.

3. Embody ideas

You embody ideas by making them tangible and sentient. Many students learn better and faster when concepts are conveyed as tangible, organic objects.

People have always communicated ideas by embodying them in stories and pictures. Stories may be verbal (case studies) or nonverbal (ambient sound). Images like schematic drawings can give color, shape, weight, even motion to concepts, so that ideas can be sensed.

Embodying ideas in characters is a favorite technique of role-play (see below), in which students themselves (or their avatars) are the embodiment.

4. Level up

A level is an oppositional setting. Students level up by overcoming challenges of increasing complexity and difficulty. After mastering an opponent in one setting, things just get harder in the next.

A key to leveling up is progression. Unlike courses where a unit is a discrete segment, in gamified training the ceiling of each unit is the floor of the next. There is cohesion and interdependence among all stages of development.

Be sure to include stretch goals when you design levels in training. They force students solve problems on the periphery of their competence. Stretch goals are key to gamification. Levels are platforms for bootstrapping.

5. Encourage practice

You encourage practice by not teaching too much. To gamify training, you must resist telling students everything they need to know and do. Make them discover much of that on their own.

Practice is what happens when a teacher leaves the room and students do the real work of learning. They try and try again to get things right. This is not just about problem solving. It's about developing acumen, intuition and perception to know what the problems are.

You may have read a defense of practice in Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers. However you don't need to know that book to gamify training. Just assign as much practice as humanly possible, and then leave the room.

6. Encourage autonomy

Autonomous students climb untethered, accepting of greater risks and rewards. They learn as they please, within a framework of goals and rules that you prepare for them. Coercion is out, incentives are in.

Autonomy is more familiar in play than training. So imagine how effective a game would be if you told players what their next moves should be, or graded each move after it took place. Would anybody want to play with you?

You gamify training by making students to learn not from your wisdom, but from their mistakes; in other words from their experience.

7. Role play

Role play is pretending to be a character in a make-believe situation. In role play students embody knowledge and skills they are learning, in order to practice solving problems in interesting situations. Role play is the zenith of gamification because many design elements converge in it.

What makes role play unique is creative pretense, or the agency of imagination. So much of what you teach is rule-based, yet success often depends not on following rules but transcending them to a higher level of performance. Role play exercises the imagination.

You can gamify training by replacing the narrative voice of your lecture with the dramatic voices of actors playing roles.

8. Unlock content

Unlockable content is a kind of reward and a key to leveling up. It is defined as critically useful information that students get only after earning it. Until then, it stays beyond their reach though they know it exists.

Unlocking in gamified training may depend on earning points,

making trades, spending assets, finding clues, solving riddles or puzzles, visiting places, asking questions, meeting people. In every case it must be worth the effort by marking a threshold between success and failure in the training.

For example, a customer in sales training may be partially revealed at first. After students earn the right to more information (by establishing trust, for example) more details may be shared. Students know what they don't know; they just can't break into it until meeting certain conditions. That's gamified.

9. Compete to win

Students who participate in gamified training are contestants. It's not enough for them to do well; they also need to do better than opposing forces. Their relative standings are posted on leaderboards (a gamified scoreboard).

Some trainers won't promote competitive behavior, feeling it's incompatible with teamwork and ethical conduct. Yet athletes ethically compete in ways that reinforce teamwork, respect other contestants and achieve excellent results. Competition is not the problem, though how a game is played may be.

To gamify training, allow students to experience the joys of victory and agonies of defeat. Let some win, let others lose and learn from their mistakes.

10. Situate learning

You gamify training by situating learning in the real world, or in a plausible metaphor of it. Recognizable situations increase relevance and promote empathy, making instruction feel immediate and less technical or academic.

Situated learning occurs in training simulations, where students learn a system by playing with a model of it. For example, a retailer learns POS by doing exercises on a simulated cash register.

Training on a mock POS platform is better than describing system features in a workbook. To further gamify, you would add the store, a merchandise assortment, characters, and problems that occur at a terminal but are not related to POS functions. All of that comprises the situation.

In conclusion, gamification is a technique to improve the quality of training. You don't gamify to create games, but to make regular training more playful and engaging. My 10 ways to gamify training may get you started. **TEL**

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