



## WE MUST ENGAGE OUR LEARNERS IN THEIR LEARNING

# HOW TO DESIGN ENGAGING TRAINING PROGRAMS

**Y**ou've heard the term. We talk about engaging the public in the political process, engaging the community in conversations about critical issues, engaging employees in their work. To be successful in designing and implementing organizational training programs, we must engage our learners in their learning.

As children, today's organizational learners were shaped by constantly evolving trends in teaching methodologies. The role of the learner went from passive to active. Little Baby Boomers attended school in classrooms where children sat in straight rows, their seats arranged alphabetically. The focus was on the teacher, who lectured from the front of the room, teaching skills that children were expected to mimic and delivering information they were expected to memorize. Younger generations participated more actively in their early education. Gen Xers went to school in "open" classrooms where there were no clear boundaries between one and the next. A more laissez-faire attitude permeated everything, and independent study was all the rage. Children were free to choose the subjects they wanted to study and then to pursue them in individual — sometimes unorthodox — ways. During Millennials' childhood, the focus had clearly shifted away from the teacher and onto teams of learners. Groups of students collaborated to develop skills and gather information to complete projects together. As soon as their projects were completed, kids were praised and rewarded.

Today, we understand that learning — among adults as well as children — happens in correlation to the level of learner engagement. The amount of skills and information acquired is directly proportional to the learner's active involvement with the material.

Engaged learners are those who participate in the learning process. They internalize and incorporate skills and knowledge. Bottom line: They do something with the material rather than simply receiving it.

The late UCLA professor C. Robert Pace conducted groundbreaking work in the field of student engagement by studying the impact of university environments on students. His assertion is that the more learners are meaningfully involved in academic tasks, the more they learn.

One of the best examples of learner engagement in action is self-directed, on-the-job, just-in-time learning. It happens every day. A worker realizes she doesn't know something she needs to know — or that she needs a specific skill she doesn't have. She seeks out a

more knowledgeable co-worker or, more commonly, searches the Internet for information on her topic. She scans articles and watches videos, evaluating the fit of the information to her specific requirements. Eventually, she chooses the article or video that comes closest to meeting her needs. If she's lucky, she finds something that breaks down the needed skill into discrete steps. She makes notes. Then she tries it. Maybe she forgets a step and has to go back and review. She decides to drop, add, or modify steps to save time or improve the end result. She tries again and succeeds, applying her new skill or knowledge where it's needed. Then she proceeds with her day, a bit more skillful and enlightened.

This everyday example illustrates learner engagement at its best. It demonstrates self-assessment, motivation, choice of learning strategy, goal-setting, customization, practice, application, feedback, integration, reinforcement, and reflection. As instructional designers, the more closely we can replicate this everyday learning experience, the more successful we will be at designing and delivering more engaging training programs.

To get organizational learners engaged:

- **Involve them in the design process.** Talk with potential trainees on a personal level about their goals, needs and preferences.
- **Offer plenty of subject matter choices.** The more involved people are in choosing what to learn, the more engaged they will be.
- **Offer choices in delivery.** The more platforms the better. When trainees can choose the delivery method that matches their personal preferences, they're far more likely to succeed.
- **Personalize the learning.** Each trainee brings a unique set of characteristics. To expect each to learn in the same way and at the same rate is unreasonable.
- **Make your design at least 80 percent participative.** An engaging module is comprised of less than 20 percent passive knowledge transfer. At least 80 percent of the learner's time needs to be spent in active participation: goal-setting, discussion, problem analysis, games, analysis of real-life situations, role play, reporting, case study, writing, and reflection.

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