Effective Ways to Engage Adult Learners in Online Job Training Courses

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Introduction

Change in the workplace was inevitable. Since there was change, there was an effort for employers to keep their employees in pace with change. Often times this meant training employees. These trainings had various content that needed to be learned, but engaging the adult learners was a problem in workplace job training (Phillips, 2011). This review of literature was examined to determine what learning theories, technology tools, and design elements held the most potential to engage adults in online job training courses.

Adult Learning Theory

There was not a single learning theory that applied to all adults or adult learning environments rather there were multiple learning theories that attempted to capture adult learning (Cercone, 2008). Designers of adult education e-learning courses should have known and been able to apply andragogy, self-directed learning, critical reflective, cognitive, and social learning theories (Waight & Stewart, 2005). Cercone (2008) also listed andragogy and self-directed learning, but found experiential learning, and transformational learning as the theories that were most beneficial to use when designing online adult education. Cercone (2008) stated that the most important aspect to consider, whichever theory was applied, was that the theory took a learner-centered approach. Constructivism was beneficial, but the implementation of this theory had the support of assessments and suitable facilitation (Ruey, 2010). No single theory was applied to all learning environments, but the theories provided frame-works or models when designing online adult courses.

There were other factors besides learning theory to consider when designing adult online courses (Cercone, 2008; Waight & Stewart, 2005). Waight and Stewart (2005) advocated placing
equal importance on the learning culture, which included financial support, technology infrastructure, and front-end analysis, as in an e-learning team’s expertise with technology, return on investment, design, and learning theories. Cercone (2008) presented 13 adult learning characteristics that influenced the design of an adult online learning environment. The learning characteristics determined how individuals approached learning tasks.

Holyoke and Larson (2009) suggested the need to consider generational differences among adults when trying to engage them in learning settings. Each of the three generations of adults needed to be able to immediately apply what they learned (Holyoke & Larson, 2009). Although each generation needed to be connected and motivated to what they learned, what they felt connected to and what motivated them varied based on their generation (Holyoke & Larson, 2009). Similar to Holyoke and Larson (2009) Ruey (2010) found slight generational differences with regards to learning and learning needs, especially how the different generations worked in groups. Regardless of the generation, adult learning theories which emphasized self-direction, flexibility, and the process of learning, rather than just the content, held the most potential to engage adults when applied to mostly online courses (Cercone, 2008; Ruey, 2010).

**Engaging Learners using Technology**

A technology tool that had been used in the learning environment was computer generated three-dimensional virtual learning environments (3-D VLEs) (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010). These environments set up learners to succeed because they provided real world simulations without the real world consequences (Dreher & Dreher, 2010). The more control the learner had in creating a portrayal of themselves, navigating, and controlling the environment itself, the more the learner felt part of the environment and thus engaged (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010). Combining the engaging attributes of a 3-D VLE such as, Second Life with machinima, learners were able to
create a video and were more interested and engaged because they were able to present, review, and reflect on their work much easier (Dreher & Dreher, 2010).

Barab, Dondlinger, Stein, and Warren (2009) designed a multi-user game within a 3-D VLE, that engaged learners by challenging them and making it so the learners must seek the help of others. Barab et al. (2009) found value in using games for engagement and learning and suggested the following when designing games: determine that the benefits are worth the time designing the game, the context and characters should be interesting to the audience, the game should at least begin with high quality graphics and sound, and all the elements of what make a game are easily integrated. Although Barab et al. (2009) found success in engaging learners using a game as a learning tool, Hoffman and Nadelson (2010) found otherwise. Hoffman and Nadelson (2010) knew that engagement was important to learning, and people who played multiple-level games were engaged. Hoffman and Nadelson (2010) found that for gamers to be engaged and motivated, the ability to control the gaming environment, have challenges, and few consequences were most important. Gamers would not be engaged with games for learning because they pursue gaming for entertainment (Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010).

Course Design Elements

Guided by research-based theory of how people learn, Mayer (2008) identified five principles for multimedia design. The principles listed were to present an explanation in words and pictures, use as few words and pictures as possible, present corresponding words and pictures closely, and present words as auditory narration (Mayer, 2008). Despite narration being more effective than written text, it was found that learners must also do something while listening to learn effectively even if it were reading, writing, standing, moving around or asking questions (Fanning, 2011). In addition, when an online course with multimedia was designed, the
design needed to take into consideration that the learners be able to apply the material they learned and not just know the content (Weinstein, 2006).

Simulations with characters that have socio-emotional expressions and provided feedback were the most valuable (Herbert & Slotte, 2008). Weinstein (2006) also found simulations that closely replicated real life social cues, simulated consequences, and indicated successes or failure were the most effective. Although replicated real life cues were found to be important, the success of the simulation did not depend on a high level of realism but the learners’ belief as to whether it related to their job (Herbert & Slotte, 2008). Training that included simulation did not need to be elaborate, but it needed to address how the training impacted the business, how success was measured, and what was expected from the training (Weinstein, 2006).

Both Herbert & Slotte (2008) and Weinstein (2006) agreed that the most value from simulation training was achieved as part of a blended approach. Weinstein (2006) contended that simulations were not to be used by itself, but as a training aid. Anywhere from 70% to 80% of learning from simulations came from reflection or feedback after the experience, so debriefing was needed (Weinstein, 2006). A live facilitator provided guidance to navigate more complex simulations (Herbert & Slotte, 2008). A facilitator had a lot of effect on getting learners to explore, reflect, and have a higher learning experience, in summary the facilitator added value to the entire learning process (Herbert & Slotte, 2008).

Conclusion

Simulations and 3-D VLEs had the potential to engage learners. These tools could have been used to engage learners in a stand-alone online workplace training or part of a blended learning program. A blended learning design and delivery was the most effective way to engage adults in an online training course. Online workplace training needed to be designed to allow
learners to work in groups, be in control, and be an active participant in their learning. Ideally an engaging online training course using multimedia would have simple narrated content with corresponding images. Despite what technology was used or how a training was designed, the critical elements needed for adults to be engaged was that the training allowed the adult learners to apply, reflect, and relate to what was learned. It was found that simply adding a single design element was not sufficient to engage learners. Many factors influenced adult learners’ engagement, which included theories, design elements, and having a supportive learning culture.
References


