



What Makes e-Learning Work?

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Ten principles of e-learning instructional design that your provider should be considering, to ensure your courses are effective.

No single set of principles will be equally applicable in all e-learning contexts. The ten principles covered in this article are intended for use in evaluating e-learning courses for workplaces, and are based on learning theory, research, and our experience as an e-learning provider to corporate and government clients. They are broad enough to address most types of workplace e-learning, but focussed enough to be useful in evaluating the quality of e-learning courseware.

1. Focus on Performance Improvement not Content Coverage

The purpose of most e-learning courses is to enable learners to make correct judgements, perform new tasks at work, or perform existing tasks in a new way. The design of courses (commonly referred to as 'instructional design') needs to focus on enabling learners to achieve the required performance standards rather than just on covering content. If we focus on what learners need to be able to do, the required content will be covered as well.

Consider:

- Is your provider asking you what you expect the learners to be able to do after completing the training?
- Is their instructional design approach focussed on helping learners to achieve the required performance standards, or is it just your content broken up into topics?

2. Structure Sequence and Flow

A well thought out course structure, sequence and flow supports the learner in building an understanding of how the course content fits together. The topic names should accurately reflect their content. Topics should be kept brief so that learners will regularly experience a sense of completion and progress. The sequence should make sense.

A diagram might be used to help learners to see the big picture before going into the detail of a course. This diagram might repeat at the start of each topic to

highlight the active topic and its relationship to other topics in the course. Each topic should have a conclusion and a natural flow to the next topic.

Consider:

- Is there evidence that your provider has put thought into structuring your courseware to help learners to understand how the course content fits together?
- Is there a natural flow from one topic to the next, making it easy for learners to see how the topics are related and how each new topic is building toward the big picture?

3. Relevance and Contextualisation

Abstract concepts and theory can be difficult for learners to commit to memory and apply in the workplace. By situating the learning in a relevant context, we can make it easier to understand and to apply. For example, rather than teaching a new service methodology in the abstract, a customer scenario could be created in which the learner uses the new service methodology to assist a fictitious customer.

If learners can see the relevance of what they are learning to their role at work, they are more likely to engage fully in the learning experience.

Consider:

- Is your provider asking you about the types of situation in which learners will need to apply their learning and tailoring their approach accordingly?
- Does your provider use workplace scenarios to provide an authentic context for learning?
- Are learners being asked to consider their workplace, and how they might apply their new skills and knowledge?

4. Motivating Learners

The relevance of the course content can provide motivation for the learner to engage and complete the course. However, relevance alone will not be enough if the course is boring. The course design needs to motivate the learner to engage and continue to the end.

A story element might run through the course so that learners want to know how it turns out. A theme or metaphor might be used to add interest? The writing style could be cheeky, witty and entertaining. A mentor character might be used to support the learner and keep them engaged. Activities could be designed to be challenging, with strong positive feedback for success. The course might be designed to surprise the learner occasionally with interesting facts or unexpected course behaviours.

Consider:

- Are the courses being developed for your organisation enjoyable?
- Would you look forward to completing one, or would it be a chore?

5. Emphasising Key Content

Content which is most important or most complex deserves special attention in the design. The designer should be asking you which aspects are most critical to the success of the training program and which elements might be confusing to learners.

These aspects should be given emphasis, additional interactivity and possibly additional practice activities in order to ensure good learning outcomes.

Consider:

- Is your provider asking questions to identify the areas of the course that require additional emphasis?
- Consider how the most important and complex areas of your content are being treated in your e-learning courses. Do you have confidence that learners will understand, recall and be able to apply their learning at work?

6. Drawing on Prior Knowledge

Learners find new content meaningful, and as a result easier to learn, if it is related to what they already know.

The prior knowledge referred to here might be common sense, common knowledge (such as a recent news story), knowledge that people will have learned in the workplace, or the content of previous courses. If it is difficult to find specific prior knowledge that is relevant to the course content, a story or case study could provide the necessary connection.

Consider:

- Is new content in your courses made meaningful by reference to information learners will already know?

7. Discovery-Based Learning

Discovery-based learning, rather than telling and testing, is the strongest approach for teaching most types of content.

Designers can use problems and scenarios to enable learners to discover for themselves the concepts, principles and facts that make up the content. Scaffolding tools such as conceptual diagrams, checklists or links to resources can be made available to guide learners in solving complex scenario-based problems.

Consider:

- Does your courseware exclusively tell and test, or does it often immerse learners in scenarios, and ask them to draw their own conclusions?
- Where discovery-based learning is employed, does your courseware provide sufficient guidance to the learner to enable them to succeed?

8. Flexibility

Training often falls down when learners find that the situations they face in the real world are much more varied and complex than the simple model that was presented in training. In order to prepare learners to make good judgements in complex situations in the workplace, the learning environment must incorporate as much of the complexity of the work environment as possible.

When addressing complex content, the design might build from simple to more complex examples and scenarios. Also, learners might be presented with a diverse range of views and perspectives.

Consider:

- Will your learners need to respond to a wider variety of workplace situations than can be anticipated and covered in the training?
- If so, does your courseware help learners to grasp this complexity and variety and make decisions in unfamiliar circumstances?

9. Reference Memory and Recall

It is usually not necessary for learners to commit everything in the course to memory. Often reference tools such as the intranet can be used to find information just in time.

Instructional design needs to make a distinction between content that must be remembered and content that can be located as needed. The design should help learners to remember the information that they must memorise and later recall. It should also help learners to become familiar with reference materials so that they can find further information as they need it.

One of the most common approaches to help people to memorise procedural knowledge is to provide many practice opportunities.

One of the most common approaches to help people to become familiar with reference materials is to design learning activities that require learners to use the available reference materials as they complete the course.

Consider:

- What content must the learner know and be able to recall instantly, and what content can they look up on a reference such as their intranet if they need it?
- Does your courseware make this distinction and respond accordingly?

10. Transfer

Training often results in quite poor levels of transfer to the workplace. Learners pass assessments, but they do not apply their new knowledge and skills. In order to facilitate a higher level of transfer the training needs to be set in a relevant context and focus on the desired performance (see above). In addition, e-learning courses can ask learners to complete learning activities in their workplace (such as discussions with colleagues). They can also ask learners to commit to follow-up actions after the training.

Consider:

- Does your courseware make an attempt to help learners to transfer what they have learned to their workplace?
- Do the activities in your courseware enable learners to break away from the computer and do things in their workplace?

Conclusion

If the courseware you are deploying addresses most of these principles, you can be confident that it is well designed, and has potential to make a positive impact on your business.

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