

"Why Am I Doing This?"

A Case for Context-Driven E-learning

Introduction

The first question a learner often asks when firing up a piece of e-learning is *"why am I doing this?"* Motivating learners to go through an e-learning course is one of the great challenges faced by instructional designers. By exploring the differences between context-driven and content-driven e-learning we can address that all-important question in the learner's mind and explore how effective learning can take place.

What is content-driven e-learning?

Content-driven e-learning consists of material which has been identified as required training for staff. It may be generic, 'off-the shelf' courseware or it may be custom-designed, and contain sound, well-designed content. It may consist of facts, procedures, processes, concepts and principles that have to be remembered or applied to their job role.

As LMS (learning management systems) are introduced into organisations, one phrase that is sometimes heard is the need to "push courses to our staff". Once the technological hurdles of implementing an LMS are overcome, this becomes an easier task than in the past. Identify the business needs and skilling requirements for staff, design interactive learning content that will satisfy those needs, then simply distribute it online to the learners. If the post-assessment has been well designed then the pass rates achieved should indicate learner mastery of objectives, and therefore the success of the courseware.

However, different learners have different needs, and it is difficult to address all those needs, especially online. One common need is that many learners today are under pressure to perform. They have competing demands for their time and attention and have to juggle priorities. Add an online course to this mix of demands and it is vital that it forms one of the learner's higher priorities. Courseware that is delivered and does not address this juggling of priorities is at risk of being viewed as another demand, another chore, and may be given a low priority and even ignored.

Content-driven e-learning does not necessarily address the particular needs of the audience. Nor are benefits of the learning outcomes immediately obvious to the audience. The learner may not easily understand how to use their new skills or knowledge in a way that will make them more effective, make their job easier and allow them to grow.

Where the focus is on content, the design often uses an 'objectivist' approach. That is, it imposes new information to be learned. Knowledge is transmitted and the learner's role is to absorb the instruction. The learner may not be given sufficient thinking skills or the ability to solve problems that they see as being relevant. A typical reaction may be 'I don't have time for this', or 'I can't relate to this'. Motivation, which is a key to e-learning success, may suffer.

Example:

New products are released and staff must be brought up to speed. The emphasis is on the product facts and principles rather how they can be used to win new business.

This is a good example to illustrate the characteristics of two instructional design approaches: one is content-based and one is context-based.

| Content based design | Context based design |
|--|--|
| Resistance to learning. | The learner can see the relevance to their job role. Motivation to learn. |
| Knowledge dump. | Addresses the learner's existing knowledge or views. Encourages the learner to explore. |
| Short-term memory gain. | Short-term memory gain, moving onto long-term memory because it is meaningful. |
| The learner is asked to remember knowledge, skills or attitudes. | The learner is asked to apply knowledge, skills or attitudes to situations. |
| Assumes the learner has enough time. Large volume of content to be completed. | Recognises that learners may be time poor. The learner may access small chunks of learning when they need to. |
| Information overload | A supportive guide to finding information when the learner requires it. |

What is context-driven e-learning?

As designers, we need to elicit a response to the question “why am I doing this?” along the lines of “this will help me to perform more effectively”. These reactions will mainly be the result of a learning experience that is context-driven. Context-driven e-learning is learner-centric. The learner’s context may be the tasks they perform, or their communication with others, and it may include a desire to move forward and grow.

Clearly, it is essential to know the audience well. Through careful audience analysis, we discover the learner's performance requirements, the future roles they may perform, the contribution they are expected to make to the business, their aims and frustrations. We then have a better understanding of their context.

We can embed their context into the course design by taking a 'constructivist' approach. This approach recognises that learners bring some form of prior knowledge to the learning activity. It taps into what the learner already knows, and encourages them to construct additional knowledge and skills, and create their own meaning. The learning experience is enriched because it is based on a personal framework.

Through a creatively designed interactive course, the learner can be invited to question their assumptions, to analyse problems, to formulate solutions and look for opportunities. Motivation and learning retention will increase, followed by improved job performance.

Example:

An employee’s role may be to sell products to customers. Rather than simply getting to know a new product, they may learn how to discover the customer’s needs through simulated role plays, and be able to offer the right product to meet those needs.

Scale of learning

An e-learning course can be scaled according to the scale of the context being addressed. Longer courses can address the larger context of a job role, whereas short, bite sized modules are ideal for helping to meet day-to-day challenges. As an example, specific telephone skills can be learned in 10 or 15 minute chunks. Staff are more likely to accept such short 'just enough, just in time' courses. They cater for time pressures, they address a single set of skills, and can be accessed when required.

This table provides a few tips on designing more effectively by using a context-driven approach.

The approach would also apply to many other topics.

| Topic | Context based design |
|-------------------|--|
| Any topic | Consider inviting the learner to take the course, pointing out the personal benefits. |
| Induction | Set tasks that require looking for relevant material on the intranet. Questions could then be answered on an intranet page, for example by using a 'Web Quest'. |
| | Set a goal. For example, find solutions to a problem by using resources such as colleagues, intranet, and other e-learning courses. |
| | Provide 'welcome' messages and insights from executives, customers and colleagues. Use short video bites, audio bites (e.g. podcasts), text and graphics. |
| Compliance | Make decisions based on real-world scenarios, then show the consequences for customers, the individual and the organisation. Refer the learner to supporting policies, regulations, processes etc. These resources may be external to the course itself. |
| Customer service | Provide insights into the customer's perspective through real-world scenarios. Show the effects of decisions made on customer loyalty and the brand. |
| Product knowledge | Discover the customer's needs. Discover the difference between offering the right product or the wrong product. Set activities that supplement the course. This may require reference to product brochures, policy documents etc. |
| System training | Many system tasks revolve around the customer. Set tasks to complete within a customer framework. Provide printable job aids and checklists. |

Summary

Context-driven e-learning is motivational. It is solution-focused, forward looking and encourages the learner to seek opportunities. The starting point of the e-learning experience is the learner's own existing mental model of skills, knowledge and attitude. This model is modified and enhanced, and a new model is learned. What is learned is applied, not simply remembered.

Through creative design the learner's response to the vital question "why am I doing this?" will be "because I want to discover", with the result that their own needs and those of the business are met, and productivity increased.

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