Developing Interactive E-Learning Activities

by Ryan Watkins, PhD

Although e-learning can offer interactive and engaging learning experiences, the creative ideas that are necessary to create such environments are not always easy for us to come up with when we are designing, developing, or teaching e-learning courses. And while instructional designers and trainers can see the benefits of including engaging activities in e-learning courses, the ideas (and the details) for how those can be developed and integrated within instruction regularly escape us. As a result, we have a tendency to develop courses that do not capitalize on engaging e-learning activities that can result in both active learning and the achievement of course objectives.

Yet, by capitalizing on the unique capabilities of web-based technologies, online courses can facilitate e-learning that is exciting, interactive, purposeful, and beneficial. With imaginative ideas we can develop e-learning activities that lead to meaningful learning experiences and engage students in most any course that uses online technologies.

Online Courses Get Interactive

E-learning activities use online technologies such as chat rooms, discussion boards, or email to facilitate interactions as meaningful exercises. These activities can be peppered throughout almost any course (online or in a blended format) to introduce learners, stimulate discussions, increase interactions, challenge presumptions, and achieve diverse course objectives (Watkins, 2005). From ice breakers and group exercises to online debates and guest speakers, we can use e-learning activities in online courses to engage learners and develop a more interactive learning environment.

Much like the activities and games used in traditional classroom training (see Silberman, 2005; Sugar, 1998; Thiagarajan, 2003), e-learning activities can be used by instructors and trainers to accomplish a variety of goals, such as introducing learners to one another, sharing experiences, benefiting from team learning, increasing participation, or encouraging learners to develop constructive online relationships throughout the course (Watkins, 2005). As a result, many e-learning activities can be adaptations of the training games used in traditional classroom instruction, and other activities can use the unique aspects of the online environment to develop distinctive activities for online courses.

For many e-learners and e-learning instructors, the online classroom is a new environment that requires a variety of technology skills and communication strategies that are not the same as those used in previous classroom experiences (Watkins & Corry, 2005). Consequently, while developing and teaching courses, we have a tendency to forget that the e-learning classroom can (and should) offer engaging and interactive learning experiences.

When a variety of interactive e-learning experiences are included, retention rates can be improved, learner participation can be increased, learning objectives can be achieved, online learning communities can be developed, and online courses that engage learners can be created.

E-learning activities can turn rather dull online experiences into entertaining, interactive, meaningful, and valuable learning experiences for students.

Developing Effective E-Learning Activities

Developing interactive e-learning activities does not, however, have to be difficult or time consuming. Yet before you select or develop an activity for your online course you should consider the following questions:
- Are the learners in the course experienced e-learners?
- Are you experienced with facilitating interactive e-learning?
- What technologies are available for facilitating the course's activities?
- Do the learners have the technical skills to use these technologies effectively?
- What pre-activity exercises would help prepare learners?
- How much time do you want to use for the activity?
- How much time do learners set aside for participation in the course?
- What learning objectives do you want to achieve through an activity?
- What other goals do you want to achieve through an activity?

After considering these issues, you can start to brainstorm the types of activities that will best achieve your goals. It is often helpful to reflect on activities you have used in traditional classroom courses to achieve similar goals and to recall some of the positive training experiences you have been through as a student. From these experiences you can list some of the potential activities that would be valuable in your online course.

For example, here is a short list of e-learning activities that may be helpful in sparking some creative ideas (based on Watkins, 2005).

Let Me Introduce

Based on an activity that is commonly used in traditional courses, this online adaptation involves students in interviewing other students and posting online introductions of their partners. This is a useful ice-breaker activity at the beginning of a course, and students can reuse the introductions when they form teams for group projects.

The steps are as follows: Pair students with partners, provide sample interview questions, and have students post introductions to a shared discussion board.

Websites About Myself

Taking advantage of unique resources available to online students, this activity is another compelling ice breaker that lets students introduce themselves by identifying websites that illustrate their interests and backgrounds. Once students have posted websites illustrating their interests, they can be encouraged to discuss similar and different interests with their peers.

The steps include the following: First, ask students to identify three websites that illustrate their interests. Next, instruct students to describe why they selected the three websites, and then have them post their sites to a shared discussion board.

Playing Roles in Groups

By assigning group members to interesting and challenging roles within group discussions, diversity of opinion can be enhanced within course discussions. These roles may include idea proposer, disagreer, devil's advocate, questioner, nay sayer, example giver, clarifier, tension reliever, discussion leader, note taker, online resource finder, or conflict negotiator.

In this activity, first assign students to teams of three or more and then assign roles to students. Then ask students play their role in group discussions, and finally have them reflect on the diversity of perspectives brought to the activity.

In the News

This activity capitalizes on online newspapers and magazines available to bring discussions of current events into online courses. Either as an individual or group activity, encouraging students to reflect on online news articles can engage them in discussions of current events related to the subject matter of most any course.

First, identify online resources related to course topics. Then, assign online news websites to individuals or teams and ask students to review and reflect on their assigned news stories. Finally, have students discuss the stories on a shared discussion board.

Group Blogs

Much like course journals, online weblogs (blogs) can be used to encourage students to work together in reflecting on course experiences. By engaging students in a group exercise in which they each contribute to a single online blog in a course discussion board, you can create an online learning community that reflects on both the positive and negative aspects of the learners' course experiences.

First, provide a shared discussion board for students to post their reflections. Then ask students to reflect on course experiences. Have students review the postings of other students.

Lessons Learned the Hard Way

This activity encourages students to reflect on and share their previous experiences using online technologies to generate a catalog of e-learning study skills that can be applied within their current courses. From lessons learned through sending emails to the wrong person to ideas for structuring file folders on their computer, encouraging students to share the e-learning study skills they have developed can be useful at most any point in an online course.

For this activity, first create a shared discussion board for the activity. Next, ask students to reflect on their previous course experiences and post the lessons they have learned (i.e., tips, suggestions, ideas) from previous experiences.

Summary

After selecting or developing an activity you will want to plan for successful implementation. This involves considering the following:
- What tasks will you have to complete as an instructor prior to starting the activity (e.g., emailing out instructions, forming groups, and establishing chat rooms)?
- What will students have to do to prepare for the activity (e.g., reading course materials, downloading software, and identifying partners)?
- What logistical steps will be necessary for both you and the students to participate effectively in the activity (e.g., when you will post the instructions, how often will students participate, and what will happen if a partner does not participate)?

- How you will assess the participation of students in the activity (for example, will the number of postings to the discussion board be important, will you review the content of all discussion postings, and will students summarize their interactions)?

E-learning activities can turn rather dull online experiences into entertaining, interactive, meaningful, and valuable learning experiences for students. Generating the creative ideas for online activities does not require long hours of meditation. By using adaptations of activities from the traditional classroom along with imaginative ideas that take advantage of the unique online technologies, you can create e-learning courses that will excite and engage students while accomplishing important course objectives. 🐚

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