

talking point

Personalisation: The key to engaging the learner

by Helen May



My first experience of work-based learning was as a recipient in the 1990s. It felt as though managers, regardless of industry or experience, were “developed” to within an inch of their lives in stuffy classrooms where facilitators would roll out the same script, the same OHPs, the same “energisers” and poor jokes, course, after course, after course...

Learning and development has come a long way in the past decade – thank goodness! Facilitators these days are much more tuned in to understanding the specific needs of the learners before they embark on any workshop or classroom activity.

So what about elearning? How far has that brought us in learning and development?

For the most part, in this context, not very far at all. Apart from the readily accepted advantages of time and money saved, the majority of elearning programmes so far have been linear and inflexible in their approach.

We recognised this and believe we found the solution.

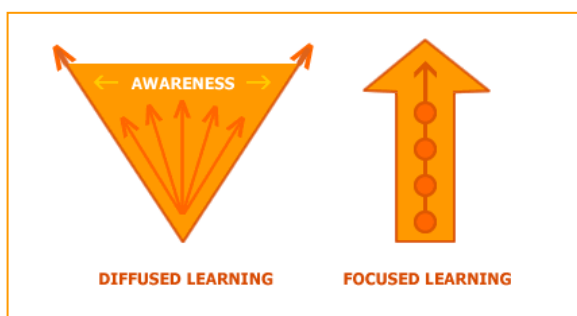
We believe that for an online learning programme to work, it is simply not enough to dump a load of content on the web. To be a success, any programme must get the learner to engage. And we have learnt that the key to this is personalisation – making the content and learning experience work for and relevant to, the individual learner.

There are four elements that we believe ensure the appropriate personalisation of an online learning programme:

- Providing flexible learning outcomes
- Meeting the needs of individual learning styles
- Keeping the learner engaged
- Enabling the learner to use their time well

Providing flexible learning outcomes

We find it useful to differentiate between two types of learning: focused and diffused.



We all have experience of focused learning: For example, at school or university, students follow a predetermined curriculum in a particular subject. They all start in the same place and the learning outcomes are defined as end-points for the group as a whole and not for individual learners. This process is essentially linear.

Contrast that with my own experience. Before I joined Nelson Croom, I was one of their customers. As training manager for Taylor & Francis/Informa I had to provide an appropriate induction for 200 new joiners as the company relocated to Oxford. Some knew the company but not the area. Others were local but had no knowledge of the publishing industry.

Nelson Croom helped us to create a diffused learning resource that met their diverse needs. It enabled them to plot their own route and find answers to their specific questions.

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In practice it had two key elements:

Non-linearity

Among the group of learners there were a variety of different objectives for the same programme – and this meant a range of different starting points and required learning outcomes. Therefore, a programme very linear in its structure wouldn't have been appropriate. In fact it could have prevented some learners from engaging with the learning experience and therefore jeopardised its success.

The online induction programme was clear and simple in its structure and yet allowed the learners to navigate the system themselves. This ensured that each individual's specific objectives were met and their interest maintained. In fact many times, the learners went through the programme from start to finish – but it was the choice of being able to go through the programme according to their own agenda which helped them buy in to the experience in the first place.

Learning Resources and Information Resources:

The Resource centre was an integral and invaluable part of the induction programme Taylor & Francis had. It was recognised that there was a wealth of information that needed to be available for access outside of the Learning Centre. Some people were well aware of Taylor & Francis procedures, but being new to the area had no idea where they could buy a pint at lunchtime! Others were fully au fait with the local watering holes but had no idea of the procedure for booking annual leave, for example.



The Resource Centre is a place where learners can access a bank of information outside of the programme, without risking wasting the time of those to whom this extra information is not applicable. This concept allowed different learners to go through entirely different learning experiences according to their need.

Meeting the needs of individual learning styles

As adults we learn in different ways and as a result will respond negatively or positively to a particular type of learning. Most of you will be aware of the research with adults carried out by David A Kolb and later developed by Honey and Mumford which categorised four broad learning styles as:

Active experimentation

A tendency to focus on involvement in human situations in a personal way. A preference for expressing as opposed to thinking. Practical rather than theoretical.

Concrete experience

A tendency to want to influence people and situations. Prefers practical application rather than reflective understanding. What works as opposed to what's right. Doing rather than observing. Likes to accomplish things and see results.

Reflective observation

A tendency to focus on understanding by observation and description. Understanding what's going on is more important than its practical application.

Abstract conceptualisation

Prefers to be logical. Likes to think things through and appreciate the theory. Analytical rather than intuitive. Enjoys systematic planning and values precision and discipline.

In the classroom the facilitator can ensure that a course or workshop includes a balanced range of lecturing, discussion, role-play and maybe a practical exercise.

While this will satisfy the needs of all learning styles, it may not necessarily do it at the right time for individual learners. For example, some people prefer to jump right in and give something a go – their instinct is to get something wrong and then learn the theory to see where they messed up. Others like to learn the theory first – take away all the facts and reflect upon them before acting. Obviously, in the classroom, everyone has to learn in the same order or there would be anarchy!

This is where online learning is at a distinct advantage over and above the classroom setting. An effective online learning programme should provide a creative mix of information and activities that the learner can choose to go through in their own preferred order and at their own pace, thus ensuring that they both engage with and get the most out of the learning experience.

Keeping the learner engaged

The key to this is relevance. No matter how good the content, structure and balance of information and activity, if a course does not contain examples and language that are directly relevant to the learner, this can be a very real barrier to getting them engaged.

For example, a course on Networking Skills that contains examples and scenarios based around the publishing world, would be of little value to a group of accountants! They would probably never engage with the programme because they think “These people don’t understand my job or my issues!”. While the basic content and learning outcomes for the course would be relevant to all, it is tailoring it to the audience that is key.

In our bespoke work we place enormous emphasis on understanding the learners. When we work with our own content, we tailor the courses for different sectors or professions and even go one stage further and tailor for a specific company or organisation.

We see tailoring as having two parts to it:

1. Adding relevance

Add things the learner will recognise – for example relevant examples and scenarios they will be familiar with.

2. Removing barriers

Remove barriers to acceptance. These barriers can be many things – from the wrong job title, unfamiliar customers, products or processes, or even just inappropriate language and tone.

Both of these things are crucial to the success of a programme and can only be attained and implemented successfully by developing a broad understanding of the learner. The addition of a Resource Centre can be a major asset in this respect.

We also discovered a process within our programmes which takes the tailoring process a stage further.

In some of the activity areas of our courses there is the

opportunity to respond to questions by giving examples of situations which have occurred in individual roles. These (anonymous!) answers can be viewed by all other learners who are enrolled on the course. This really helps the learner to feel part of a community.

One of our partners, the Institute of Physics, offer their members access to some of our courses. We were concerned about how we were going to tailor the courses to make them relevant to 32,000 of their members!

We made a range of changes to the content, but it was when the learners got started that it really started to feel right. They filled their courses on Negotiation Skills, Coaching Skills and Managing Workload with stories and examples of how it applied in their labs. In essence, the learning community personalised the course themselves.

Enabling the learner to use their time well

One of the biggest drawbacks of classroom based learning, as I alluded to earlier, is that the pace the facilitator sets may not be suitable for all the people in the room. Learners in the workplace will bring in a broad range of knowledge and experience, so parts of a course that are relevant to one learner may be a waste of time for another – and it is certainly not the best use of anybody’s time to take a whole day out to sit through a course when only the last hour of the session was of any benefit to them!

Researchers at the University of Missouri recently found that on average only 50% of a group of learners in the classroom were listening to the trainer. 20% had moved ahead of the tutor and disengaged and 30% had failed to keep up and were lost.

Instead of everyone sitting in a classroom for an entire session and being ticked off on a list as trained, whether or not they learnt anything, something much more flexible and better is possible with online learning.

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Compliance training is an example of one such area where we have found this to be particularly pertinent. One person can spend just 10 minutes taking an assessment and passing because they already have the knowledge to do so while another person might spend several hours working through the material at their own pace because they find the subject hard.

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We recently had an experience with a pharma packaging company which proves exactly this point. We developed a Competition Law course for them and the average time taken to complete the course by some of their staff was 3 hours. But the detail is more interesting: one person took 11 hours (and they weren't making cups of coffee!), whereas one person took 11 minutes to complete the assessment and scored over 95%. When we checked we found out he was the in-house lawyer, who had to go through the course but didn't have to waste his time.

One of the biggest challenges of any learning method is engaging the learner. The key to the success of the learning experience is to ensure that the learner is engaged from the outset or the experience will essentially be worth nothing. It is no great revelation to say that the best way to do this is through personalisation – in the classroom every trainer or facilitator realises that they have to know about their attendees and react to their specific needs. Online learning is no exception – it isn't simply about providing content; it is about providing a personalised learning solution – one that is flexible, creative and relevant to the learner. If it is delivered in this way it has countless benefits over and above anything that can be delivered solely in the classroom. And it is this that gives online learning enormous potential in the future of learning and development.