

Top 10 Tips: How to ensure eLearning is not eBoring!

By Naomi Waldron, Senior Instructional Designer, Workstar

In order to develop eLearning products and solutions which are appealing, Instructional Designers are constantly challenged to produce ideas that are both captivating and meaningful to learners.

Research has highlighted a number of ways in which eLearning can achieve this goal of making learning interesting to individuals. By creating materials which are clear, well presented and personally relevant to learners, Instructional Designers can offer learning environments which are engaging to learners from a variety of backgrounds.

The following presents ten suggestions to make sure eLearning sustains the attention and interest of the learner and in doing so, avoiding boredom.

1. Constructive Alignment

Our top tip for creating quality eLearning is to aim for what John Biggs (2003) terms 'constructive alignment'. The idea behind 'constructive alignment' is that learners construct meaning through relevant learning activities. Instructional Designers need to create a learning environment that supports the learning activities and assessment so that learners will achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Here is the single most important tip for the development of any training materials:

To align your	intended learning outcomes
with your	content
with your	activities
with your	assessment

While it may sound obvious, in practice it can be quite difficult to achieve. Workstar uses a specific strategy where all four of these items are mapped so that for every learning objective, we can see exactly how it is covered in the content, activities and assessment.

2. Blend It

It is important to remember that eLearning is just another form of training. When a classroom instructor tries to teach a whole class just by writing things on the board, more often than not, people would say that his or her training was boring and ineffective. It is therefore no wonder that when people go through fifty screens of monotonous text in eLearning, that they have the same response.

Variety is the spice of life, so don't be afraid to blend a whole range of training modes to

address intended learning outcomes.

Some different modes of training and learning include:

- Face-to-face
- Online
- Virtual classroom
- Paper-based
- Coaching and mentoring
- Online reference materials as performance support.

There are many different ways to use these training modes. The trick however, is to understand when to use a mode, and when not to use it.

3. Know Your Audience (Users)

When training face-to-face, you can ask questions of your audience and adapt your approach as you go. When designing educational materials such as eLearning, you don't have the opportunity to adapt as you go. So you need to know your users and consider their needs and interests.

Who are they?

- Are they all similar (e.g. a group of accountants who work within a firm), or are they a varied group (e.g. the general public)?
- What is their educational background?
- What is their previous experience with computers and eLearning?

What motivates them?

Personal motivation is the most significant factor influencing the completion of online courses (O'Connor et al, 2003). Therefore we need to question:

- Why are they doing this training?

What is their learning environment?

- Will they be doing the eLearning in dedicated work time in a private office with broadband internet?
- Will they be doing this in their breaks while on a remote location with intermittent Internet access at best?
- Will they be doing this at home or on the weekend?

You can't cater for everyone with the same design. Consequently, try to build in learner choice and optional pathways through the training material so that learners can decide how they want to learn.

4. Use Plain English

Make it as easy as possible for learners to understand the message you are conveying. Use plain English to explain even the most complex scenario and use visual aids where possible, as well as text. This way you give your user every chance they need to achieve the desired result. Sometimes complex language is unavoidable. In this case, surround the jargon with supporting images, animations etc, to help learners get the gist of the content.

5. Keep the Learners Active

It's easy for a learner to tune out when they have a lot of text to read. People learn best when they are actively putting into practice the principles they have absorbed visually or aurally during the course.

When designing your eLearning, continually reflect on this question: 'What is the learner doing now in the course?' If the answer is 'just reading', or other passive modes, you are running the risk of being eBoring!

Instead, consider whether an activity that requires mental effort would be more appropriate. Workstar's Instructional Designers are skilled in developing learning activities that are effective in an eLearning mode.

6. Use Examples

One way to make the content personally relevant to the learner is by using real-life examples and stories. Stories and examples bring difficult or boring content to life for the learner. They help learners to relate on a personal level to the material and draw on their own similar experiences to make sense of new information.

Spend time with your Subject Matter Expert (SME) talking about stories, getting them to give examples and metaphors that illustrate the point they are making.

7. Love Your SME (Subject Matter Expert)

Choose the right people. Make sure they are aware of the commitment required. Help them understand the development process and where they fit in. Keep communication channels open and be clear on expectations.

8. Plan Before You Do

eLearning is often expensive to develop and is usually more expensive to fix mistakes once the project is complete. That's why planning is so important!

At Workstar, there are three main planning stages:

1. Requirements analysis
2. High level design and
3. Low level design

In **Requirements Analysis**, time is spent discussing what the requirements are for the project in order to meet the learning, business, technical, timeline and budgetary needs. Design and development team leaders then check these requirements to make sure that the proposed project is feasible.

From here, the learning sequence is developed as well as the look and feel for the project. This is then checked to ensure that it is going to meet the requirements that were determined earlier- this is the **High Level Design** phase.

Once all of the above is decided upon, the third phase is entered; **Low Level Design**. This is where all of the media that will appear in the learning material is planned. This also includes story boards and scripts. All of this planning helps develop a product of extremely high quality that meets the primary objective- helping people to learn.

9. Work with Quality Content

You may be familiar with the phrase, 'Garbage in, garbage out'. This same principle applies to eLearning. It is important to start any eLearning project with quality content. This saves significant time and rework in the design stage, and if you're outsourcing development, will also save you time and money.

Sometimes you are developing eLearning based on an existing classroom-based course or paper-based training materials. In these cases, collect all of these materials before the project starts.

Other times you are developing a completely new learning package. In this case, you need to work with Subject Matter Experts to develop quality content before the eLearning product can be developed.

If this sounds all too difficult, do not worry. Workstar has proven techniques for gathering content and workshopping content with SMEs, and can lead this process for you. We also have a pool of industry experts across a wide range of fields who can act as SMEs if you don't have staff available to perform this task.

10. Less is More

Keep it straight forward and user-friendly. Do not put things in just because they are 'cool' or fun. If it doesn't serve a clear educational purpose, consider ditching it. Create lots of short chunks rather than a few epic courses. The longer the eLearning duration, the lower the number of participants successfully completing the program (Van Liew, 2006).

References

Biggs, J., 2003. Aligning Training and Assessing to Course Objectives, Proceedings of the 2003 Conference of Training and Learning in Higher Education, University of Aveiro, 13-17 April 2003.

*Available from : <http://event.ua.pt/iched/main/invcom/p182.pdf>
[cited 6 June 2007].*

O'Connor, C., et al., 2003. Departure, Abandonment, and Dropout of E-learning: Dilemma and Solutions. Available from : http://www.masie.com/researchgrants/2003/JMU_Exec_Summary.pdf.

[cited 6 June 2007].

Van Liew, R. 2006. E-learning's "Dirty Little Secret", Hands on Technology Transfer.

*Available from : <http://www.traininghott.com/E-learning-Secrets.htm>
[cited 6 June 2007].*

