

Six eLearning Interactive Activities

While most of us can see the benefits of including engaging activities in our eLearning courses, many are not cognizant of specific development strategies. As a result, many on-line courses lack interactive and engaging activities designed to enhance the eLearning experience.

Using the unique capabilities of Web technologies, online courses can facilitate eLearning if it is user-friendly, interactive, purposeful...and exciting. Although developing interactive eLearning activities does not have to be difficult or time consuming, before you select one for your online course, you should consider the following:

- a) Are the students in the course familiar with eLearning?*
- b) Am I experienced in conducting interactive eLearning?*
- c) What technologies are available for facilitating the course's activities?*
- d) Do the students have the technical skills to use these technologies effectively?*
- e) What exercises would help prepare students?*
- f) How much time do I want to use for the activity?*
- g) How much time do students set aside for participation in the course?*
- h) What learning objectives do I want to achieve through an exercise?*
- i) What other goals do I want to achieve?*

After considering these important issues, you can now brainstorm the types of tasks that will best achieve your learning 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 educational experiences you had as a student.

Below are six eLearning exercises that may be helpful in sparking some creative ideas:

1. LET ME INTRODUCE: Based on an activity that is commonly used in traditional courses, this online adaptation has students interview other students and post online introductions of their partners. This is a great ice-breaker at the beginning of a course and you can later have students re-use the introductions when they form teams for group projects.

Steps: (a) Pair students with partners, (b) provide sample interview questions, and (c) have students interview each other and post introductions to a shared discussion board.

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2. WEBSITES ABOUT MYSELF: Taking advantage of unique resources available to online students, this exercise is a wonderful ice breaker and lets students introduce themselves by identifying Websites that illustrate their interests and backgrounds. When students have posted Websites illustrating their interests, you can then encourage them to discuss similar and different interests with their peers.

Steps: (a) Have students identify three Websites and describe why they selected each one, (b) have students post their Websites to a shared discussion board, and (c) have students explore one posted website from a classmate and provide the classmate with feedback (positive, negative, interesting) about the website.

3. PLAYING ROLES IN GROUPS: By assigning group members to roles within group discussions (for example, discussion leader, idea proposer, disagreeer, cheerleader, devil's advocate, questioner, naysayer, example giver, clarifier, tension reliever, encourager, note taker, online resource finder, or conflict negotiator), you can use this activity to add diversity and depth to course discussions.

Steps: (a) Assign students to teams of three or more, (b) assign a role to each student, (c) have students play their role in group discussions, and (d) have students reflect on the positive or negative contribution of assigned roles to the discussion.

4. IN THE NEWS: This activity capitalizes on the number of newspaper and magazine articles available online to bring discussions of current events into online courses. Either as an individual or group activity, encouraging students to utilize these news articles can engage them in discussions related to current events relative to the subject matter of most any course.

Steps: (a) Identify online resources related to course topics, (b) assign online news Websites to individuals or teams, (c) have students read and reflect on their assigned news stories, and (d) have students discuss the news stories on a shared discussion board.

5. COURSE BLOGS: Much like course journals, an online blog (short for "web log") can be used as an effective eLearning activity that encourages students to work together in reflecting on course experiences. By engaging students in a group exercise where they each contribute to a single blog that explores their positive and negative course experiences, you can create an online learning community.

Steps: (a) Ask students to reflect privately on their positive and negative course experiences, (b) provide a shared discussion board for students to post their reflections, and (c) have students review and respond to the postings of other students.

6. LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY: This one causes students to reflect on and share their previous experiences in using online technologies to generate a catalog of eLearning study skills that can be applied in 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 eLearning study skills they have developed can be useful at almost any point in an online course.

Steps: (a) Create a shared discussion board for the activity, (b) have students reflect on experiences they have had in an e-course, and (c) have students post what they learned (i.e., tips, suggestions, ideas) from each experience.

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To ensure the successful implementation of these or other eLearning activities, you will want to consider the following:

- a) What tasks you will have to complete prior to starting the activity (for example, emailing instructions, forming groups, establishing chat rooms).*
- b) What the students will have to do to prepare for the activity (for example, reading course materials, downloading software, identifying partners).*
- c) The logistical steps that will necessary for both you and the students to participate effectively in the activity (for example, when you will post the instructions, how often will students participate, and what will happen if a partner does not participate?).*
- d) How you will assess the participation of students in the activity and how much extra time that will take you (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?).*

By adapting things from the traditional classroom and adding imaginative ideas that take advantage of the unique online technologies, you can create eLearning courses that will excite and engage students. And, by including a variety of interactive eLearning experiences, you should be able to improve retention rates, increase learner participation, achieve your learning objectives, develop online learning communities, and ensure that your online courses engage learners, regardless of the course topic.

Related Readings

Watkins, R. and Corry, M. (2007). *ELearning Companion: A Student's Guide to Online Success*. 2nd Edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Watkins, R. (2005). *75 ELearning Activities: Making Online Courses More Interactive*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley/Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

Watkins, R. (2005). Ends and Means: Developing eLearning activities. *Distance Learning Magazine*, 2(1).

Author Bio

Ryan Watkins is an associate professor at the George Washington University in Washington DC. He is the author of several best-selling books and more than 60 articles on eLearning, eLearner success, and related topics. His approach to preparing eLearners for online success has been featured on National Public Radio, ABC, and CNN. Most recently he has teamed up with How2eLearn.com to create dynamic online courses and tutorials to assist students in developing the necessary skills for eLearning success.