learning blueprint

TRAINING DELIVERY AND FACILITATION

Easy Ways to Increase Learner Engagement

Activate intellectual curiosity, emotional interest, and body movement for better learning outcomes.

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To teach in an engaging and inspiring manner, transform content into an experience that maximizes impact.

What it is

Engagement tools such as cards, posters, discussion guides, workbooks, and stories can enhance the learner experience. Although creating interactive materials will extend the program-development timeline, the trade-offs are well worth the payoff.

How it works

Breaking the classroom into smaller groups and leveraging those tools fundamentally makes learning more engaging and memorable.

Remember that people are more likely to engage in small groups (up to six people) than large ones. When individuals work in small groups, their participation becomes more meaningful and individually relevant to the activity or conversation.

In a virtual environment, the inclination to engage is even more obvious as the group size decreases. Large virtual groups tend to cause participants to feel isolated and anonymous. Conversely, the willingness to turn on cameras or stay unmuted dramatically increases in partner and triad situations. Those behaviors drop the veil of anonymity and improve social connection.

Small-group activities offer additional benefits beyond social pressure and psychological safety. In an in-person setting, the mere act of joining a group requires physical movement. That affects a participant's heart rate and increases focus.

A group of people who work through an activity together for just 10 minutes will bond dramatically more than a group of 50 people who sit in a room listening to a lecture for an hour. Relationships make the learning process stickier and more fulfilling.

Guidelines

With a macrolevel understanding that learners are naturally more engaged in smaller groups, the next challenge is determining what methods will achieve a workshop's desired outcomes. We regularly lean on the following tools to structure and activate learning, particularly in small groups.

Card decks. If each card contains a single piece of information, various interactive opportunities open. For example, you can instruct participants to take turns reading the cards aloud. Taking turns democratizes the content and sets the expectation that everyone will participate. Individuals will actively discover the

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CHECKLIST
Make Memorable Experiences

✓ Plan a longer development process to allot time for designing activities and materials that fuel engagement.

✓ Find moments to put learners in groups throughout the training program so they are always present and engaged.

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content—as opposed to passively absorbing the information—and move through the information at their own pace, which supports curiosity and increases retention.

Cards also offer a kinetic opportunity. Individuals can pick them up, move them around, and sort or rank them. Moving the cards is physically and mentally engaging and creates conversational opportunities. In an in-person environment, cards also encourage participants to move, making it particularly difficult to share the table with distractions such as phones and laptops. Virtual cards or sticky notes offer similar functionality within a virtual environment.

Posters and flipcharts. These tools organize and structure information. Imagine a group of five people standing in front of a poster and adding check marks to the most important data points. That brings a visual and tactile element to the experience that appeals to many learning preferences.

Flipcharts can also structure the collection of input from groups. When using either posters or flipcharts, you can further increase interactivity and movement by setting up a round-robin and having groups move from one poster to another to add or align with other groups.

In a virtual environment, digital tools such as a shared whiteboard offer many of the benefits of a physical poster, although the physical movement is more limited.

Discussion guides. A discussion guide is a series of instructions and questions that direct a small-group conversation. When designed well, the guide can progress participants through most of the steps of the learning journey. You can pair the discussion guides with other materials, with the guides serving as facilitators for each group. In a virtual environment, discussion guides can be as simple as a slide with instructions and questions broadcast to all the breakout groups.

RESOURCES

Kolb, D.A., R.E. Boyatzis, and C. Mainemelis. 2001. "Experiential Learning Theory: Previous Research and New Directions." In *Perspectives on Thinking, Learning, and Cognitive Styles,* edited by R.J. Sternberg and L.F. Zhang, 227–247. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

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Workbooks. Workbooks help individuals stay oriented within the experience, keep on track with the learning, and capture insights and takeaways. They organize the information more effectively than handouts or files. Workbooks are also significantly more effective as an artifact of learning than a typical presentation slide deck because they enable everyone to capture notes.

Workbooks can be digital for virtual experiences but should remain editable so learners can mark them up. That way, they still offer a more tactical and movement-oriented experience.

Stories. One of the most powerful ways to engage learners is through story, especially when it comes to emotional engagement. Stories reveal something about the storyteller, which helps facilitators connect with learners, whether in person or virtual.

Results

When it comes to engagement, not only do learners feel inclined to participate and possess the psychological safety to do so; they are functionally discouraged from multitasking or zoning out because they have something to do, not just something to listen to. Meanwhile, individuals build relationships, make connections, and have greater ownership of their learning. That leads to a more positive experience, an inclination to recommend the training program to others, and—most importantly—better information retention.

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✓ Experiment with integrating content into materials. Try putting your content on cards and letting participants discover it themselves.

✓ Match the size of the ask to the size of the group. Assign as solo or partner work the tasks that take participants out of their comfort zone. Save easier tasks for larger groups.

✓ Get feedback to discover what did and didn't work. Hold onto what learners found valuable, and experiment with everything else.

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