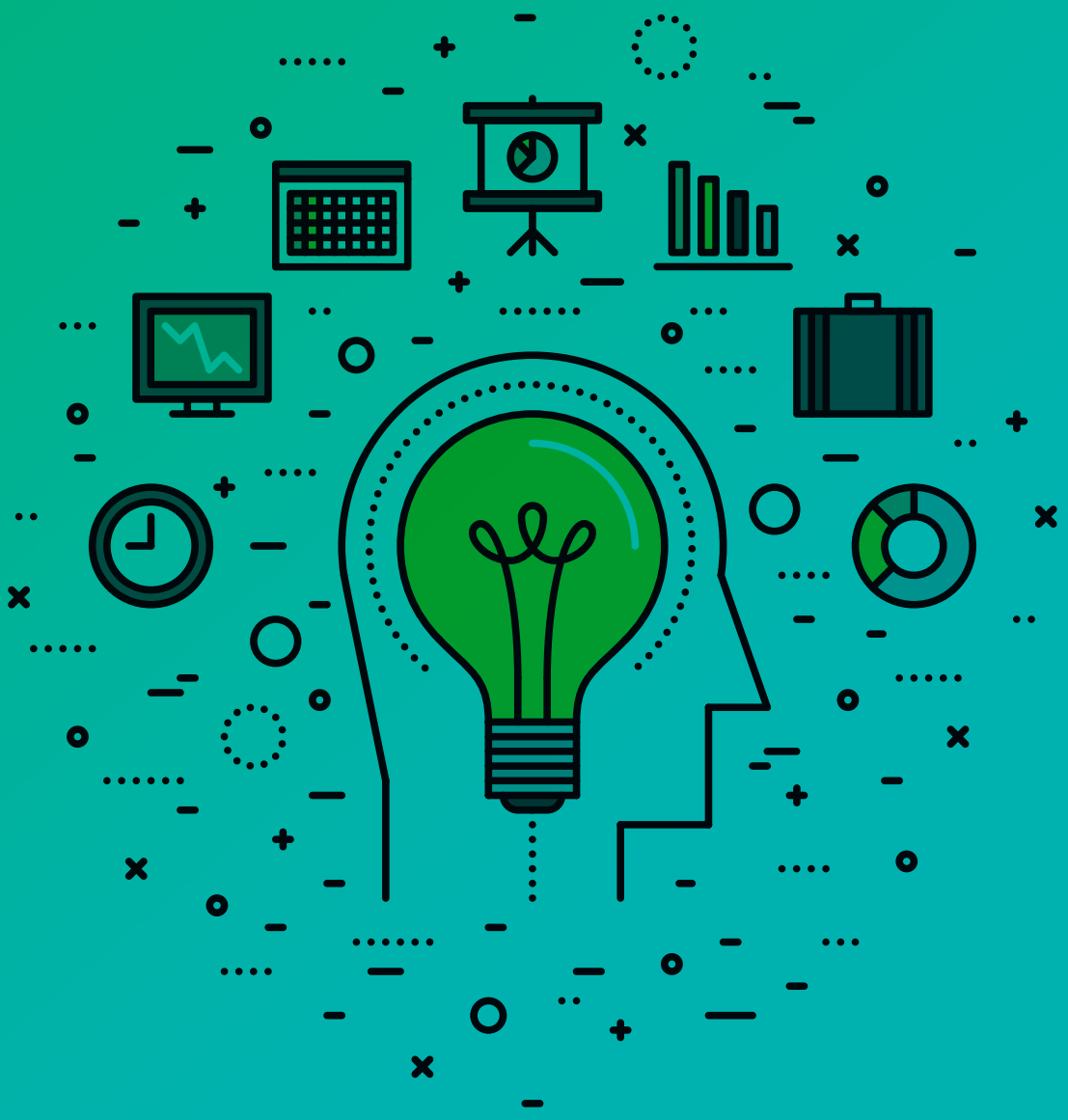
workstar

The Power Of Experiential e-Learning



Introduction

Experiential e-Learning is an innovative, engaging and highly effective method of training developed in response to the work of educational theorist David A. Kolb.

Experiential e-Learning places employees in authentic, 'virtual' situations online, allowing them to replicate and practise a wide range of roles and receive detailed feedback, empowering them to be more confident and skilled, and providing them with integrated knowledge specific to their tasks. As a result, employee engagement, knowledge retention and dramatic performance improvements undoubtedly benefit businesses exponentially.

What is Experiential Learning and what benefits does it offer?

Quite simply, experiential learning is 'learning by doing'. It's one of the most fundamental, intuitive ways that humans can learn, and we all do it, all the time. Any time you do something that you have never done before and then think about how it worked and why, you are using experiential learning.

Unsurprisingly then, experiential learning has long been held in high esteem as a method of formal learning. The great ancient philosophers and educators understood the effectiveness of experiential learning.

> I hear and I forget.
> I see and I remember.
> I do and I understand.
>
> Confucius (551 – 479 BC)

More recently, educational theorists have researched and published the benefits and effectiveness of experiential learning.

Experiential learning is the educational theory underpinning apprenticeships, manual arts classes, outdoor education, internships, role plays, classroom science experiments, flight simulators and more. It is characterised by learners actually doing the task that they are supposed to learn.

But what are the benefits of experiential learning over direct instruction?

Benefit # 1: Experiential learning gives learners the skills and experience they need for real world success.

More often than not, employees seem to lack problem-solving skills and don't seem to be able to apply what they've learnt in training to the workplace.

In a study comparing experiential learning and direct instruction for agricultural science, According to Baker (2012), experiential learning may lead to higher domain specific creativity and practical use of knowledge, whereas direct instruction may yield higher practical knowledge scores.

Because learners actually do the practical job in their learning experience, they are much better able to transfer their learning to the workplace and apply what they have learnt to related workplace situations.

Benefit # 2: Experiential learning supports subconscious adoption of values and personal attributes which are difficult to teach with direct instruction.

This is because in experiential learning that targets attribute adoption, learners don't only experience doing a task, but take on a new kind of identity-'being' a different kind of person.

Behavioural change researcher James Prochaska (2013) argues that emotional arousal and depth of feeling is an important element in shifting from abstract awareness to commitment to change, and actual change.

Experiential learning can access the emotional state much more easily than direct instruction. In a 2011 study of leadership and sustainability experiential learning training at IBM and HSBC, Gitsham (2011) found that the learning programmes had a powerful impact on the senior managers and future leaders who participated in the experience.

A participant from IBM whose programme took them to Nigeria made a comment which highlighted the power of experiential learning to change deeply-held values and attitudes: "We all know about things like poverty in Africa and corruption and bribery, and how hard life can be, but it's really interesting to feel it, or feel something of it, it's really powerful, in terms of appreciating just how hard life can be for people. This kind of experience really brings what we already know – from the news and TV – and other things to life, you really feel it." (Gitsham, ibid.)

There are many organisational issues where a cultural shift is required, and in these situations, experiential learning can provide the emotional impetus to shift even the most long-held views.

Benefit # 3: Experiential learning is enjoyable, leading to better performance and higher completion rates.

Learners often find experiential learning enjoyable because it is such a natural, intuitive way to learn. We know that if learners are engaged in learning experiences that they see the relevance of, they have increased motivation to learn. Participants are also motivated to learn when they have opportunities to practice, reflect and gain feedback (Ambrose, et. al., 2010).

It follows that increased motivation leads to higher course completion rates, fewer drop-outs, and better overall performance.

A widely quoted figure is that around 90% of students drop out of massive open online courses (Tauber, 2013; Kolowich, 2013). While the reasons for the high attrition rate vary, and are the subject of much current research (Rivard, 2013), the importance of engaging and motivating online learners cannot be underestimated.

Experiential learning engages learners in meaningful, real-life situations, and this has a positive impact on motivation and participation.

How experiential learning compares with direct instruction?

Direct instruction, as characterised by Watkins and Slocum (2003), includes the following three characteristics:

1. content and learning objectives to be communicated through carefully constructed instructional programs;

2. sequencing of instruction including scheduling, grouping, and ongoing progress monitoring to ensure sufficient instruction;

3. interaction techniques to engage the learner with instruction to master the objectives of each lesson. (pp. 75 –76)

Most formal training programs are developed for direct instruction, whether to be delivered by a trainer or self-paced computer-based training. The supposed benefit of direct instruction is increased efficiency and scientific process. It is efficient to design and create training using the direct instruction approach, because when content is separated from its context, it can be more easily re-used and re-purposed. It is simple to test and measure learner superficial knowledge acquisition using the direct instruction approach.

However, the significant trade-off is lack of transfer of learning into real world context. In other words, the learner may remember the facts that they have been taught using direct instruction, but may not be able to put those facts to practical use.

In contrast, experiential learning results when people purposefully reflect on their experiences. Experiential learning is an instinctual and innate skill within all people. By definition, it embeds learning in the holistic context that is meaningful to the learner because they are able to relate learning to their own direct experience.

American educational theorist, David A. Kolb, developed the Experiential Learning Cycle in 1984. The model is still useful today, as it integrates the experience, reflection and formation of abstract concepts as a result of the experience.

Step 1: Concrete Experience

The learner participates in a complex experience, set in a rich context. The nature of the experience may be intentionally ill-defined, and the learner must make decisions based on a range of sources of information available. The decisions made have realistic consequences.

Step 2: Reflective Observation

The learner reflects on the consequences of their decisions and compares their experience with their prior experiences and understandings about the issues raised in the experience.

Step 3: Abstract Conceptualisation

The learner forms a new understanding or hypothesis, based on their observation of the experience.

Step 4: Active Experimentation

The learner tests their hypothesis/ understanding in a similar context, under slightly different conditions, in order to strengthen or further develop their understanding.

The cycle can continue until the learner has mastered the task.

An example

For the sake of illustration, consider the following fictional example:

A call centre for a large finance organisation regularly hired new employees who were responsible for responding to customer enquiries about mortgages.

Their traditional approach was to train new recruits using direct instruction, where they would break the task into clear knowledge and skill objectives, train and then test each one in a classroom setting. The L&D team was proud of their 100% completion rate and 85% or greater pass rate for each learning objective.

However, front-line managers complained that they still needed to spend a lot of time training the new recruits, resulting in poor profit results for new starters. It seemed that there was a disconnect between training results and workplace performance.

The L&D team decide to trial an experiential learning approach, with the goal of improving new recruit's practical call centre skills. But, as one trainer rightly pointed out, they couldn't just let total newcomers loose on unsuspecting customers without any prior expertise.

As a result, they turned to experiential e-Learning for a solution that would enable learners to participate in realistic experiences without any risk to business.

How does Experiential e-Learning work?

The phrase 'Experiential e-Learning' means modelling realistic, life-like, authentic learning experiences with the use of online technology. It encompasses many different aspects of e-Learning, such as computer-based training, augmented reality and classroom-based technology applications.

Online-based training applications – such as Scenarios and Simulations, Just-In-Time, Face-To-Face Simulations, Conversation Aids, Learning Games

Experiential learning can be incorporated into traditional computer-based training content, in the form of learning designs such as scenarios, simulations and serious games.

In scenario-based learning, learners are presented with a complex and realistic scenario, and are asked to make decisions based on the information they have available to them. Depending on the decisions they make, they receive realistic consequences. For example, they may have a virtual profit score that they need to reach by participating in the scenario.

Online simulations vary in style, ranging from high-fidelity simulations used in military, aviation and health contexts, through to more basic simulations such as software application simulations. The aim is to immerse the learner in a virtual world that represents an aspect of real life.

Serious games use the principles of game design to motivate and drive learners to complete different challenges. Not all learning games are experiential, but many are, requiring learners to solve realistic problems for game-based rewards.

Augmented reality applications – for example, e-job aids, performance tools, virtual coaches

Augmented reality applications are becoming more common as mobile devices become ubiquitous. They remove the physical distinction between 'learning' and 'doing' the task in real life. Whereas previously a learner would sit down at a computer and take an online course on a topic, they can now physically take their mobile device with them to where they are working and use the course material as a guide.

Consider the following example: Pharmacy assistants need to speak to a customer and recommend the appropriate product to suit their needs. Recommending the wrong product, or failing to give appropriate advice on the product's use, could be harmful to the customer. Training is important, but to complicate matters, product information is regularly changing and being updated. An augmented reality experiential learning solution would allow the pharmacy assistant to refer to learning materials on a tablet while speaking with a customer, to confirm the features and benefits of a particular product.

As wearable technology becomes more pervasive, it may be feasible to design more augmented reality learning experiences to guide and provide just-in-time feedback to learners as they perform a task. Shoes that send biometric data back to a mobile phone to provide computer-generated coaching feedback are one example of augmented reality experiential learning in the health and fitness field.

Classroom-based technology applications, such as team scenarios and virtual tours

While face-to-face training remains an important part of many organisations' training programmes, the constraints of the classroom have always posed a significant challenge to trainers. It's not uncommon for employees to step out of the training room and back into the workplace and forget everything they learnt in the classroom. In the physical classroom setting, trainers are using technology to bring workplace experiences into the classroom, with the intention of improving workplace transfer. This blended learning approach combines direct instruction in a face-to-face classroom setting, with simulations or scenarios that model real-life experiences.

Workstar has developed a scenario-based team learning activity, where small groups of learners undertake complex problem-solving activities and can compete with other teams for realistic rewards such as profit and customer satisfaction scores. The team learning activity follows Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle, to ensure that learners reflect upon and consolidate learning from their experiences.

Other classroom-based technology applications include the use of web conferencing and even robotics to give learners an experience of geographically-remote or dangerous locations. In 2012, schoolchildren in remote locations around Australia were able to experience a tour of the National Art Gallery through the eyes of robots which explored the artwork.

One consistent challenge with experiential e-Learning is how to move beyond the 'experience' in all its wonder and awe, through to deep understanding and consolidated long-term memory. A consideration for the design of learning experiences is that it's not enough for a person to simply 'experience', they also need to reflect on their experience and draw inferences from what they have experienced to convert that to 'learnings' which they can transfer and apply to different contexts. The Kolb experiential learning method is an excellent foundation to ensure that deep learning results from experience.

Summary

Throughout the ages and into the future, experiential learning will remain a powerful and effective method of learning. Workstar's Experiential e-Learning model is built on strong foundations of educational theory and practice, brought up-to-date with the most recent e-Learning advances.

To see how the experiential learning can work for your organisation, contact us to view examples and discuss how we can apply the model to your unique organisational requirements.

VIEW OUR FREE DEMO TODAY

More information

For more information about the concepts presented in this article, we invite you to explore the following articles and links.

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). How learning works: Sevenresearch-based principles for smart teaching. John Wiley & Sons.

Baker, M. (2012). The Effect of Kolb's Experiential Learning Model on Successful Secondary Student Intelligenceand Student Motivation (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest. (UMI No. 3554889)

Griffith, C. (2012, August 28). Remote chance to visit national museum. The Australian. Retrieved eptember 01,2014, from http://www.theaustralian.com.au/technology/remote-chance-to-visit-national-museum/story-fn4htb9o-1226459322767

Gitsham, M. (2012). Experiential learning for leadership and sustainability at IBM and HSBC. Journal ofManagement Development, 31(3), 298-307.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development. Englewood Cliffs,NJ: Prentice Hall. Retrieved September 01, 2014, from http://academic.regis.edu/ed205/Kolb.pdf

Kolowich, S. (2013, April 8). Coursera Takes a Nuanced View of MOOC Dropout Rates. The Chronicle of HigherEducation, Retrieved September 01, 2014, from http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/coursera-takes-a-nuanced-view-of-mooc-dropout-rates/43341

Prochaska, J. O., & Velicer, W. F. (1997). The transtheoretical model of health behavior change. American journalof health promotion, 12(1), 38-48.

Rivard, R. (2013, March 8). Measuring the MOOC Dropout Rate, Inside Higher Ed, Retrieved September 01, 2014, from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/03/08/researchers-explore-who-taking-moocs-and-why-so-many-drop-out

Tauber, T. (2013, March 21). The dirty little secret of online learning: Students are bored and dropping out, Quartz,Retrieved September 01, 2014, from http://qz.com/65408/the-dirty-little-secret-of-online-learning-students-are-bored-and-dropping-out/

Watkins, C. L. & Slocum, T.A. (2003). The components of direct instruction. Journal of Direct Instruction, 3(2), 75-110.

workstar