BUILDING

COMPPELLING

INTERACTIONS

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Introduction

When it comes to e-learning courses, it can be challenging to keep your learners engaged from start to finish. You’re competing for their attention with many distractions—both online and offline. So what’s the best way to keep their focus on your course? Give them opportunities to actively interact with your content every step of the way.

When you add meaningful interactions to your courses, your learners learn by doing, rather than reading or hearing about the information. For example, if you’re teaching nursing students, you might encourage them to explore a file cabinet for information, talk to patients to diagnose symptoms, or search for the tools they’ll need in the examination room. These types of interactions will not only capture your learners’ attention, but will also make sure they retain more of what they learn.

Let’s take a look at how you can add engaging and relevant interactions to your courses. With our tips and guidelines, even your most reluctant learners will have a hard time staying passive.
Discovery

Entice your learners to take action by inviting them to explore. Not many of us can resist the urge to poke around a new environment; humans are naturally inquisitive. What do we do when we walk into someone’s house for the first time? We take a look around to get a feel for what the person likes, how the person lives, and what we might have in common with them. Most of us wouldn’t feel comfortable peeking inside a friend’s cabinets without good reason. But we might be tempted to look because we might find something interesting or unexpected.

Build interactions that your learners want to explore, that entice them to discover content out of curiosity. For example, instead of presenting multiple slides full of bullets, create a single tab interaction that lets learners dig into content in any order they want. Not only do tab interactions invite exploration, they’re great for consolidating a lot of information on a single slide. Would you rather click around on a screen mimicking an iPad application’s interface or slog your way through a bunch of slides?
Building Compelling Interactions

Encourage Exploration

Learners click on the app-like tabs in this interaction to reveal content.

With the right e-learning authoring software, you can turn any image into an experience of discovery. For example, you could have items pinned to a bulletin board or sticky notes on a desk that reveal additional information when learners hover over or click on them. Or, if you need to train your sales team on a new product, you could add clickable icons to a product image like the one on the next page.

There will be times when you want to pair information with media to provide visual context. Or sometimes a video or photograph isn’t the context, it’s the main point. But perhaps you need to augment it with text. Media interactions make it easy to convey your message while keeping learners active, engaged, and inquisitive. You can build a media
If you need to walk learners through a process, workflow, or procedure, process interactions are a great alternative to bullets or paragraphs of text. With a process diagram, you reveal steps one at a time, letting learners consume the information in a sequential way. They control when they’re ready to move from one step to the next.
A Sample Process Interaction

Information is broken down into a sequence showing one step at a time.

And to convey relationships between concepts, try an interactive diagram. For example, you might use a segmented pyramid that lets learners explore hierarchical relationships or a circle diagram that lets them investigate interrelated ideas.
Questions

Ask any expert conversationalist and they’ll tell you that the secret to engaging people is asking them questions. (Don’t you wish you knew that trick when you were 14?!)

By asking learners questions, you connect them to the content. What do you think, learner? What do you want to do? How would you solve this? Now they’re personally involved.

You can use questions in any number of ways to lure learners. You can ask questions that impact what content the learner sees next. Add a knowledge check that reinforces key concepts. Or ask them to do an activity that lets them practice new skills.

Depending on your authoring tool, you’ll have a range of assessment types to choose from. We love freeform interactions—such as drag-and-drops—because they let you turn pretty much any objects you want into a question.

For example, it’s easy to use a drag-and-drop interaction as a navigation/branching tool. Ask a question like, “Which department should Sally visit to learn more about our company’s new data security policies? Drag Sally over a door to choose where she should go next.”
Or you could use a drag-and-drop to ask learners how they’d solve a real-world problem—or do an activity required in their jobs.

For example, a course for hospitality professionals could include a table-setting exercise where learners place utensils and other items where they belong on a table. Watch this short video tutorial to learn how to create an interaction like this with Articulate Storyline.

With the right course authoring tool, you can add interactivity to any objects, media, or characters you want to create any type of interaction you can imagine. But resist the urge to add interactivity for novelty’s sake. While gratuitous interactivity might engage them the first time they see it, if your course is filled with unnecessary clicks, drags, and mouseovers, learners will start getting frustrated.
Problem-Solving

One of the ways you make interactions feel meaningful—and not just gratuitous—is to make them relevant to the learner’s job or experience.

Remember, many of your learners don’t choose to take your course. It’s more likely that they’re required by law, corporate policy, or an academic program to complete the e-learning module (with flying colors, of course). And, let’s face it, you might be asked to create a course on material that’s not inherently exciting. And no interaction on its own can make up for that.

So, how do you draw in reluctant learners, especially when the content isn’t naturally stimulating? Ask your learners to solve problems that they might actually face. They’ll need to think about the information they’ve learned, and make decisions based on their new understanding. And if you introduce new facts throughout the scenario, they’re more likely to retain them because the information is immediately meaningful. Pepper your scenario with interactivity that’s natural to the situation, and presto! You have a winning combination.
Contextual Relevance

Create a problem that’s contextually relevant to your learners, so that they’ll feel like they have a stake and will be motivated to solve it. And, if you can, add an emotional component. The key is to tap into the reason the course content is important to the learner. What’s in it for them? Why do they need the information? What do they have to gain? Or, what’s at stake if they don’t learn it? In short, what’s the personal impact of this kind of decision?

For example, say you’re developing anti-discrimination training for managers at a bank. Instead of a bunch of bulleted slides, what if you presented a scenario where an employee reports a troubling interaction with a colleague in another department? Perhaps the bank just settled a discrimination suit for hundreds of thousands of dollars, so management’s feeling particularly sensitive about missteps. With this type of realistic (and high stakes) situation, you can help learners internalize why the training matters.

Keep in mind that any scenarios you use should tie directly to your learning objectives. What do you expect learners to know—or be able to do—by the end of the course? How will you know if they’ve met those expectations? If you’re not clear on the performance requirements, you can’t create scenarios that help learners meet them.
Decision Points

Once you’ve defined the circumstances of your scenario, you’ll need to create interactive activities and decision points where learners can apply what they’ve learned—or learn what they need to know to solve the problem. Each decision should force understanding, or the need to gain it.

This is where subject matter experts can help. Ask them to share different experiences and possible outcomes. The more nuanced and loaded the situation, the more your learners will need to think through how to apply information. In the real world, decisions are rarely clear-cut and correct choices aren’t always obvious. Sometimes there isn’t a correct choice at all, just different consequences. So when you’re building a decision point, offer realistic, nuanced choices that actually force the learner to think.

While you don’t want to try to trick learners, you can throw in some choices that are somewhat right and somewhat wrong, and ask the learner to pick the best one. You can then address nuances in the feedback. And when you don’t have a clear-cut right decision, you can create other situations that highlight what’s wrong with each choice.
For example, for that anti-discrimination training, you could ask managers to decide what action to take immediately after learning of the incident:

- Notify the human resources (HR) and legal departments of the potential problem.
- Research the incident further and discuss a course of action with the accused’s supervisor.
- Try to facilitate a resolution between the two employees.

None of these is wrong. But none is totally right, either. So learners must think through the potential outcomes of each, which keeps them completely engaged.
Consequences

If you’ve ever read a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, you already know how compelling it is to play the hero. Because you make the decisions that determine the outcome, you’re invested in learning what happens next. You’re drawn into the story.

The same is true for decision-making scenarios. They let learners explore the consequences of their actions and wonder, “What happens if I choose this?” The point isn’t for learners to get it right the first time. It’s to let them explore consequence, to “play” with what might happen if they get it wrong.

With each choice they make, you can provide feedback that deepens their understanding of the material or reinforces key concepts.

Or, instead of providing feedback and stopping there, you can let each decision drive a new twist in the scenario. Let’s look at the anti-discrimination training again.

If learners choose to immediately notify the HR and legal departments of the potential problem (and thereby delay addressing the issue), you could present a second scenario in which the harassed employee becomes frustrated at the inaction and threatens suit. Learners then must navigate another set of challenges.
If they choose to research the incident, you could escalate the situation. Perhaps the incident starts infecting office culture as both parties start soliciting support from other colleagues. Suddenly, there are multiple people taking sides, each sidetracked from their core jobs. What should learners do next?

Also, if learners try to facilitate a resolution between the two employees, they could find themselves in hot water with both HR and legal. Now what?
Just be careful not to make the scenarios so difficult that they give up. It’s no fun to feel like no matter what you do, you’ll never get it right. And remember to build realistic scenarios and consequences so that learners can see how they connect to their own jobs.

In this well-done decision-making scenario by Elearner Engaged, Sam is on the verge of quitting his job because his co-worker Emma won’t stop acting appropriately with him. As the learner, you have to decide how Sam should respond to Emma with each new overture. What could be wrong with opening a jar of pickles for her? As Sam discovers, one thing can lead to another, and before he knows it, Emma’s cornered him into an after-work drink. Unable to deal with her, Sam decides to quit a job he otherwise loves. Make different choices for Sam, and he’ll set clear boundaries with Emma that let him find peace in the office—and keep his job.

The scenario expertly presents nuanced choices, then shows the consequences of each decision Sam makes. Because the scenario is so emotionally fraught and you’re put into the driver’s seat, it’s impossible not to be fully engaged. And if you get the sad result that Sam quits, the course invites you to try again, letting you explore how different choices impact the outcome.
Overcoming Objections

If your subject matter experts or clients question whether scenario-based learning is an effective way to convey voluminous content, you can assure them that there are many ways to share key material in a scenario-based course. You can:

- **Create information-rich, decision-making points.** For the anti-discrimination training, you could provide details on a relevant anti-discrimination law when you set the stage for the scenario. “In 1991, the U.S. government passed a civil rights law that states...”
- **Add resources or help links that learners can access if they need more context or information to make decision.** For example, you could provide links to a FAQ on your course player that detail key portions of anti-discrimination laws.
- **Use characters to provide helpful information.** So you could let learners click on an HR manager to hear audio or watch video of a real person explaining what behavior is considered discriminatory.
- **Create a virtual guide.** This could be a character or simply an interactive element you make available throughout the scenario. Learners could click on it to get tips and clues any time they need help.
• **Respond to decisions with content.** When learners make a choice, it’s an opportunity for information-sharing. When you provide feedback on their decisions, you can add content that underlines why each choice is a good one—or why it falls short. “That’s not a good choice because the current law requires...”

Whenever you build scenario-based learning, remember to “keep it real.” The most engaging scenarios are those learners can relate to in a personal way. If you’re not sure whether the situation you envision is realistic, poll learners and subject matter experts about how and when they’d use the course content.
INTERACTION TIPS

- Let learners explore content on a slide in any order they want
- Use tab interactions to consolidate a lot of info on a single slide
- Use interactive diagrams to let learners explore hierarchical relationships
- Create interactions that let learners solve realistic problems they might actually face
- Turn images into experiences of discovery by adding click-and-reveal interactivity
- Try process interactions to walk learners through a process, procedure, or workflow
- Connect learners personally to the content by asking them what they think or would do
- Create realistic decision-making scenarios using free-form and drag-and-drop interactions
- Give learners nuanced choices when building interactive scenarios, and use feedback to reinforce key concepts
- Create scenarios that are realistic and have high stakes
- Sequence decision-making interactions so learners face additional challenges or consequences for each choice they make
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