Binnaz Cubukcu explores the largely untapped and interactive possibilities that occur when e-Learning meets hands-on experience.

SCENARIO-BASED
LEARNING

E-Learning is often designed to hold a learner in front of a screen for a set period of time: 5 minutes, 20 minutes or, in the worst cases, longer! During those periods, learners usually only interact with the screen. Imagine if, instead, e-Learning was designed to push learners into their work environments: to interact, research and problem-solve. Furthermore, what if e-Learning was designed for groups rather than individuals?

According to the University of Adelaide's Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD): *'Scenario-based learning is a methodology which aims to promote deep learning and awareness by involving learners in realistic critical incidents where they are forced to consider a wide range of factors, make decisions and reflect on the outcomes and what they have learned from this.'*

It usually incorporates the exploration of tasks, encounters with challenges, work-based role engagement, competence development – all worked through company values, communication style or any other corporate agenda point. In the process, learners must apply their subject knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving skills in a real-world but safe context. Scenario-based learning is often non-linear, and can provide numerous feedback opportunities based on the decisions learners make at each stage in the process.

Scenario-based learning may be self-contained, or it may be a part of a larger assignment requiring the learner to complete the scenario, and then provide a findings, reflection and/or self-assessment.

Large participant numbers can be reached cost-effectively and conveniently. Conferencing and bouncing ideas can be achieved online very successfully. Well designed scenario-based learning can also promote self- learning, facilitating a wider scope than the scenarios themselves. It can be used to facilitate dialogue between colleagues, to promote fact finding, to use analytical skills to turn the findings into inputs to the scenario-based learning flow. In this way, the learning piece becomes 'a part of everyday business', it 'feels natural'.

As Vashi Dominguez, founder and CEO of Vashi.com, Europe's largest online jeweller, puts it: "I know what I want to learn, I swoop in, do it, get back to my day job." Scenario-based learning not only allows this, it also steers less competent employees to realise what they do not know – and leads them through a learning experience tightly linked to everyday business.

When scenario-based learning is structured properly, it is not only more time-efficient, it can lead to better outcomes. It definitely prolongs the 'Ebbinghaus curve of forgetting'. Rather than learners remembering only 10% of the content 30 days later, it goes up to as high as 30%.

Is there a magic potion or a recipe for success? Well….there are certain ingredients but the success lies entirely in the hands of the learning designer. Just as the same recipe will taste differently in the hands of different cooks, the designs will be different from learning designer to learning designer. This is OK, since the design should cater for the business need and business impact and meet the requirements of the learners. In

that case, there can never be one solution or a wrong one.

By keeping the following ingredients in mind while designing a scenario-based learning, you will be well on your way.

There are three important things to always keep in mind:

1. CHOOSING APPROPRIATE TOPICS:

a. Identify the learning outcomes: It is important to identify what it is you want learners to achieve on completion of the scenario, and then to work backwards from the learning outcomes to create the situation that will lead to this learning. Identifying learning outcomes may not be the easiest task but once done properly it helps determine the right learning solution mix. The trick is to involve business owners to state the 'business need' as clearly as possible and agree on whether learning should be a part of achieving the 'business impact'. Once agreed, identifying learning outcomes become comparably easier.

b. Choosing a topic: Remember that non-routine tasks tend to lend themselves to scenario-based learning. Consider using 'critical incidents' and challenging situations that have occurred in your subject area. Each learning situation has its own psychology and the choice of media can either support learning or do the opposite. If a topic is too complex, it should be rethought twice before deciding on a scenario-based learning. On the other hand it might be an idea to have scenario-based learning as a part of the blend for that specific complex topic. It is about what the topic is and how it makes people feel. The second thing to consider is 'richness' of interaction. How much interaction does the topic require? Can the scenario-based learning provide the required level of interaction?

2. GATHERING THE RIGHT CONTENT:

a. Identify the trigger event or situation: This will be the starting point of your scenario. As you create the scenario, identify decision points and key areas for feedback and reflection. Creating a storyboard is an effective way to do this. Working with subject matter experts might prove to be challenging at times. That is why you should have the learning architecture very clearly mapped out and expectations clearly stated. You would need to have these to keep the subject matter experts within the frame. One of the possibilities scenario-based learning gives us is that one can simulate real life online while pushing some tasks to be done offline. The trick is to find the trigger events or situations where it will make sense for the learner to leave their

desks, do some investigation, talk to some people, do some work, analyse their findings and feed this into the scenario to move forward. Although many people think 'content is king' in scenario-based learning, the way the learners are steered to find and identify the relevant content is 'the emperor'.

3. CREATING A CHALLENGING INTERFACE:

a. Decide on your format: Is your scenario going to be delivered in the face-to-face or online environments or both? What media (photographs, audio, video) and other resources will you need? If you are using an online scenario, will you provide other supporting activities, such as wikis, discussion forums, etc.? What is the role of the facilitator if they are used? How would you make certain messages consistent? Which media can help you keep both consistency and quality? As you can sense from all these questions, scenario based learning can be a stand-alone online course, a part of a face-to-face training or part of a blended learning experience. Using scenario-based learning in a face-to-face training can be very strong depending on the design or it can be a better version of a case study.

That is why learning need, topic, content and format selection are key to the success. But, format selection is not enough. It has to be designed well to make sure it has the right structure, right flow, good balance of different media and methods. The interaction of all these components and the way content is woven into this is done by learning designers. One of the key things I have learned through experience is the importance of using 'gaming principles' in the design. I don't mean that you should turn your scenario into a game or a game-based learning. What I am saying is that there are certain 'gaming principles' which makes a scenario-based learning strong. They offer you possibilities to hold the learner's attention. If we say 'scenario-based learning' makes it stick for the learners, a good application of 'gaming principles' within the learning design engages learners better and for longer.

b. Peer review your scenario: Ask colleagues to work through the scenario to ensure that it flows in the way you expect, and achieves the outcomes you intended. Testing the scenario with people who are not involved in the creation or production

processes provides invaluable information.

To summarise:

• Be clear about the business need and business impact

• Once that's clear, look into the content and target group

• Then make your decision whether it should be a scenario-based learning

• Create a flow which will show how to work with the content

• Work with subject matter experts/content specialists to create the scenarios

• Production and testing...use different people to test the scenarios during production when possible

Keep in mind:

• Involvement of the business owners is crucial to take the first step in the right direction

• A clear mapping of learning outcomes will get you closer to a decision

• A strong learning architecture will support you in the topic selection and content gathering work

• Use the suitable 'gaming principles' to make the design strong, and keep the users interested and engaged.

• Depending on the stages of the scenario-base learning and the topics, a specific competence can become more important than the others. Find them and highlight them. By this way, learners will see the relevance and appreciate the real-life links.

• Use people who are not already involved in creation or production to test the scenarios and the flow

• Use their input for adjustments

• If your design requires a facilitator/trainer, the required competences of an online trainer are generally not different from those of any other trainer

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