

10 Practical Principles for Creating **IMPACTFUL E-LEARNING**



By Ethan Edwards, Chief Instructional Strategist



While instructional design, technology, and project management are crucial, trusting your own experience with your learners and making practical and common sense choices is the most important element in designing e-learning that actually makes a difference.



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Intro

Instructional designers of e-learning face a constant challenge of how to create learning experiences that actually make a difference. Too many of the accepted and easy approaches result in e-learning courses that fail to motivate, engage, or empower learners. Sophisticated simulations and technically-sophisticated designs seem out of reach for many instructional designers.

While much can be accomplished in sophisticated development environments, rarely is it the technology that is actually responsible for the impact. Rather, it's the powerful design ideas that are grounded on some relatively practical and achievable principles.

I will share ten powerful and practical principles that should be implemented at any level of complexity to create training experiences that are transforming and memorable. (They are listed in no particular order.)

1. Don't list formal learning objectives.

Learning objectives are an essential element to inform instructional designers in coming up with meaningful interactions and valid evaluation tools. However, the presentation of these formal statements to set the stage for learning in an individualized module is, in many cases, useless. Few learners will actually read them, and those who do can rarely make sense of the overly-specific language used to craft objectives. Yet it's vitally important to communicate the intent of the learning objectives. Instead of these formal, overt, and easily ignorable statements, communicate to learners in terms they understand and value—express the “What’s in it for me?” (WIFM) in conversational language—and use imagery, media, and compelling storytelling to highlight problems in a way that arouses curiosity.

ACTION

Communicate the anticipated outcome as concisely, clearly, and personally as you can.



2. Let the learners take control.



Learning requires intention and effort. When e-learning interactivity requires nothing more of learners except for thoughtlessly following a narrowly defined path as a passive observer, it is unlikely that any personal change will occur. Decisions mean nothing; consequences have no impact; the lesson becomes something “to sit through.” It requires confidence in our training culture of tracking and learning enforcement, but turning control over to learners will always increase engagement. This can be as simple as providing choices in sequencing or deciding when to explore content, when to have interactions judged as complete, and even when to take tests. Be specific and rigorous about expectations, but then empower each learner to determine how best he or she can succeed.

ACTION

Maintain clear standards for mastery and completion, but put the learner in control of as many decisions as possible.

3. Design the end of your lesson first.

In almost all cases, an e-learning module should build to a valuable outcome. It is the culminating interactions/simulations/evaluations that most clearly embody the hoped-for learning outcomes. Yet many designers misplace their most creative design energy by designing linearly, focusing so much on initial content presentation (that has relatively little impact), and then run out of time, money, or energy by the time they are ready to tackle the interactions that will actually make some difference. This violates the way that Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) tend to share their content, but the actual presentation of information will have little significant impact on learning. The interactions will. Start designing the end of a module first. Create activities that truly display performance change. By starting here in sketching and prototyping, you will apply your most productive and creative design efforts to the part of the lesson that matters most.

ACTION

Focus your initial design energy on interactivity.



4. Talk less, do more.



Experience and analysis both tell us that learners don't read a great deal of the text that appears on the screen. And that which they do read is not read very effectively. It isn't until a meaningful challenge is presented to create the need for learners to seek out information or knowledge that they will engage in productive reading. That's why many learners' "best practice" is to skip through content as quickly as possible, find out what the questions are, and then go back to the content—not to actually read—but to extract the important bits. To counteract this tendency, try to get learners actively engaged in DOING something first. Don't present content as the initial learning opportunity. Provide just enough text-based content to help learners get started. Let the learners decide when to explore text content more fully to gather information for a specific purpose.

ACTION

Engage learners immediately in action; let each learner navigate content as they choose to.

5. Create real-life activities.

Experience in all modes of training has proven how important specific physical activities engaged in during learning are for improving retention and performance. This becomes a particular challenge, though, because the range of gestures available to the learner is so limited—learners can use the mouse to point at or click on a screen element or use the keyboard to type single characters or words. As a result, e-learning often requires the learner to do nothing but repeatedly perform meaningless actions that add up to nothing. The potential of media is to create purpose, both functional and emotional. When learners complete activities that suggest real-life behavior and achieve a concrete goal, they are more likely to remember and carry these actions to the job. This is the real win of creating simulations: practicing realistic behaviors in a goal-directed environment.

ACTION

Design challenges rooted in the real world that have concrete and meaningful outcomes.



6. Enable specific gestures.



Many e-learning lessons are created in which no more is required of learners than to perform generic gestures (e.g., click a, b, c, or d; click t or f) repeatedly. The problem with these interactions is that success can be achieved even when the learners pay no attention to what they are doing. These interactions that demand no attention simply foster thoughtless activity at the expense of meaning. Instead craft your interactions, including even simple questions, to require focused, specific manipulation of meaningful, context-laden screen elements. Better yet, make individual gestures build on each other to create specific outcomes that relate to problems the learner has experienced. Generic gestures provide no information to guide corrective feedback; the best you can do is judge “right” or “wrong.” Specific gestures provide explicit clues to help customize corrective feedback.

ACTION

Avoid reliance on arbitrary question-answering gestures; design specific, context-defined responses.

7. Don't be adversarial.

In general, learning is rarely nurtured in harsh, judgmental environments. E-Learning has the potential to create an empowering, non-judgmental sphere in which one can safely and confidently experiment and make mistakes. This process of making and correcting errors is essential for learning. Designers often undermine this potential by unnecessarily creating conflict and an adversarial tone associated with interactivity. The voice of the lesson establishes distrust and enforcement as the overwhelming emotions when learners engage in the lesson. Think, for a moment, how unacceptable a live teacher who leads by judgment and ridicule would be. Yet somehow, this is viewed as acceptable in e-learning. Instead, try to design your e-learning so its voice is helpful and empowering.

ACTION

Listen to the “voice” of your e-learning. Write to convey a culture of support, assistance, and collaboration instead of judgment and opposition.



8. Use Context to create meaning.



Generic or context-free learning presentations are hard to process meaningfully when learners do not already possess an understanding of the application and significance of the material. Learning can be enhanced significantly by presenting content in visual or narrative contexts that give clues to how new information or procedures relate to pre-existing knowledge, recognized problems or challenges, and meaningful application scenarios. Visual images are a crucial tool in establishing context. We process images more quickly and thoroughly than linear text. Use context-establishing backgrounds and images of what you are talking about. Use storytelling to build rich emotional context around the material you want to communicate. A narrative arc that tells a story, resolves a conflict, identifies people and personal needs and taps human emotions always enhance meaning.

ACTION

Use all of the design elements at your disposal to attach rich contextual significance to unfamiliar aspects of your message.

9. Avoid judging and scoring every iteration.

Testing creates anxiety, even in skilled learners, and anxiety interferes with performance and attention. Yet too often, the preponderance of much e-learning interactivity centers most on being tested. The point of each question is to assess whether the learner is “right” or “wrong,” not so much because that serves any teaching purpose, but rather for fear that otherwise the learner will not pay any attention. Unfortunately, being correct is a useful concept for final evaluation, but is sort of useless for learning. E-Learning interactions don’t need to always be about getting the correct answer. In truth, interactivity for learning is improved when learners can experiment with multiple outcomes, testing a hypothesis, and even intentionally trying to create a “wrong” outcome. These important learning activities are discouraged when the focus is so firmly on testing and scoring.

ACTION

Encourage trial and exploration in interactions.



10. Hold the learner accountable for learning.



Consequences are powerful tools to focus attention and effort. Consequences are not superficial punishment, but are impactful in communicating the outcome of undesired behaviors. When learners are not held accountable for their actions in learning (by being able to make progress in spite of failure, by being told the answer rather than having to figure something out, or by getting nothing more complex than “Correct” or “Incorrect” as feedback), they tend to coast through e-learning courses thoughtlessly, not needing to actually process lesson content meaningfully. Real-life consequences that are linked to learners making meaningful choices help the learners understand the tangible impact of this kind of learning in the actual performance environment. Experiencing the results of failure is so much more impactful than a figurative slap on the wrist for a less-than-optimal choice.

ACTION

Embed real-life, significant consequences in your feedback actions and messages and in each interaction’s judging logic.

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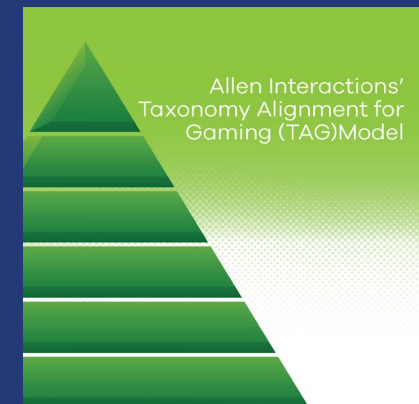
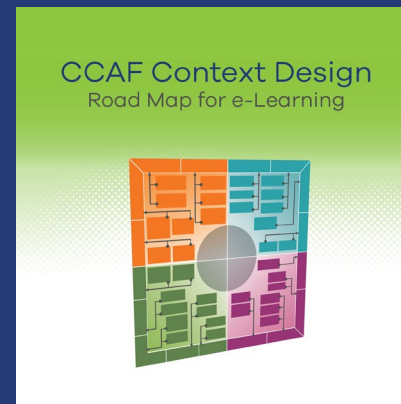
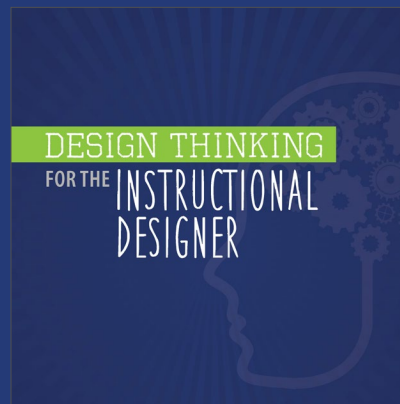
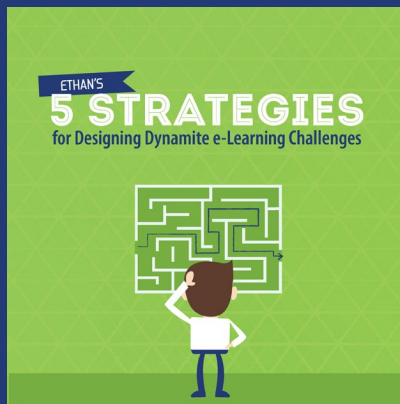
Ethan Edwards draws on more than 30 years of industry experience as an e-learning instructional designer and developer. He is responsible for the delivery of the internal and external training and communications that reflect Allen Interactions' unique perspective on designing and developing Meaningful, Memorable, and Motivational e-learning programs.

Ethan is an internationally recognized speaker on e-learning instructional design, is a primary blogger on [Allen Interactions' e-Learning Leadership Blog](#) and has published many e-books on creating effective e-learning. Ethan holds a master's degree and significant doctoral work in educational psychology from the University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign.

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