Online Training, the treasure within

B. Online Training
7. Learning by experience

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Content

Let's start

Experience can be used in two different ways to improve learning. On the one side, learning while experiencing something (in a very practical way involves us emotionally) and on the other side, learning considering the own learner experience as a foundation to build new knowledge, linking it with new concepts and helping to potentiate the new skills and competences that are being acquired. In both senses, the experiential learning is derived from experience, that is our own knowledge or practical wisdom gained throughout our life. This can help us to connect with new knowledge that now learners are acquiring.

Active learning makes knowledge that the learner is not aware of more explicit by reflecting, sharing, discovering, solving, etc. In a classroom, that kind of activities can be easily done. However, when teaching online, the learner is more autonomous. Furthermore, in asynchronous online activities, dynamism can be lost and results in boredom. In this chapter you will learn how to avoid those risks and make the most of the online education potentialities.

What am I learning here and why?

In this learning unit we want to introduce the concept of experiential learning but also to show you how to take advantage of the learners' experience to provide a rather successful and reliable learning, engage learners in a more active online education and help them to connect what they already know and their needs with your course.

By applying this approach, learning will become more enjoyable and fruitful by means of linking together the learner needs (that is their own past experience, current motivation, expectations) with an active methodology (that is very practical, engaging and applied to those needs).

What content will I find here?

You will get to know both main concepts: experiential learning and learning by experience. Usually, those are methodologies that are explained separately but it is good to consider them as a whole. You will also find examples and scenarios that could be transferred in your subjects, together with suggestions to apply this content to your already planned activities.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning is very effective as it activates the learner and increases the retention of knowledge. The most common method used during teaching is the delivery of information, that is providing knowledge and/or skills by transferring information. You can upload some materials in an online environment make a video explaining something or even make a presentation or conference about certain topic, but it might happen that the learner retains very few concepts after the lesson finishes. In fact, it is likely that the learner gets distracted

while watching the video or attending a conference, in this case, he/she will not even be listening.

☆ Most used methodology for online environments for novice trainers is content delivery, based on putting PDFs, presentations, documents, videos, etc. and expecting students to read/watch. If you only do this, you are missing a lot of eLearning potentialities.

Another teaching method is to promote the participation of the learner. That can be through exercises, questionnaires, discussions, or involving the learner with any content-related task. You will increase the retention of the concepts you are delivering, at least, you will force the learner to read/view and understand the topics you are explaining. But still those can be easily forgotten unless the learner connects those topics to some interest he/she has, or until he/she can put in practice the knowledge acquired to solve his/her needs.

Reading
10% of what we READ

Hearing
20% of what we HEAR

Seeing
30% of what we SEE

Watching and looking
50% of what we SEE & HEAR

Participating in a discussion
70% of what we SAY

Doing the real thing
90% of what we SAY & DO

Figure 1. Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience. What we remember?

On experiential learning, the teacher's aim is that learner develops knowledge and skills by practicing or interacting with other learners and the environment. Note that here the educational action is focused on the learner, as we are facilitating the development of skills and competences to be originated by the learner. We can help, facilitate and guide, but we should encourage the learner to practice, observe and reflect. If we get the learner to discover a solution to a certain problem, or reach a better understanding of a complex topic by himself/herself we will have succeeded in making the idea hard to forget.
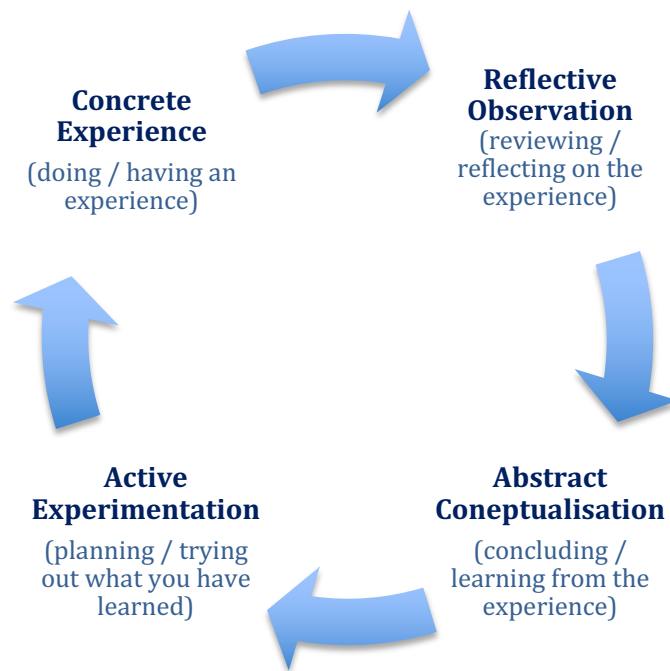
Concrete Experience

(doing / having an experience)

Reflective Observation

(reviewing / reflecting on the experience)

Active Experimentation

(planning / trying out what you have learned)

Abstract Coneptualisation

(concluding / learning from the experience)

Figure 2. Why, What, How, What If

A learning method closely linked to experiential learning is complex thinking and we can take advantage of it by learning about skills and concepts while we connect those with our needs and aims.

> "Complex thinking". A separate set of mental processes facilitates your ability to do complex, sophisticated thinking, such as understanding concepts, generating original ideas, and using logical approaches to address complicated problems.

We should try that the learner does not memorise concepts, formulas or ideas, but to make a deeper learning, that is apply those concepts. Instead of repeating on deeper learning, students should learn to separate what is important from the irrelevant. Avoid duplicating ideas, explain information using your own terms, and use linkers such as "in conclusion", "but nevertheless", and "this" and can summarise. Now, it is time to understand not only "what" or "when" but also "why" "how" and "what if".

Experiential learning

One of the andragogical principles proposes taking into consideration learners' experience, that is their life background, prior knowledge as well as existing needs and requirements. It is important to build a target or a vision about how we want ourselves in the future as that would help us to increase our motivation. Existing experience can be used as grounding to build new knowledge. We could include here positive aspects of our experience, that is existing expertise, skills and capacities that help us to build new skills connecting and linking with our existing capacities, but also weaknesses such as needs, errors, misunderstanding or any problem / challenge that happened in the past.

The andragogical approach that uses learners' experiences is founded on the fact that remembering and acquiring new skills is done more effectively if those are linked to and supported with existing knowledge and needs.

Therefore, as trainers, we should facilitate the learner use existing experience as a **resource and as a tool** during the new learning process.

We should promote the learner to make explicit that experience, and help him/her to make link, find similarities, or complements, help to understand new facts and contextualise. In online environments, where the main way of communicating is using text, it can help to reflect and clarify ideas.

Using learners' experience for experiential learning is closely linked to the constructivism learning theory:

Constructivism educational theory affirms that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, maybe even changing what we believe, or discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge. To do this, we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know.

On constructivism, the trainers act as a guide and facilitator. First, providing the basic information and resources about a certain topic, later proposing an activity with a certain degree of autonomy to the learner.

You can review the Andragogy chapter about the characteristics of adult learners. Here we will propose some experiential learning examples and practises as a way to fulfill adult learners' potentialities.

Examples

Experiential learning can be done individually or in teams. For example, if we are in a biology classroom, we can promote the student to learn about the differences on the ecosystem according to climate by going to any nearby park, observing the plants and insects, reflecting about what she/he found and comparing with a different park that has a different climate. Of course, during the course, some basic information should be provided, and the learner must be willing to try, observe and reflect. Other soft skills and transversal competences are necessary, as abstraction or analytical and problem-solving skills. Here the trainer can help the student during this process, but the main responsibility is still on the learner.

In some courses or subjects it can be difficult to have time or resources for testing or experimenting. Therefore, in these cases we could stimulate them in a scenario. In a course

about arts, let's propose the learner to explore some of the most important paintings, architecture and sculpture during a definite period of history and try to find similarities or common tendencies.

Case studies or challenges where learners had to propose a solution, projects to build or achieve some kind of product can be very experiential also. The most important aspect here is to propose an activity where to observe, understand, abstract, reflect and apply.

Even previous examples are proposed for individual work, when proposing online activities, the best results are done when we put together individual collaborative activities, involving teamwork. The main potentiality here is the capacity of learning from others, discovering new aspects we could not observe or understand, or finding new solutions we were not aware of.

Exercises

Firstly, promote activities where students will be able to show their motivation, needs and interests. This activity could be very useful for the trainer where they will get more understanding of their learners needs, but this should be also seen as a self-reflecting activity for the student, where:

1. Students will make explicit their experience and needs and help to clarify for future activities.
2. It will help students to join in groups of interests allowing information to be shared (as between equals), and also help each other (in case somebody knows more than the other).
3. On group formation processes, creating empathy and better understanding of the individuals help to create group dynamics, therefore, it is good for everybody to know other people life experience, their challenges and interests. Even those interests could be very different from person to person, it helps to find shared interests.

Secondly, plan experiential learning activities that follow the "Why, What, How and What if" process that has already been explained previously, notice the common points it has with the learning by experience approach:

1. The "Why" steps require first to explore the individual and group motivation and interests. The same happens with "What", as people has to choose or select, and that could be based on objective criteria or on the other side, with some degree of freedom by the learner. You will see later some examples and observe the potentiality of letting the learner to choose his/her learning path.
2. The "How" and "What if" let learners use and apply competences and skills they acquired during the course. It could be done individually or in groups. The learning should not be isolated to the course, making it extensible to learner life and also influence others, creating by this way supporting links.

Exercise 1: Group formation

Let's first try to find this answer, firstly individually, later it will be possible to move to the group "Why you become trainer? What do you like the most of it? What aspects would you like to improve?"

Notice that in previous questions we are trying to get emotional and objective information. In a forum let everybody to answer that questions.

Next step would be to facilitate the group formation, as so far, only individual information has been shared, but without purpose. It would be a pity not to use those interests. This is where experiential learning can be applied very fruitful.

Finally, to promote an experiential learning, previous information should be contextualized and applied. For example if the course is about pedagogy and just now we are in the chapter about quality assurance, students could link those concepts with the question they answered before "What aspects would you like to improve?", now adding more questions that each other could solve "How?". They can try to reach that better knowledge using the pedagogy learning materials and also other colleagues' suggestions.

Exercise 2: Stimulate

1. Share with your learners the lesson, add PDFs, videos, texts, etc. This wil be the basic knowledge for the next steps.

2. Depending on the subject you are teaching create a scenario, here are some samples:
   a. If you are teaching a course of business Management, a scenario could be "The manager of an international technology company focused on Hardware".
   b. If you are teaching arts, a scenario could be "you are an artist during the period changing from Gothic to Renaissance in Italy".
   c. If you are teaching Biology, a scenario could be "you have just arrived to the Amazon".
   d. If you are teaching English, a scenario could be "you have just arrived to London for work".
   e. If you are teaching Anthropology, a scenario could be "you are now living in the Neolithic era (4500 BC) in a cave".

3. Propose the learner to link the content of the course (you already explained it in step 1) with a specific context (step 2), understand and reflect about your text, environment, challenges, etc.

4. Announce a problem or challenge. More examples, linked with the scenarios described in phase 2 could be:

    a. The cost of raw materials is increasing, also the transport cost and salaries. You need to decrease the price of the product you are selling.

    b. The bishop that is asking you to decorate a cathedral in Gothic style, while you are convinced that it is an old style and the bishop will not pay you when he sees that all the other cathedrals are in a new and better style. How do you convince him now?

    c. Government is burning forest to create new fields looking for short term profit, how do we convince them it is a long-term mistake.

    d. You need to look for a flat to rent and go to work to find services. Which would be the basic vocabulary and context to make yourself understood?

    e. What kind of animals, tools, groups of people, etc. would you paint in your cave?

1. Let students try to find a solution to the question or challenge. You can help them or guide, but never provide a definitive solution. You can organize them in teams or groups, so each other can later propose new approaches or new perspectives to others. Challenges should not have a definitive answer but work on the process; that is abstract the key aspects of the problem, relate that with the course contents, apply and share with what would happen.

Summary

Experiential learning is a good approach for reaching course aims set by the trainer in his/her subject. Furthermore, you will get:

- More engaging activities, which is very important, especially when doing online activities where dynamism of face-to-face is lost.
- Learner will not only learn about the topic of your course, but he/she will apply those concepts practically and outside of the course framework. Very important he/she will apply that knowledge using online tools and services, searching and using knowledge that is on the net.
- Learners will be able to link concepts learnt with previous knowledge and current needs, increasing motivation to keep learning, creating networks among other learners and sharing knowledge.

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