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Learning through gamification, engagement: People or culture?

I met an old friend last month for dinner at a restaurant in historic Philadelphia. On the surface, the building appeared to be a bookstore, but it was actually a restaurant themed as a 1920s speakeasy. We grabbed a table and opened the menus that were pasted into old books. The rules were presented to us first, "This is the 1920s, and cell phones have not been invented yet. Your dining companion wants to talk to you, not the top of your head." We silenced our phones, stashed them in our coats and began talking, reviving the lost art of eye contact and conversation without the staccato of beeps and buzzing to interrupt us. It was an old-fashioned, meaningful dialogue between lifelong friends.

Some weeks later, I was developing a training module, and I thought back to this interaction. I realized we always refer to connectedness and attention issues as a problem of the younger generation, but I wondered if that is really true. As I am cresting toward 40 (not there yet), I am no longer that young generation. Yet, I too struggle with remaining focused due to the distractions around me.

Trainers have always faced the issue of engaging learners. Solutions presented each year seem to always sacrifice some essential element. Gamification is a method to bridge that gap. By creating a game-like atmosphere, learners are thrown into an experience where they must roll up their sleeves and accomplish a task. This type of approach combines a minimal use of direction, such as lecturing or reading, with a heavier use of hands-on activity and collaboration among players. This type of approach increases learner engagement and improves problem-solving skills through practice and the use of scenarios specific to a learner's job function.

When most people think of gamification, playing a video game is probably what comes to mind. However, gamification as a training tool isn't simply playing a game but applying it in a way that makes it informational and presents the information in a meaningful way to the learner. Types of games used for instructional purposes can range from online simulations to role playing games, listening games and even board games.

So how do we apply gamification to create an engaging learning scenario? The methodology of gaming comprises four pieces: story, strategy, score and support. If your game can fit into these four pieces, it's a safe bet it will be instructional and will engage learners with your message.

A number of people believe gaming can't really be used as an instructional tool because it isn't instruction; it's a game. That is an incorrect assumption. Let's use a specific example developed for refinery turnarounds. This board game for planning and scheduling teams gives players control of electricians, mechanics, operators and more to safely move through simulated real-world issues.

First, take the information you want to teach and create a story or a purpose behind the training. In the Maintenance Planning and Scheduling Game, learners take on various roles, simulating the dynamics of real-world maintenance work.

Once the story has been established, a strategy needs to be developed for how the learners will gain the desired knowledge.

The board game employs a role playing method where players work through a backlog of work orders, parts, interruptions and scheduling.

A score can come in a variety of ways and provides a challenge and feedback. In this example, players will get feedback if mistakes are made since the plant operations will be interrupted.

Finally, there needs to be support available to learners along the way. During the simulated workweeks, each player is a part of a team of six where everyone depends on and learns from each other. While this isn't a virtual environment, it promotes learning through communication and collaboration.

Gamification can be applied in many ways to promote learning through communication, collaboration and engagement. It doesn't necessarily take a screen to accomplish this as long as it follows the methodology of story, strategy, score and support.

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