Motivating Online Corporate Training

by Cherie Mills Schenck, MBA, Ed.D.

What motivates employees to complete online staff development training, or even take it in the first place? It’s certainly not cool flash gadgets or lots of graphics. And definitely not mountains of information piled on.

It takes well-designed instruction, starting with the overall course design. Trainees will be most motivated if the curriculum is customized to meet the individual company or departmental needs. There should be a high level of interaction with the instructor, with other learners, and with the material. The course should contain varied ways for the learner to interact with the material. There should be some on-the-ground instruction in addition to the online sessions, even if it’s just an orientation session. The student should be given an orientation on how to use the online tools.

Researcher John Keller’s* ARCS (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction) model maintains that in order for instruction to be interesting, meaningful and challenging, therefore motivating, to a learner, the design of each module or lesson needs to accomplish four things:

1. Get learners’ attention and hold it.
2. Make learning relevant to the learners’ needs.
3. Instill confidence in the learner that he or she can succeed.
4. Make learning satisfying and rewarding for the participant.

Many of the overall course design strategies and the ARCS Motivation strategies were implemented in some of the blended and online learning programs at LMU Extension at Loyola Marymount University.

The Telemundo program is an example of a company that had to quickly move staff into a new paradigm. Telemundo wanted to quickly train 24 individuals to write Spanish language content. The network had been purchasing productions throughout Latin America for years, but recently made a corporate decision to begin writing and producing their own shows. In addition, their audience had begun to move away from the TV screen in favor of the computer screen, so Telemundo had recently partnered with Yahoo for a strong multimedia, interactive web presence, which they needed to fill with content. Management really felt the shortage of Spanish language television writers, and discovered that there are virtually no Spanish language interactive web content writers to be found.

As a remedy, Telemundo held a world-wide search for promising writers and selected 24 top candidates to participate in a 24-week training program called Taller Telemundo, or “Telemundo Workshop.” There was an earlier iteration of Taller Telemundo at Miami-Dade College, but Telemundo wanted to tap into the talent found on the West Coast, and establish a presence there, so they began working with LMU.
The Telemundo staff is located in Miami and needed to be involved in the training every step of the way, so quite a bit was accomplished online from a distance. The training started out on the LMU campus in Los Angeles with an orientation and on-the-ground.

Taller Telemundo contains all five of the elements of motivating overall course design.

1. The curriculum is highly customized.
2. There is a high level of interaction with the instructor, with other learners, and with the material.
3. The course contains varied ways for the learner to interact with the material.
4. It is a blended course, with intensive on-the-ground instruction in addition to the online sessions.
5. The orientation demonstrated the use of the online course management system, and allowed for practice.

For two weeks, the learners were treated to guest lectures given by Telemundo executives and industry writers, producers and actors. The lectures oriented the learners with the TV industry, with the Telemundo network and its audience demographics, and the principles of TV writing, acting, directing and producing. The time spent on campus was important for team building and confidence building.

The online portion of the course was carried out on the open source course management system Moodle (www.moodle.org). The usual component of an online course, such as announcements, syllabus, Power Point presentations and readings resided there. But the core of the online course was the back and forth input as the students developed their script. Each week, the students had a new assignment, which they uploaded to Moodle. Each of the four instructors gave feedback, and the students implemented the instructors’ suggestions, and received even more feedback. This process would not be feasible using email, but Moodle time-stamped all submissions, kept track of all comments, and allowed instructors to submit scores. This of course required a lot of the instructor’s time. In fact, the course required four instructors. But the interactivity and the timely feedback gave the students the reinforcement they needed for continued motivation.

This blended learning program was very expensive to implement because in order to get everyone physically in the same place at the same time, we had to fly in and house the trainers and speakers, as well as some of the trainees. It may be possible, in some situations and with advance planning, to combine training with an event that would bring everyone from a company together anyway, such as a corporate retreat or an industry conference. If that’s just not possible, then another option is to hold a webinar or video conference, which is the tool LMU chose for the Promise Schools project. This example, while academic in nature, is appropriate for soft skills training, like communication skills, presentation skills, leadership, management, supervision, customer service, and the like, skills that are needed across job categories, industries, and regions.

The Center for Equity and Excellence in English Learner Education and Research (CE 4 R) in the School of Education at Loyola Marymount University collaborated with LMU
Extension to provide in-service training to teachers and teacher leaders in schools working with linguistically diverse students. CE 4 R developed the curriculum for a series of courses that allow educators to earn a Certificate for Leadership in Biliteracy for English Learners through LMU’s Extension Program. This unique certificate represents an extensive knowledge in programmatic, political, and instructional issues in working with English learners. Courses were offered to educators across six counties in the southern California region, including participants from the PROMISE Initiative (Pursuing Regional Opportunities for Mentoring, Innovation, and Success for English Learners). Scholarship funding for this program was provided through a special grant from Bank of America. However, only one instructor was available to provide training to schools spread out over the six counties. On-site training was out of the question due to time considerations and the huge distance between training sites, yet this training required modeling, guidance and interaction that can’t really be achieved in a totally online format.

So a model was chosen that blends live videoconferencing with online modules. The videoconference portion meets once a month during the semester using Codian web-based videoconference software, linking the county offices of education. The teachers and one facilitator meet in each county office, and the instructor, Elvira Armas, Ed.D., meets with her teachers on the LMU campus. She leads the entire class over the network with brief lectures, Power Point presentations and video clips. Every 20 minutes or so, she breaks and mutes the sound, and directs members of each group to interact with each other and their onsite facilitator using focused questions, or prompts, as a springboard for discussion. Sometimes they work together to construct or evaluate a lesson, sometimes to write a poem or reflection, to discuss the lecture or video, or to share their own classroom experiences relating to the topic. Everyone comes back to the video class and Elvira often asks one or two participants from each county to share their outcome with the video class. This technique never fails to maintain the students’ attention, provides varied student interaction, and allows for an inquiry-based approach to learning.

One of the ARCS strategies that Elvira uses frequently in her lessons falls under the Attention condition. For learning to take place, the learner must attend to the material. It’s not just a matter of getting their attention, but to direct that attention to the learning needs at hand, and to sustain the attention throughout instruction, without either boring them or over stimulating them or diverting their attention away from the material. John Keller describes six kinds of attention strategies:

1. Incongruity and conflict
2. Concreteness
3. Variability
4. Humor
5. Inquiry
6. Participation

The Attention strategy that Elvira uses the most is inquiry. Inquiry as an attention strategy includes frequent problem solving activities and providing opportunities for learners to select topics, projects, and assignments that can capitalize on their interests.
Elvira provides opportunities for teachers in the class to create action plans for learning, including goals, objectives and action steps, select topics and reading, and be creative with projects and assignments so that it is applicable to their context, yet aligned with the goals of the Certificate Program. Some of these include writing their own lesson plans that they can use in their classrooms, designing parent education training modules, exploring student interaction patterns, or participating in group poetry-writing. The teachers love it and look forward to these activities.

Elvira also employs relevance strategies, which assist students in attaching value to the learning task and deepen the internalization of that value. She helps them see why what they are learning should be important to them. Six of the relevance strategies include:

1. Experience
2. Present worth
3. Future usefulness
4. Need matching
5. Modeling
6. Choice

Elvira frequently uses the first relevance strategy, experience, by building lessons on previous lessons so that new learning will use existing skills, by using analogies to relate current learning to prior experience, and she tries to relate to learner interests.

In the weeks between videoconferenced classes, students access the online portion of the course through the Blackboard course management system (www.blackboard.com). The lessons are designed to keep the learners motivated between class sessions. There are additional readings, videos and lessons that build on the material from the previous session, and build toward the next session. The learners are required to interact with the material by producing small projects, implementing it with their students in their own classrooms, producing anecdotal records, or reflective writing which they post to the discussion board, and receive replies from classmates.

Extension is involved in another consortium grant intended to boost skills for System Engineers. The consortium conducted a needs assessment to determine the skills that companies want in their System Engineers. Among the top skills identified were communication, presentation and writing. The companies also wanted training that their full-time engineers could take without having to take any time away from work. The consortium identified several courses from our catalog of totally online courses provided by Ed2Go, an educational vendor contracted through LMU Extension since 1999.

These courses are fully online, can be taken any time, anywhere. They are instructor-led, so there is some interaction with the instructor, a key motivational factor. There are clear expectations for learning, which reduces learners’ anxiety. Information is presented in chunks, which reduces boredom. There are regularly scheduled quizzes at the end of each module for reinforcement. A set time period of one week per module and six weeks per course keeps the learners on track.
This model is low cost, and is appropriate for the company who has only one or a few employees to train on a particular subject. The courses cannot be customized for the company or department, but is suitable for general soft skills training. Ed2Go courses employ many confidence strategies, which tend to focus on various aspects of learner performance in the learning process. These strategies are particularly helpful in preventing blocks that keep learners from engaging in practice and persistence. The five Confidence strategies are:

1. Learning requirements
2. Difficulty
3. Expectations
4. Attributions
5. Self-confidence

The Ed2Go courses all follow a similar format. Every course and module states the learning requirements so that students clearly know what is being taught. Ed2Go always incorporates learning goals into the instructional materials, provides self-evaluation tools and skills, and provides an explanation of the criteria used in evaluation. The material is usually sequenced in order of increasing difficulty, providing a continual but reasonable challenge.

The university contracts with Skill Soft to provide online soft-skills training to its own employees (www.skillsoft.com). This online training has the same drawbacks as Ed2Go in that it is not customizable, but has further drawbacks in that it is not instructor-led, but completely programmed.

Skill Soft does employ the five satisfaction strategies that affect motivation through management of the consequences of student activity and learning:

1. Natural consequences
2. Unexpected rewards
3. Positive outcomes
4. Avoidance of negative influences
5. Scheduling

It uses the strategy of natural consequences by simulating an environment that lets students use their skills in realistic settings. It sprinkles in self-check quizzes, surprising the learner from time to time with unexpected rewards, diversions that offset boring tasks. It regularly offers the positive outcomes like praise, helpful feedback, and motivating feedback immediately following task performance. Skill Soft, by design, avoids the negative, like threats, surveillance practices, and external performance evaluation when student self-evaluation is possible. And, frequent reinforcement is scheduled when learners are new at learning a task, but become more intermittent as the learners become more experienced.

When a corporate or educational decision-maker is choosing the type of online training to offer its employees an assortment of factors need to be weighed. Is the training designed for motivation? Points to consider regarding the design:
• Is there instructor participation?
• Does it provide for student-to-student interaction?
• Are there varied ways to interact with the material?
• Do the lessons get learners’ attention and hold it?
• Is the instruction relevant to the learners’ needs?
• Does the instructional design instill confidence in the learner that he or she can succeed?
• Is the learning satisfying and rewarding for the participant?

The other factor to consider: is the training cost-effective?
• Can it be used off-the-shelf, or does it need to be customized?
• Does there need to be on-site training or can it all be accomplished online?

The equation of motivation vs. cost needs to be carefully considered to determine the right choice and assure the instruction is well designed.

References


**Cherie Mills Schenck**, holds a doctorate in Instructional Technology and Distance Education from Nova Southeastern University, a Masters in Business Administration from California State University, Long Beach, and a Bachelor of Arts in Radio/TV/Film from California State University, Northridge. Schenck is currently Senior Director of Extension at Loyola Marymount University, where she oversees blended corporate training projects and online programs. She served as Director of Programs with the California Elementary Education Association, and has designed, developed and instructed 13 online professional development courses for educators. She served as lead consultant on the Online Zulu Language and Culture Resource project at UCLA Center for Digital Humanities. She is currently serving as consultant for the online Plato project, Center for Global Education at Loyola Marymount University.