

Bored to Death by E-Learning?

Why Gee Whiz Interactions Don't Deliver

And the boredom-busting approaches that **will** improve performance...



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What's in this guide?

Bored to Death by E-Learning? provides a frank analysis of the shortcomings of many e-learning courses.

It explains why the typical efforts of e-learning designers to achieve success and alleviate learner boredom are well-meaning, but misdirected.

The guide acknowledges that when learners are bored or disengaged, results will always be poor and performance will not improve.

It goes on to outline a series of approaches and techniques developed by top e-learning experts such as Michael Allen. Techniques also used by Pacific Blue's e-learning designers to ensure successful courses that improve organisational performance and achieve results.

E-Learning: The state we're in

Here at Pacific Blue, we like to tell it like it is. And in our honest opinion, most e-learning is boring. Deathly boring.

The standard response of most e-learning suppliers to that concern? Usually one of three things. Make it **engaging**. Make it **stimulating**. Make it **interactive**.

That's what you need to focus on, they will tell you, to stop it from being boring.

And what do they mean by engaging, stimulating and interactive? Well lots of gee whizz things you can do with your typical e-learning development tool: create multiple choice and true-false questions, develop quizzes, make it so that objects on the screen can be dragged and dropped. Throw in some animation, audio and video clips for good measure. Hey presto, e-learning that is not boring.

Why engaging, stimulating and interactive isn't enough

Perhaps they should talk to Gloria Gery, an expert who knows a thing or two about e-learning. She tells the story of reviewing a piece of e-learning with all manner of features like those just described. No expense had been spared to wow the learners and (allegedly) stop them from being bored.

The problem? Within a few minutes of starting the programme, she **was** bored. Despite the high quality video production and the almost Disney-like animations, she was bored. Rigid.

There was no *genuine* interactivity. No *genuine* opportunity for learning. Just a linear series of text screens with lots of gee whizz multimedia and features.

The Law of Diminishing Astonishment

Gloria, by the way, came up with "The Law of Diminishing Astonishment". This law states that any new technology, tool or visual effect quickly becomes the baseline.

What initially amazes people, quickly becomes the new expectation. This law requires we continue to up the ante, in our mistaken belief that this will keep learners attentive and involved.

And there's the problem. You can spend all your time and money on gee whizz features, but in the end, your learners will still be bored. Plain and simple.

Is there an alternative?

So if gee whizz features really aren't the answer, what are the alternatives?

What we call boredom-busters. These are approaches, principles and techniques developed and used by the top experts in the e-learning world, but rarely applied by your average e-learning developer.

Are they more expensive than existing approaches? Not at all. In many cases these boredom-busting techniques can be cheaper than gee whizzery.

Are they complex to understand and apply? Definitely not.

Will they create more effective and enjoyable e-learning? Almost certainly.

Will they help learners and organisations see the real power and benefit of e-learning? Most definitely.

What's next?

Let's take a look at the top three of these expert-developed boredom-busters. The things that can make all the difference. But the very things frequently missing from a typical piece of e-learning.

Boredom buster 1: Avoid content-centred design

Make no mistake, we know about the importance of content. It needs to be clear. It needs to be relevant. It needs to be concise.

In short, quality content **must** be a critical part of any successful learning experience.

But when it comes to creating e-learning, too much focus on content can steer you in entirely the wrong direction. Focus too much on content and your e-learning ends up like an e-book or a dull PowerPoint presentation. A series of well-organised, linear screens that your learners have to plough their way through.

Which quickly leads to an obsession with gee whizz features. If only, the thinking goes, some of those dull screens could be livened up with a bit of interactivity and some really nice multimedia. Give the learners **something to do** every few screens. Make it attractive to look at. Provide some gee whizz features, rather than just have them reading text.

But adding gee whizz features is addressing the wrong problem. The mistaken belief that, at heart, it's okay for e-learning to be like reading an e-book or viewing a PowerPoint presentation. The mistaken belief that because reading online **is** hard work, all we need to do is make it more entertaining.

Taking an e-learning course should not be remotely like reading a book or viewing a presentation. It should be a learner-centred experience, putting their interests at the heart of the course.

It should be about learning that is meaningful, memorable and motivating...

Boredom-buster 2: Make it meaningful, memorable and motivating

You spend hundreds of hours and thousands of pounds developing an e-learning course. You and your team feel a great sense of achievement.

Then your learners take the course and complain about being bored. Worse still, you discover it has little or no measurable impact on improving performance.

If this has happened to you, your e-learning is almost certainly missing one or all of the three Ms: meaningful, memorable and motivating.

Meaningful

When a learning event is not meaningful, learners will struggle to maintain focus, practice sufficiently or apply their learning beyond the event.

To make it meaningful, the content needs to make sense to your learner. It needs to build on their current knowledge and skills.

The outcomes you expect to achieve need to have meaning to your learners in the context of their jobs or their lives.

In short, *meaningful* is the gateway to any successful learning event - e-learning or otherwise. Without it, your learners will not play their full part in the learning process.

Memorable

Learners forget about 80% of what they have covered within 30 days of a learning event. To help reverse this massive memory loss, a learning experience must make a lasting impact.

And this is not about making an impact through novelty. It's about using meaningful, relevant scenarios. It's about providing authentic spaced practice activities. It's about using genuine audio and visuals appropriately.

These are all devices which make a learning event truly memorable. Devices which genuinely help learners retain new skills well beyond the event.

Motivating

Ever enjoyed taking a course or attended a learning event, yet felt totally drained at the end of it? That's because learning really does involve expending energy, making an effort. Without a clear reason for breaking into a sweat, your learners just won't bother.

Motivation to learn functions on two levels. There is the motivation to take the course. Then there is the motivation to transfer what you've learnt into practice.

Most organisations can bully or cajole their learners into taking a boring e-learning course. Very few can actually force them to transfer their learning into practice.

Only a course that provides a genuinely motivating experience can do this. Only a course that recognises and removes incentives not to learn (or not to change) can succeed.

Without all three of the Ms, your e-learning is unlikely to be as successful as you want. Because the three Ms provide a framework for success. Within that framework it's easy to apply our final boredom-buster: the fab four.

Boredom-buster 3: Follow the fab four

No, not the Beatles or one of their tribute bands. But four key components that ensure e-learning courses achieve their desired learning impact.

And what are these fab four components? Context. Challenge. Activity. Feedback. Here's more on each one...

Component A: Context

There's a reason people say, "Let me put that in context for you". They want to help you connect the unfamiliar with the familiar. Context gives your e-learning a familiar point of reference. It makes things meaningful and interesting.

An authentic context provides a situation that learners can relate to and care about.

It could be a simulated work environment such as a customer service desk in a department store or a weekly team meeting in a law firm.

It could be a task-focused environment such as monitoring a patient's blood pressure or completing a credit application with a customer.

An authentic context makes learners think about the applicability of their learning. It sets the scene for an equally authentic learning challenge.

Component B: Challenge

A challenge stimulates the brain. It forces the learner to think about what they know already, process new information they are presented with and decide what action to take.

In the context of negotiating and agreeing a contract, a challenge might be to identify paragraphs in the contract which pose unacceptable risk to your organisation and to highlight the specific sentences you would change.

In the context of selling mobile phones, a challenge might be to ask questions of a prospective customer to find out how they use their mobile phone and recommend two handsets at different price points.

Well-designed challenges build on the context previously set. They require learners to consider various courses of action and select the most appropriate path.

Component C: Activity

A challenge for your learners means they need to take action. Well-designed activities will feel natural. In other words, similar to or (if possible) identical to the kind of actions the learner would make back in the real world.

Of course, e-learning does have some limitations in this respect. The best way to overcome these limitations? Ensure activities allow learners to communicate their thinking and demonstrate their abilities.

Most important, activities should allow your learners to make corrections and experiment with alternatives - just as they would in real life. Learners get most benefit from seeing how different actions achieve different results or have a variety of consequences.

Component D: Feedback

If you've ever taken an e-learning course, you'll have experienced this kind of feedback:

"Congratulations, that's the right answer".

"Sorry, that's not right. Have another go".

It's called *extrinsic feedback* and it's particularly unhelpful. Why? It gives no indication of what makes an answer right or wrong. It simply focuses your learners on winning approval.

Instead, you need feedback that demonstrates successful (or poor) performance. This is *intrinsic feedback*. It lets learners see the effects of their decisions or actions.

As an example: You are working through a scenario, learning how best to work with sales prospects. At one point, you have a prospect who is agreeable to a sales meeting. You decide to wait a week before arranging a meeting date.

The intrinsic feedback? During this week of waiting, your prospect has asked for several bids from competitors.

This is powerful, situational feedback which powerfully highlights the consequences a previous decision.

In conclusion: A boredom-busting manifesto

E-Learning is not about creating an e-book or a PowerPoint-style presentation and then livening it up with attractive graphic design, whizzy interactions, animations, audio and video.

Creating e-learning like this bores learners and fails to get results.

E-learning is a unique medium that requires different approaches to those used for writing books, creating classroom learning or developing presentations.

A handful of e-learning experts have developed and tested unique, success-driven approaches to e-learning course creation. Unfortunately, most of the e-learning industry has looked the other way, happy to churn out nice-looking, but fundamentally flawed courses.

Many in the industry seem to forget that e-learning is not about page turning but about, (dare we say it), learning. Gaining knowledge or skills you didn't have before. Doing things differently. Doing things better. Changing your behaviour. Changing your methods of working.

Achieving these results means creating e-learning that is learner-centred. It means putting learning in a context that is familiar and engaging. It means using that context to challenge you learners from the word go. It means providing a variety of tasks and activities to help them meet the challenge. It means providing feedback in the right way and at the right moment.

E-learning that really gets results doesn't have to be hard to create. It doesn't have to be expensive. But it does need imagination, creativity and a willingness to avoid too much focus on content alone. A willingness to reject enticing, whizzy surface features that, ultimately, don't do the job.

Next steps

Here at Pacific Blue we are passionate about using those creative, success-driven approaches and producing e-learning that gets results.

If you want your next outsourced development project to be a piece of boredom-busting, success-driven e-learning, then our free, thirty-minute phone consultation is an ideal starting point.

During this consulting session, we will work with you to:

- Understand and define your learning goals
- Identify how to best align those goals with your learners and their needs, and
- Suggest ways to make your course meaningful, memorable and motivating.

To arrange a suitable time for a phone consultation or just to talk through your requirement informally,

send us an email at: enquiry@pacificblue.co.uk

or

call us on: **0845 122 7102**, Monday to Friday 9.30 - 6.00.