

5 Ways to Create Tough and Engaging Online Team Tasks

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Creating team tasks are a real learning design challenge. At DynaMind e-Learning we spend a lot of time on brainstorming, writing and fine-tuning team tasks for every e-workshop we develop. It's worth the effort. Well-designed tasks add so much value to the learning experience and to the depth in which learning outcomes are achieved. Team tasks keep learners interested and engaged.

1. Apply problem-based learning principles: the focus is on “doing”. There is a clear distinction between case-based learning and problem-based learning. Whereas in case-based learning the problem scenario comes with a reading list and a list of questions to answer and discuss, problem-based learning starts with only a problem scenario.

In e-workshop team tasks I don't ask questions, I ask for a solution. The questions are therefore asked, answered and discussed by the learners as they work on the open-ended complex problem. Problem-solving is a natural process and it feels real.

I find that online, problem-based learning works much better than case-based learning. Problem-based learning is a total approach rather than a method and provides an excellent fit with adult learning principles.

2. Get your inspiration from real life. I go out of my way to find messy and tough problems that people face in the workplace. Then, together with a subject-matter expert, I build scenarios based on these problems.

The task needs to give plenty of opportunity for decision making. And – this is an important point – there need to be different perspectives on how to solve the problem. This is when team work becomes interesting. That's when people will also draw from their own experiences and where “sharing” becomes meaningful.

What does this look like? Here are two examples:

ONE: Take a performance management e-workshop for a group of supervisors. If they all come from the same or similar sector, make sure your scenario is one taken right from their workplaces. If not, write a more general one that inspires people across different sectors. Come up with a fictional organization with fictional characters – all sorts of characters, those who are easy to manage and a few who are more difficult. Just like in real life. Write a

complex story. Ask teams to do what it is they should be doing: identify desired outcomes, clarify expectations using the language of standards, agree on outcomes statements, script the conversations in which the manager would communicate these, script examples of genuine praise the manager should give the staff regularly, and so on and so on.

TWO: Or, take a project management e-workshop with the aim of building budgeting skills. Again, get right into the real world and describe a project in detail, provide the project document, describe the environment, give the tools and get your teams to work it out. This is how they build the experience in a safe environment, one where it's okay to make mistakes and one where they learn from others while they are trying to figure out how to develop a budget. They will also get plenty of feedback from the e-facilitator. This is a perfect dry-run for the real thing and very engaging for any professional.

3. Define a clear real-life deliverable. What are real-life deliverables? Ask yourself - what do we do at work? We write emails, draft plans, craft checklists, prepare presentations, write job descriptions, propose budgets, draft one-page briefings, prepare responses, complete forms, etc.

So – as a learning designer – unpack this work and have a very close look at all the tangible deliverables that are produced at work. This is your starting point. This is what learners need to “do”. Make sure it's a manageable deliverable for online teams: a 5-page report isn't, but a job description is. Short and crisp is key!

Stay away from asking for a discussion. Discussion is a means to an end. The “end” is a suggested solution of the real-life problem. In the process of getting there, there is a lot of discussion. It doesn't feel contrived – it feels real because there is a purpose.

Likewise, stay away from assignments that have a “course” flavor. If the deliverable isn't produced in a workplace somewhere out there, then I believe it should not be a team task in an e-workshop either.

TIP: To make the approach extra clear to the e-workshop participants, re-name your “discussion forums” as “work spaces.”

4. Design for collaboration rather than cooperation. Collaboration, not cooperation: the difference is subtle, but important.

Cooperating means working with someone in the sense of enabling, typically by providing information they wouldn't otherwise have. When online learners are asked to share their

experiences or answer questions posted in a forum, that's cooperation. Most online courses are cooperative, even though they are often labeled to be collaborative.

Collaborating is much more active. "Labore," from which the word collaboration derives, means work. It means actually working alongside someone to achieve an agreed outcome. This may involve changing our own individual approaches. Differing views may require negotiation to ensure all team members "own" this outcome.

Collaborative learning requires higher thinking skills than cooperation. Collaborative learning is connected to the social constructivist view that knowledge is a social construct. I believe true collaborative learning achieves much deeper learning. Learners talk about being "hooked" and "addicted" to logging in every day to check on progress made by their team.

This is what I'm aiming at when designing team tasks to be truly collaborative – getting learners deeply engaged and inspired.

5. Craft crystal clear instructions. Nothing is more off-putting than having to work hard to find out what you need to do and where you need to do this. The task should be simple to understand yet the problem challenging to solve.

So I make sure the e-workshop participants find their way immediately when they start a new session with a team task: here is the story, this is what you need to do (explained in clear, short sentences, step-by-step), here is the team you belong to, this is the deadline, and here are the tools you need to use to work in your team.

TIP: Once tough and engaging team tasks have been designed, it is important to hire e-facilitators who have been trained in supporting this approach online. The required abilities are different from traditional online tutoring skills.