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LMS e-Learning Implementation Podcast Transcript #3 *Developing Learning Activities and Simulations in e-Learning Content*

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Mary Kay Lofurno: Hello, and welcome to the 3rd edition of the SyberWorks e-Learning Podcast series. My name is Mary Kay Lofurno and I'm the Marketing Director here at SyberWorks, and I will be your host today. In this edition we are going to be talking with Dana Fine, Senior Instructional Designer here at SyberWorks, about developing activities and simulations in e-learning content.

Hi Dana, thanks so much for joining us today. How are you?

Dana: Terrific, thanks for having me in.

Mary Kay: You're welcome. Let's get started

Dana: In your opinion, what's a great learning activity?

A great learning activity is an interactive activity that engages the student's interest, requires the student to do something in response, and reinforces a concept in the course. Therefore, even though test questions can be reinforcing, they are not learning activities. Learning activities are interactive activities that help to explain concepts and involve the student with hands on learning. This could include all forms of drag and drop questions, one-to-one correlation, many to one correlation, one to many correlation, as well as interactive ordering of graphics or text and finally, maybe most importantly, simulations.

Learning activities that are simulations can involve the student and give him a safe environment in which to practice skills gained through the course.

Mary Kay: What are some of the things to consider when creating a great learning activity?

Dana: We need to provide the means for simulations inside online courses -- to provide the hands on learning that students need. Through clever activities that allow seeing the consequences of your actions on the model. We can provide activities that will help them retain the material in practice using the material. If these activities lead the student to greater understanding, we have provided not only an entertaining activity, but also great value for our online courses.

A great learning activity should provide clear instructions, enable practice of the concept in the course, use humor in a non-threatening way when the student performs an incorrect interaction, and provide an analysis of the student's performance also in a non-threatening way. I use the word non-threatening because no one wants a learning activity that is inappropriate or that uses humor inappropriately.

I worked on a simulation program for anesthetists and anesthesiologists way back in the 80's. The learning activity displayed a patient on a bed ready to receive anesthesia. Using two dials the student administered anesthesia and oxygen to the patient. The simulation displayed the vital statistics of the patient.

However, if you incorrectly administered the anesthesia, funeral music began to play and a text message "you killed him" was also displayed. This was terrifying and inappropriate though kind of funny.

Mary Kay: Oh my! You mentioned interactivity. Do you know how much is enough when it comes to interactivity in an online course, and how much is too much?

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Dana: Well it all depends on the subject matter, the course, and the audience, as well as the cost of developing activities. In a perfect world the learning activities would reflect the concepts learned and come at the perfect intervals to enhance learning -- say one learning activity per lesson. In addition, if the simulation is excellent the entire lesson could be a learning activity. The only time interactivity is too much is if the student feels that he is clicking the buttons all the time, and it's too much.

If it takes the student too long to finish the course compared to his expectations, the student may simply the learning activities. A good course developer learns how to gauge this over time, and it's a great reason to beta test your course.

Mary Kay: Thanks, Dana. You talk about simulations in your article. Simulations and e-learning have always been a hot topic. They are very engaging and if done correctly they can help the learner learn the material better and faster. I see lots of articles on simulations and gaming by educators, e-learning pundits, and e-learning analyst firms of this world about the benefits of simulations and gaming -- but are companies really doing that?

Dana: Well certainly some corporations and institutions like the the military are spending their money to develop this type of e-learning content, but it's still very, very expensive. I would say the majority of companies are opting for a blended learning approach that combines a variety of media and materials like online course, job aids, reference materials and other types of content. Most instructional designers I know, myself included, enjoy developing simulations and e-learning content, but despite all the industry press and buzz, more often than not companies are opting for this blended learning approach, because it's so much cheaper.

It's not that a blended learning approach can't use simulations but most companies have yet to be convinced it's worth the money for their own training use unless it's a situation where one of their clients requests it and is paying for it. There are no absolutes here. Certainly there are companies out there that elect to have simulations developed in their e-learning and of course we do this type of work at SyberWorks.

Mary Kay: Thanks, Dana. I just wanted to ask you that question because of the buzz around simulations and e-learning.
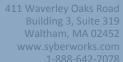
Dana: No problem.

Mary Kay: This is not a podcast about blended learning so I don't want to get off topic. In your article "Developing Learning Activities and Simulations in E-Learning Content," which is available on the SyberWorks website in the media center at www.syberworks.com/articles/dlactivities.htm you mention the use of humor in e-learning content development. How do you determine what is funny to a specific audience and not cross the line in offending anyone.

Dana: Well as I discussed earlier, humor is important, but has to be used appropriately. Students do not all come from the same background, and they come from many countries as well in our e-learning online world. You have to careful. If you cannot be careful, avoid humor. Adding humor to simulations and learning activities can be controversial. As the simulation developer you do not want to add any humor that could be perceived as offensive, sexist, or worse: unfunny.

To use a sales example that I actually discuss in my article, when the sales person is unsuccessful at selling his product in the learning activity, you would not want you customer video or simple animation of the customer, to offend the salesperson student. You want him to laugh and try again. Perhaps the customer morosely shaking his head and leaving the room, with text indicating how the sales call went dreadfully South, would be acceptable and could be done in a humorous fashion.

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You would not want this animation to be disturbing. I mean the customer should not shake his fist and yell for a restraining order against the salesperson, for example.

Mary Kay: Well that makes a lot of sense. You know, I bet it is tough to use humor in online training development. I know you need to be running along now so that's all for today. We appreciate the time you spent with us. Thanks.

Dana: You're welcome.

Mary Kay: And you have a great day out there. Thanks for listening.

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