ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

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Branching learning: when we use full immersion to learn

It is an eLearning modality that is still little used, but is among those with the highest guarantee of success. Here's how to put it into practice.

Does the desire to succeed in implementing a new type of learning activity necessarily have to pass through alternative methods? This is perhaps one of the biggest questions facing teachers and trainers who, as is well known, have been opting for new teaching systems for several decades now.

The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us even more about how decisive the use of devices can be in implementing e-learning, distance learning, continuing education. One of the most innovative methods in the sector is certainly represented by '**branching learning**', which we could define as a sort of full immersion in the digital lesson through a process that in Italian is defined as branching because:

1. The student has the opportunity to choose his or her own virtual character
2. He has the opportunity to literally immerse himself in virtual rooms
3. The results overcome the theory and become practical the moment the lesson begins

Putting the student in the driver's seat

In reality, each **student guides himself**, an approach that triggers a whole other set of mechanisms such as empowerment, well-considered choice of path to take and much more. A didactic approach that makes it possible to make considerable progress in the path of life beyond pure learning of a specific subject. Digital experiences of this kind can be approached in two different contexts that we see below:

1. At home, **individually**, but connected to a network for sharing the experience, thus enabling, once finished, comparison with others who have tested the activity
2. In a **group** that is physically together (think of a classroom or even the meeting room of a company) but each connected to their own device, equipped with headphones and a desire to learn something new and stimulating

Branching learning stories

A **'choose your own adventure'** scenario is, by far, the most functional as the learning activity is perceived as a game, something stimulating. The uniqueness of this type of e-learning is that it allows users to learn by experiencing the consequences rather than being told about them. One ventures, in the strictest sense of the word, into a story of which one not only does not know the ending, but decides what it will be through one's own choices. Just like in everyday life but without running the risk of changing human and professional relationships. A training ground even for everyday life. This is why it is a type of e-learning that is very popular with students all over the world and increasingly in Italy as well.

Which games work best

As has been amply demonstrated over the years, the best possible opportunities are those that implement **dialogue simulations** (as happens in role-playing games, for example) that tend to imitate reality, to capture in play what are everyday conversations in practical, real life. The relationship with scenes that show the real opens up a mental map that can develop depending on the actions between the interacting subjects.

Not only virtual reality

A further type of branching learning is represented by **quizzes**. Probably nobody would have ever guessed it but something as 'trivial' as a quiz is actually a learning activity based on the same mental structure. A correct answer can take you further down the path, an incorrect answer can lead to an information sheet with more details about the subject you are most deficient in.

What are the reasons for preferring a branching scenario?

Trainers are well aware of the secrets of this highly effective technique and they can be summarised in a few key points that we propose below.

Greater commitment. Instead of being literally overwhelmed by textbooks, students have the opportunity to make choices that produce circumstances. They are not mere observers, but active participants who have a vote. This triggers positive feelings and makes students invest in learning (both behavioural and emotional) even more intensively.

Better evaluation of mistakes. Branching scenarios allow people to learn from their mistakes in a way that other techniques do not. Understanding what real consequences the choices they make may lead to, or reviewing material they cannot remember, can help them absorb information more easily as well as memorise it more effectively.

Risk-free environment. It looks like real life; yet, it is not. In light of this, there is no possibility of taking a real-life risk. Instead of forcing students to exercise their communication skills in a real-life situation and risk damaging relationships with a customer, a hypothetical friend, acquaintance, it can be done in a safe environment, with the help of a dialogue simulator. The branching scenarios will allow them to see how their choices will affect their work performance and help them avoid mistakes in real life.

A different experience for each answer. This non-linear structure is what really characterises the branching activity. Quizzes often focus on checking comprehension and memorisation, while branching scenarios are about presenting realistic situations and asking for practical choices. Furthermore, quizzes provide immediate feedback while branching scenarios present the consequences of answers. This is a more indirect way of presenting answers, which allows students to better understand the outcome of their actions.

Is there a risk of getting caught up in the fake reality?

Absolutely not. The answer is quickly given. There is no such risk because those who follow this digital lesson do not do so with the intention of substituting their lives for fictional ones as can happen in online role-playing games. In this specific case, the approach is totally different: the lesson is of limited duration, with the objectives of intellectual enrichment and not pure entertainment.

How to start the activity

Before starting a **scenario storyboard**, it is a good idea to identify the objectives of the activity: what do you want to achieve with this specific action and with the training as a whole? It is important to add branching scenarios when they can really help you achieve your main objective and not just for the pleasure of creating something interactive and special for the team.

When we are certain that we have decided what the purpose of our storyboard is, we can proceed with the design of the different paths. This approach requires very good thinking skills on the part of the educator, who must hypothesise but also keep in mind what the possible final outcomes of the branching process are. In some cases, the different paths may intersect and lead to the same result, not a possibility to be excluded. It is also in light of this reason that it is advisable to use tools specifically designed for branching scenarios, which will help eliminate the most time-consuming tasks, such as creating slides, inserting images, copy/pasting text into different scenarios, and much more.

It is also necessary to select a realistic scenario that can effectively represent a typical situation that students will immediately recognise. The scenario must include several decision phases, with each choice leading to a new scenario and a new option to be chosen. There is then a further stage that cannot be overlooked at all and that is scenario testing. It is up to the teacher to try

them all out to see if they really work. To create an effective course, it is essential to navigate through the course and try out all the different options offered to students.

Where to find branching scenarios

Branching scenario models help students write texts that offer readers a choice and explore the consequences of different choices. As we have already seen:

1. They increase student engagement as educators can set existing scenarios for students to complete or challenge them to create their own
2. Encourage students to consider cause and effect in a range of contexts
3. They support students in developing critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving skills.

To retrieve some ready-made scenarios, visit the **NSW Government website**.

For further reading, also read:

- **How to use storyboards in eLearning?**
- **5 tips for writing eLearning storyboards**
- **How to write eLearning scripts with animated characters**

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