ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

Year 6 - number 228 Wednesday 14 december 2022

Modern Learners: who they are and how they are formed

The peculiarities of modern learners force us to rethink how courses are delivered and designed. How to design courses that are Modern Learner-proof?

Thanks to IT tools, it is easier for each of us to retrieve information and knowledge. These tools also bring with them more stimuli that, if unfiltered, can become an obstacle to learning: more distractions and less attention span can be a limitation that a good Instruction Designer must know how to deal with.

Who are the Modern Learners

Depicted among the frescoes in Pompeii is a girl with a stylus and a waxed tablet, a tool used by students to write and do exercises. The tablet, a wooden panel on which wax had been allowed to cool, allowed the user to engrave letters or make drawings; to erase them, it was enough to heat the wax, then reuse the tool. Two thousand years later, tablets are their updated version. The basic use is the same, if we limit ourselves to the educational aspect; the potential is incomparably greater. The difference is the programs designed expressly for education. The content provided in eLearning is nothing more than a reasoned way of making the user think: Course Writer, the author of the course, Instructional Designer, the architect of the course, and Subject Matter Expert, the subject matter expert, aim to **create content that captures the users' attention, interest and involvement**.

The interactivity of computer tools is certainly a valuable ally for this purpose, but it is so up to a point. The one for user attention is a bloody battle. The Roman wax tablet may have lacked functionality, but this was not just a limitation. On any computer tool, from the cell phone to the home PC, there may be several dozen applications or software ready to require frequent and continuous user interaction. The **modern learner** is yes that modern user, comfortable with technology, but also continuously connected to it. According to Lisa Owens and Crystal Kadakia's definition, the modern learner is that learner who is fully **immersed in an environment laden with stimuli and resources and, because of this, has the need to learn quickly**. The definition is not only positive. Speed of use and abundance of sources also bring problems such as reduced attention span and the problem of content redundancy.

Modern Learners and learning styles

It has been mentioned how **different learning styles** exist. Learners may differ greatly in their study methods, content enjoyment preference, and sensitivity to different stimuli: a simplified distinction distinguishes, for example, between visual or auditory learning, depending on which channel helps to retain more information. Students may then prefer reworking information in words, fixing it with logic or total immersion involving actions and notions. Finally, there are those who prefer learning alone or in groups.

These distinctions are very useful when designing and offering an online course. Marketers and Instructional Designers can get better results when they consider different learning styles to **create Learner Personas**. Instead of simply listing the different methods of assimilation, it is much more useful to personify these styles by creating fictitious personas that summarize the characteristics of the learners you want to reach: instead of thinking generically about those who prefer group learning, it is more effective to reconstruct their age, personality and needs. While there is less variety in the school setting, consider how different a 50-year-old man from Turin, a father of two daughters, a longtime employee, and a young recent graduate in engineering off-campus may be, even though they both prefer to compare themselves with others by taking a course.

The distinctions should be taken as guidelines, not rigid categories. This is because learning never takes place in a vacuum: numerous influencing and disruptive factors intervene in the course of education, which can distort-even for the better-the study and understanding of the notions received. A clear example is the contribution of technology. It is not to say that the student who prefers to relive learned concepts cannot do so via a computer screen, nor that those who prefer to understand using logic and reasoning cannot find interactive exercises and simulations to distract them. On the contrary: it is the main purpose of

eLearning courses to best engage all learning styles, regardless of the individual's preference.

How do learning styles match up with the figure of modern learners? From the description of the two research authors, it was found that the modern learner has these attributes:

- Processes data quickly, but not in depth
- Has a short attention span and distributes attention subtly
- Is highly visual
- Is easily distracted
- Is found in all age groups
- Uses more systems and devices than ever before and can quickly switch between them
- Is overloaded with information
- Forgets things more easily
- Seeks immediate gratification
- Expects frequent rewards

In essence, the modern learner is a person who, while juggling technology well, is in danger of being totally absorbed by it. One would be mistaken to think that we are talking only about young learners. Potentially, any age group can fall into this category, especially those who are still in the working world. The central feature is that, for the modern learner, time is limited: the amount of attention he or she is willing to devote to a piece of content is limited, as is the expectation for a reward. The answer to a question, the meaning of a concept and its implications, the result of a test-these are all outcomes that cannot be delayed too long, on pain of diminished interest. **The risk is that the preference for immediate gratification will hinder a higher level of commitment and long-term goals**.

Training modern learners

The peculiarities of this type of learner necessitate rethinking how courses are delivered and designed. In particular, it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that these are listless subjects or those with little determination. It may certainly be the case that some of these do not have an immediate interest in the subject matter, but the point is another: it is not the lack of initial interest that is the problem but the ease with which this can be distracted by another concept or activity. given these premises, the **priority is not -only- to capture the user's attention, but to keep it alive or to direct it**. There are at least two levels of action where action can be taken to this end: thinking about content and its usability.

Regarding content, the Instructional Designer can work accordingly to the attributes described above to shape the course by meeting the needs and frailties of the modern learner. In the face of increased frequency of expected rewards, more opportunities to earn them can be offered, perhaps with spot questions or micro-exercises during a lecture. The increased susceptibility to forgetting what has been covered could be addressed by resorting to **mnemonic techniques to be included in lessons**, perhaps interspersing what has been learned with appropriate **timed repetitions**. Information overload could be mitigated by the use of a minimal User Interface (UI) and graphics, along the lines of the design of many successful sites: the subject matter is open to interpretation, and a good Instructional Designer has all the tools to be able to assess the right balance between an engaging interface and one that allows for mitigating external distractions. If we notice, the major social media outlets have tended to adopt a simple, almost subdued presentation without losing the ability to hook the user. Speed of processing can also be employed as a strength, perhaps by subjecting the user to exercises of increasing difficulty and pace: as long as attention remains high, it is possible to try to pull the subject toward greater depth of analysis, although results may vary.

There is another, important feature of eLearning courses that can be decidedly useful in offering training content to modern learners. Having said that these are easy to distract, one solution seems to be to atomize courses into micro-lessons. What can act as leverage is to allow the user to choose the learning path to take and allow him or her to navigate independently through these micro-lessons. Well understood, the subject matter must be able to allow for a nonlinear sequence of concepts. The point is that by being able to decide to follow the flow of one's curiosity, the student will be more likely to have an active attitude in receiving the content. The micro-lessons themselves then, should contain brief cross-references and summaries to other related micro-lessons, so that they can anticipate a piece of content when interest and receptivity are still present, or support memorization of those already covered. With the **Learning Experience Platform (LXP)** approach, an eLearning platform can be adapted to meet these needs, allowing free navigation among the content offered.

Finally, if the modern learner is an easy subject to distraction, burdened with multiple electronic stimuli, it may be effective to increase the immersiveness of the course offered by going in the opposite direction: limiting the computerized enjoyment to a part of the course and linking dui activities to it in person, focusing on the actual hands-on experience.

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator