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Situated cognition and application to the virtual classroom

What is situated cognition and how can it be applied to a virtual learning environment?

Situated cognition is a context-centered **learning theory** developed by Collins, Duguid, and Brown in 1989. The authors contrast traditional training and education, which keep theory and practice separate, with an approach that combines these two aspects and ties them to the context in which learning occurs. To apply this method to a virtual environment, one must keep in mind the strong **link between theory and practice**, individual and group, as in **experiential learning**. Before seeing concrete examples of application to eLearning, let's see in more detail what situated cognition is.

Situated cognition: definition

In the theory of situated cognition, learning is closely related to the context in which it occurs: an activity, place, culture, social relationships. We learn within the context and from the context in which we live, so it is important to take this into account when preparing training courses.

These are the characteristics of situated learning:

- A lesson must be **real and authentic**, based on problems actually encountered by the student.
- The trainer must guide the inexperienced learner by giving him or her **space to reflect** on how he or she can solve a situation, becoming an expert in turn.
- The course must provide a **community of learners** where they can exchange ideas, impressions and learn from each other.
- The learner must also **practice what he or she has learned** during an assessment or self-assessment test.

The significance of situated is precisely the contextualization of learning.

How to apply such a practice-centered approach to online training? Here are some ideas.

Simulations and scenarios to deal with authentic problems

The best way is to start with a **realistic situation**, where the learner can practice different ways to solve a problem in a controlled environment. Simulating a dialogue with a customer is a great way to learn new sales techniques, for example. If desired, depending on the student's response, different scenarios can be opened up, bringing the story to an epilogue that corresponds to the choices made.

In order to apply situated cognition to **simulations** of an eLearning course, it is important to know how to tell the story (**storytelling**) by choosing realistic characters, as well as, of course, dealing with situations that you may actually encounter in the workplace, in the case of corporate training.

Video tutorials as expert support

At the stage where the trainer is supporting the novice student, it can be useful to make **video tutorials** so that they can observe and immediately put into practice what they have applied. Activities, procedures, and behaviors can be internalized by observing and repeating them in the workplace as well.

Discussion groups for self-reflection

The relational aspect is another of the elements that are part of the context in which and from which one learns. You can create a community of practice, the community of practice of situated cognition, even through the tools of your **LMS, learning management system**. Students, divided into groups, can use the discussion forum, videoconferencing or even social networks to share the training experience, find and offer an answer to doubts and curiosities.

Quiz for evaluation

An eLearning quiz can also be implemented in the form of a game or **branching scenario** to assess how much the learner has actually learned by putting it into practice.

Learner engagement becomes the essential ingredient to be able to apply situated cognition to eLearning. The tools you use can be any of those provided by your LMS, from simulations to discussion groups to the virtual classroom. The essential thing is to deal with authentic problems and push the learner to reflect in order to find a solution.

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