

Designing Games That Really Teach

Designing games and other creative activities requires a lot of planning and a solid understanding about training goals. But it also requires some fun and surprise to keep the learners engaged.

By Joseph P. Giunta



What is it?

Chris Clarke-Epstein is a professional speaker and consultant who co-authored the book, *The Instant Trainer* with C. Leslie Charles. In their book, they list several criteria for game design based on principles developed by Ed Scannell and John Newstrom. “I would add one more thing to their list,” writes Clarke-Epstein. “Games are fun!” But how does a trainer add fun to a game without sacrificing learning objectives?



How it works

Bruce Kuzmanich is a training manager and trainer for Joliet Junior College in Joliet, Illinois. He currently teaches teambuilding and problem-solving skills with Lego motorcycle kits, but originally, he started with puzzles. He used them to teach his students how to perform as a team, and he added an element of surprise to make it more interesting.

“I force them to go outside their teams in order to complete the projects by putting one piece they needed with another team’s puzzle,” says Kuzmanich. “Teams had to figure out how to get the piece they needed from the other team. It forced them to go outside their own team to be successful, which required negotiation.”

That is an example of how a trainer can incorporate fun in a meaningful

way. By adding unexpected elements to a game, learners are forced to deal with reality in a nonthreatening environment. The game is not a role play but an activity that allows people to be themselves.

This approach goes beyond role playing and puts the focus on learning. “People get flummoxed in role playing because people are threatened by it,” says Clarke-Epstein. “Change is hard. People will resist it,” she says. “If they resist it in a training class, they will resist it in the real world. I don’t know how you do training without having people actively involved.”

Kuzmanich is also cautious about role playing. “When you do a role-play activity, it is not really teaching you how to think,” he says. “It is teaching you how to act in front of an audience. Role players are often trying to get points on how well they perform.”



Guidelines

Games take a lot of preparation. “Lectures are easier,” says Clarke-Epstein, who believes there are four components to any game or activity:

- 1| confidence in the value of the game
- 2| practice
- 3| written instructions
- 4| a script.

Other writers such as Scannell and Newstrom have listed a number

of additional requirements which include being brief, using props, forcing participation, and being single-focused.

While all of these are important elements to a game, they do not provide a process for designing it. Sometimes trainers may not know where or how to begin.

Know your goals. Before trainers can design a game, it is necessary to know the learning goals it needs to accomplish. For example, a game to teach teambuilding should force the players to deal with issues they might actually encounter on the job. Kuzmanich brings reality into his Lego motorcycle activity by throwing in surprises such as an OSHA violation or a loss of power. These unexpected setbacks are designed to challenge the learners to think beyond the goal of the game or activity.

Resources:

- Charles G.L., Clarke-Epstein C. *The Instant Trainer: Quick Tips on How to Teach Others What You Know* New York McGraw-Hill, 1998
- Kroehnert G. *Basic Training for Trainers (2nd Ed)* New York McGraw-Hill, 1998

“While I put them in competition with each other,” says Kuzmanich, “the goal is to have a bike from every team completed by the deadline, not just one. Often, a team will finish first and fail to help the other teams complete their bikes.”

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When designing a game, trainers should use the principle of “form follows function” and create a learning activity that teaches the skills or concepts needed. This may seem obvious for soft skills such as teambuilding and customer service, but what about teaching computer skills with games?

Teaching Excel with food. “I use an M&M game to teach learners how to do charts in a basic Excel training,” says Amy Murphy, director of Corporate and Community Services for Joliet Junior College. She gives each participant a bag of different colored M&Ms and asks them to group their colors together. They then enter the number of each color into the appropriate cells in Excel where they convert their data into a bar chart.

Checklist:

With all these concepts in mind, a trainer should follow the following three guidelines when designing a game:

- ✓ Know the goals for learning and connect them to the game with some fun and surprise.
- ✓ Write out the game and practice it before using it in a training session.
- ✓ Debrief the game or activity to analyze what was learned.

“This teaches them how to learn to do a simple chart and understand the concept of creating one on their own,” says Murphy. “This activity ties together education and food. When teaching adults, food is a great way to incorporate games into learning.”

Other approaches to teaching computer skills use a treasure or scavenger hunt, which forces learners to find various functions within a software’s window. “There isn’t any subject to be taught that can’t incorporate a game,” says Clarke-Epstein.

Why it works

This approach works because there is a connection between the game and the skills participants need to learn. Without that connection, the game is nothing more than an exercise. Another reason it works is because there is a debriefing session at the end of the game. Without that, learners may not make the connection or internalize the concepts.

“The real value is the debriefing so we can use that experience,” says Clarke-Epstein. “Very seldom does everybody get into the debriefing part which is pretty astounding to me. This is why trainers get a bad rap. It never gets tied down to the learning part.”

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