



How to Deliver Fun, Engaging, and Meaningful Learning Experiences in Online Distance Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Using a qualitative action research methodology, this study sought to understand how to deliver a fun, engaging, and meaning learning experience in the online distance delivery of events marketing during the covid-19 pandemic. The study finds that despite perceived learning environment disruptions, such as unreliable Internet connectivity and competing responsibilities of learners, and disruptions in the events industry, instructors may still deliver a fun, engaging, and meaningful learning experience through animated storytelling and a challenged-based approach.

Key Words: Online distance learning; challenged-based learning

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and rationale

The covid-19 pandemic shifted how events and classroom experiences are being delivered. Both classroom and event experiences shifted online, which creates new challenges for both educators and event managers and more so for those teaching event marketing in the online setting. Teaching during a pandemic adds yet another layer of challenges.

In transformative learning literature, these changes and challenges, in what Mezirow (1978a & 1978b) refer to as disorienting dilemma, become opportunities for learners to find meaning and make meaning of their situation (Baumgartner, 2001). To facilitate this transformation within the online classroom, not only does the teaching approach need to shift, but so does the discussion of the subject matter. The problem or the research question in this context becomes: how do I deliver a fun, engaging, and meaningful experience to events marketing

classes delivered using the online distance learning modality during the covid-19 pandemic?

1.2 Context

I teach events marketing, and my teaching philosophy is learning should be a fun, engaging, and meaningful experience. Delivering a fun, engaging, and meaningful experience is important in my subject matter for two reasons. First, event management is in the business of conceptualizing, designing, producing, and delivering experiences (Berridge, 2012). Second, according to Pine and Gilmore (1998), we live in the experience economy and that consumption is experiential (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), which makes experiences central not just in event marketing but also in general marketing theory.

Furthermore, extant literature demonstrates how having fun, being engaged, and finding meaning are important aspects of learning. Learners having fun enhances learning (Lucardie, 2014, as does learner engagement (Armstrong, Hallet, Sherratt & Woodroffe, 2009). In



transformative learning literature, Mezirow (1996) argues that knowledge is formed by making sense of or putting meaning into past experiences. Making it fun, engaging learners, and helping learners find meaning personalizes and enhances the learning experience.

I describe my teaching approach as challenged-based, as defined by Baloian, Hoeksema, Hoppe & Milrad (2006) and Conde, Fernández, Alves, Ramos, Celis-Tena, Gonçalves & Peñalvo, (2019). In my experience, this approach enables fun, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences. In this paper, it is important to note that the term learners will be used to refer to both the instructor and the students. The challenged-based learning is a collaborative approach that involves not just the students but also teachers, parents, peers, etc. in finding a solution to a real problem (Conde et al, 2019). I consider myself a learner, too. The assessment considers the experience of all learners.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative action research that focuses on understanding student expectations, experiences, and evaluation of the course delivery. This study used two main research instruments: online survey questionnaires and a diary log.

At the beginning of the term, students were asked to fill out an online pre-course survey questionnaire that asks students to indicate their learning tools and learning environment, to identify potential distractions while learning at home, to assess their skills, to express their expectations on the course, and to define what success in the course means for them. At the end of the term, students are then asked to describe their learning experiences through a post-course survey questionnaire where they were asked to assess their experiences and performance in the course. I kept a diary to log my thoughts and feelings while teaching the course, and to record any notable incidents.

Most questions on the survey were open-ended to allow the students to express themselves freely. These responses were then coded and categorized for analysis.

This research was conducted through the duration of one term, between July and September 2020, which was also the first term wherein I taught the class fully online. The University moved the opening of the term to allow administrators, professors, and students to adjust to the requirements of online learning.

The respondents were students from two classes: Events Marketing and Advertising Events. Sixty-one students responded to the pre-class survey, while fifty-one students responded to the post-course assessment. Participation in the study was voluntary. All respondents provided their consent to participate in this study. They were explicitly informed of the study's rationale and that their responses will not affect how their performance in the course was graded.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Preparing for online distance learning

I prepared for the shift to the online distance modality for a period of one month based on the assumption that students will face disruptions, such as but not limited to Internet connectivity and distractions within their home living environment. I expected these disruptions to make it challenging for all learners to focus on learning. To address this, I focused on setting up a learning environment that would encourage learners to focus.

I use the challenge-based approach in all of my events marketing courses. For the online course, I shifted the goal, or challenge, to finding ways to organize, produce, and deliver engaging events online. This meant modifying the curriculum that I used in the traditional classroom. First, I condensed the coverage, focusing only on the salient and relevant topics contributes to addressing the new



challenge of mounting events online. Next, I developed new material that would fit an online learning environment. This included video materials that students can access through the university's learning management system (LMS).

I also decreased the course requirements to three projects. The first project required students to attend their first online event and create a video log to evaluate their experience. The midterm requirement is a group project wherein students produced their own online event based on themes and parameters specified by the instructor and were attended only by learners in the class. The capstone requirement is a group project wherein students conceptualized, promoted, and delivered an event online. It also served as a community engagement event as proceeds from the event were donated to a beneficiary. Students also chose the audience for this final events requirement.

I structured a communication system that not only makes it easy for students to communicate with me, but also contextualizes the communication. I used the LMS to disseminate course materials and official announcements. To engage students casually and informally, I used Facebook for most communication. I maintained a private Facebook Group Page to send out weekly reminders and instructions. For project-related communication, students from the same project group communicated to me through group chat so that I can provide specific feedback and guidance. For individual issues, students are encouraged to reach out through private messaging within school hours or through email communication.

3.2 Challenges in the online distance learning environment

Learners experience significant distractions in the remote learning setting as they face competing responsibilities, such as taking care of family members (38%), co-managing the household (80%), helping in the family business (33%), or taking on part-time work (25%). Some students have confided that their families were experiencing financial

trouble, while one particular student disclosed that members of his family fell ill with the coronavirus.

Many students (51%) acknowledged their inability to focus. While most students have the tools (95% had either a desktop or laptop), and a dedicated learning space (85%), students were worried about unreliable Internet connectivity (57%) and how the limitations of learning remotely can affect their performance (23%).

3.3 Students are motivated to learn, but need guidance and compassion

The pre-class survey intended to establish the students' motivations for taking the course and expectations on their experience. The general responses from the open-ended questions indicate that they are motivated to learn. Most students (81%) claim that that they want to develop knowledge in the subject matter.

All of the respondents expressed their need for compassion, understanding, patience, and consideration from me. They want the learning experience to be fun and engaging. Some of them have also expressed that they want their experience to be meaningful by helping the community and contribute to the pandemic efforts even if they were stuck at home. Here are examples of their responses:

"I expect my professor to be patient, understanding and engaging. I also hope that he shares a lot of real-life experiences so that we'll know what to expect if ever we choose the events industry in the real world."

"I believe that I would need your guidance ... I would also need your patience and understanding as we go through this course."

"[I expect my professor to be] considerate because of the situation right now, and to make class engaging and fun!"



"I am looking forward to the Online Fundraiser ... It's so also difficult to find an outlet to help especially since we are restricted to our homes so I'm excited to finally have the opportunity to help the community."

3.4 Students want to learn through challenges that they solve on their own

In the pre-class survey, a majority of the students (61%) looked forward to organizing and producing their own event during the course, and a third of the student respondents believed that succeeding in the course entails being able to apply the knowledge that they've learned.

In the post-course assessment, most students point to the midterm requirement and capstone requirement as the top activities that created the most impression. Some students found the midterm event requirement most enjoyable (67%), most challenging (35%), and delivered the most significant impact (22%); others, however, considered the capstone event requirement as the most enjoyable (24%), most challenging (55%), and the delivered the most significant impact (59%).

3.5 Students love storytelling, but want more engagement

Instead of delivering lectures, I told stories in class. Rather than focus on explaining concepts, I walked the class through the progression of events, from conceptualization to post-production. In doing so, the discussion focused on the experience, particularly how it is conceptualized, how it is developed, and how it is delivered. This is because concepts don't fully describe an experience, but a story does. In doing so, learners felt more engaged. Here are some responses from students that describe their sentiment about lectures delivered using the storytelling style:

"Include more stories! Very entertaining and enjoyable. Makes every meeting worthwhile."

"[Please add] more stories ... The experiences that [were] shared in class made me really interested more about events and connecting it with real world situation makes it more enticing."

"I enjoyed the stories Sir Mond would tell us during class, most especially with how he applied events marketing in real life."

Students value engagement. They expressed the desire for more opportunities to engage not just with the subject matter and the instructor, but with other students as well.

"I would like to see more class engaging activities, similar to [a specific activity in class]."

"I guess more synchronous meeting with short mini games to engage students. Have more sharing and encourage students to share [there] experiences."

3.6 It was a fun, engaging, and meaningful learning experience

The post-course assessment survey shows that students enjoying taking the course (88% strongly agree, 12% agree). Students also agree that they learned important lessons (76% strongly agree, 20% agree) and developed important skills (76% strongly agree, 22% agree) after taking the course. All students agreed that they were able to apply what they learned in the course (75% strongly agree, 25% agree). Most importantly, all students agree that they felt like a better person after taking the course (71% strongly agree, 29% agree).

While students considered the midterm and capstone event requirements challenging, these activities were also enjoyable and fulfilling because these projects were opportunities for them to collaborate with others and learn how to organize events online (35%), to adapt to and overcome the limitations of the learning environment (25%), and to learn how to facilitate engagement online (24%).



In the post-course assessment, students were asked, using open-ended questions, to identify the course material, lesson, or activity that delivered the most impact and to describe how this impacted them. Most students (76%) cited either one of the event requirements, while others (14%) cited a specific lecture. They found these impactful because they learned about online events (41%), they discovered the value of events (22%), they were able to make a difference with the community (31%), they learned how to collaborate online (20%), and they learned about themselves in the process (10%). Many students acknowledged that they felt a sense of accomplishment after fulfilling course requirements:

“I did not see [the capstone project] as a mere course output [but] as a Passion Project that my groupmates and I created. It was a very fulfilling ... learning experience ... [that] will be beneficial to me in the future.”

“We were able to organize an online event that would help others ... Completing the event [was] very fulfilling.”

“I felt that it was really challenging, but in the end, we were successful, and it feels really rewarding. It was my first time doing something like this and I do think it is a really great opportunity. It has taught me a lot about trying to work with a group, and there were many mishaps ... but ... we were able to deal with those things.”

“I felt like I was really able to make an impact on society.”

However, while survey responses show that the course provided a fun, engaging, and meaningful experience for many learners, some students have openly expressed that they do not enjoy taking virtual classes (4% strongly did not enjoy, 10% did not enjoy). About 36% of students acknowledged having difficulty focusing in class.

3.7 Self-reflection

The mark of good research is its replicability, among many other factors. The rationale for this particular research is to understand the factors that lead to a fun, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences so that I may replicate it in succeeding courses. Here are three actions that nurtured affective trust and improved the instructor-student relationship that contributed to a fun, engaging, and meaningful learning experience.

First, my lectures did not only serve as a learning delivery method, but also as a concrete example of the subject matter that I am teaching. I treated each lecture as an online event and behaved as a masters of ceremony during each lecture. This is to provide the students first-hand experience of what an online event experience would feel like. I kept my energy up and told stories in a very animated way. I planned for each lecture meticulously and employed the use of digital and tangible props, such as personal photos, music, videos, toys, event souvenirs, among many others. In modern events management, setting up the environment is an important step in experience delivery. Props and visuals help set up this environment and enhanced the stories I told in every lecture.

Second, I checked in with each of my students, especially in the very early stages of the term, in an effort to establish and nurture trust with them. I was intentional in being more understanding, extending compassion to students, and making sure that they know when and how to communicate with me. I recall a very important incident when I felt very exhausted—this was a couple of weeks after my father passed away. I also sensed that the students, too, were tired. Spontaneously, I announced a free cut, which I do not typically do in the traditional classroom. A few of my students sent me private messages expressing sincere gratitude for the brain break.

Finally, I was also explicit to my students about my own limitations, particularly about how I was also adjusting to online distance learning and how I, too, was grappling with the changes in the



events industry. I made it known that I did not have the solution to the challenge that I posed. I was explicit that I, too, was a learner in the course.

However, despite positive sentiment towards the online delivery of my course, there are still many areas to improve upon. Engagement is still an issue repeatedly raised by students not just in the survey questionnaires, but also in the casual conversations that I have with them before, during, and after class hours that I have with them. They have particularly expressed that they lost their ability to build and nurture their social circle, all of which take place face-to-face and in campus. They value opportunities of engagement during class, but these opportunities come far and few in-between in the online distance learning modality. The lack of engagement affects student performance in group activities as engagement affects group dynamics. Therefore, this is particularly an important factor to consider and nurture to instructors who use the challenge-based approach.

4. CONCLUSION

Learners face many challenges in an online distance learning set-up, including distractions in their learning environment and infrequency of engagement opportunities compared to learning in a physical classroom—and more so when teaching during a pandemic. However, learners can overcome these challenges and make the learning experience fun, engaging, and meaningful. Using a challenge-based approach has shown to enhance engagement amongst all learners, and it allows students not just to learn about the subject matter but also to enjoy and find meaning in the learning process.

5. REFERENCES

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