Animated Characters in Adult E-Learning Courses

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Introduction

Corporate America’s human resource departments are typically responsible for the continued training of their employees. With the slow transition from ILT (Instructor-Led Training) to online learning, human resource departments often face employees who have poor attitudes toward training in general. This may be due to lack of incentives, lack of time to dedicate to training, negative preconceived ideas about the training experience or fears of their ability to complete an online course (Hoffman, 2009). Whatever the reason, e-learning often stirs up negative emotions. The challenge is to redefine online training with engaging courses that create emotionally positive experiences.

The majority of online learning courses today are comprised of PowerPoint slides, Word documents, PDFs, video, or simulations. While these tools are functional, they may not be enough to fully engage learners and optimize their learning potential. How can developers create courses that motivate the learner to read, listen, watch, interact with, and absorb the content in each and every section? One option could be to use animated characters to create a media-to-human conversation where the learner is engaged both socially and intellectually.

What is an Animated Character?

Animated characters are computer generated characters that may be created to look like a real person “or an anonymous character with a real personality” (De Vries, 2004, p. 4). They are also referred to as avatars (Culbertson, 2010), character simulations (De Vries, 2004), animated pedagogical agents (Interactive Animated Pedagogical Agents., n.d.), or automated characters (Reeves, 2004).

Animated characters are used by companies like Geico and Esurance as online marketing tools and sales representatives. Pikes Peak Community College uses an animated character
named “Addy” as a type of help desk to assist students and parents with completing online applications (Examples | CodeBaby Web). Animated characters are also frequently used in online learning resources.

**Roles of Animated Characters in E-courses**

Animated characters in training courses meet many needs. They can emulate instructors, co-workers, bosses, subordinates, guides, or on-demand help desks. They give direction, have personality, are attractive, motivational, and empathetic (Culbertson, 2010). In short, animated characters create an emotional and social element not found in most traditional e-learning courses.

Humans are social creatures. In the typical classroom, teacher and student are able to communicate not only through words, but through facial expressions, hand gestures, and body movements. Animated characters, if properly designed, produce a similar social conversation to online environments because humans automatically respond socially to animated characters as if they are real (Reeves, 2004).

Reeves further notes that:

> With interactive media, people take turns in conversations, receive information personalized for the moment, listen to people speak (with written words, recorded voices, and synthesized speech), and give input that is expected to change the course of an interaction. These are all simulations of human-human interaction, causing people to subconsciously think socially (Reeves, 2004, p. 2).

As users begin to interact with the animated character(s) socially, they begin to expect the character to meet emotional needs, such as gaining approval and giving rewards. Since animated
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characters are, well, animated, they can “demonstrate desired and undesirable behaviors in an interesting and non-threatening way” (De Vries, 2004, p. 5). Their voice and mannerisms can be calming and relaxing or excited and encouraging; all depending on the choice(s) made by the learner. Well-written feedback motivates the learner to continue with the course and maximizes their learning potential.

**Match the Course to the Character**

When appropriate and possible, course developers should include more than one character for students to choose to use throughout a course. This accounts for gender, race, age, and voice preferences of the user. Similar to looking in a mirror, we tend to reflect what we see, and will often select the character that looks like ourselves or someone well-known and trusted. For example, vendors of GPS navigation systems recognize the need for human-to-media emotional connections by allowing the owner to select a navigational voice that is comforting and friendly.

Course designers should also build characters appropriate to the course content. For example, one probably would not create a 70-year old male character to guide college students through a session titled “Your first week in a sorority.” The overall goal is to create a character that is relatable, encouraging, motivating, empathetic, stimulating, humorous, knowledgeable, and trustworthy.

**Conclusion**

The use of animated characters in e-learning courses is still relatively new and little research has been conducted to evaluate the success of using animated characters. There are two important factors to consider when evaluating the user’s experience of an online course. The first factor is the interest and engagement level of the learner. This applies to all types of learning
whether using face-to-face tutoring, classroom training, hands-on training, watching a video, playing a game, or interacting with an animated character. The whole point of using animated characters is to engage learners and to capture (and maintain) interest.

The second important factor is the quality of the course. Using an animated character does not automatically make a course wonderful or engaging. An animated character can be as dry and boring as a real (boring) trainer in the classroom. The course must be designed and developed to meet the intended learning objectives, while providing the proper amount of entertainment, education, and interaction. It is believed, however, that using characters expands the learners experience from an information-gathering session to a social, intellectual conversation which, if presented correctly, may increase “memory and learning” (Reeves, 2004, p. 2).

In conclusion, changing negative perceptions of online training can be challenging, but not impossible. Tackle the challenge by considering the social and emotional needs of online learners. Re-evaluate courses that are traditionally taught in a classroom and determine which ones would most benefit from social interactions. Incorporating an animated character may be just what is needed to enrich the course and produce a positive online learning experience.
Works Cited


