Providing Feedback

We all know that feedback is a crucial part of learning. Even kids in school know about their successes and failures through test scores and report cards. Obviously, adults do not need grades to feel motivated. What they need is constant clear and immediate feedback. While it's hard to provide truly valuable feedback in an eLearning format, there are some ways to do that. For example, instructional designers may create short quizzes or "test your knowledge" activities after each segment or objective. These knowledge checks may be in a form of a question, or designed as a game or simulation. You may even consider breaking your game into levels, and have learners participate in the level that is right for them.

Before we delve deeper into the "how," let's pause and think about "why" corrective feedback is important. Adult learners participate in eLearning courses to obtain new knowledge and skills. However, the following questions often come to mind:

- What if the learners were not able to fully grasp the course content?
- What if their approach to taking the course was not conducive to distance learning?
- What if there was a lack of understanding of the initial content, which they then carried through the entire course, thereby defeating the objectives of the course?

With a formal corrective feedback mechanism in place, all of these issues would be addressed appropriately, ensuring that the learner can then take remedial action to fully benefit from the instruction.

However, corrective feedback is not just a one-way street:

- How will course designers know what they are lacking in course delivery?
- What alternative (other than filling out an end-of-course survey) do learners have if they need additional assistance with the content of the course?
- How can the training be improved if there is no feedback from learners about the challenge areas of the course?

Corrective feedback is therefore essential for both the instructional designers and learners. Depending on the type of course, the complexity of content, and the level of maturity of the audience, eLearning course designers may opt for one, or a combination, of these corrective feedback approaches.

Proponents and opponents of each of these corrective feedback approaches abound, and each of these methods has its pros and cons. It is recommended to keep the following best practices in mind:

- Corrective feedback should not wait until the end of the course. Instead, it must be provided regularly to be effective.
- Feedback should not focus solely on the "corrective" aspect. It should be balanced, also highlighting what went well.
- Before starting a feedback session, ensure that you understand exactly what you want to achieve from it.
- If this is purely an online feedback session, offer opportunities for the learners (via free-text form fields, drop-down lists, and check-box responses) to provide their own assessment of the course, even if that includes criticism of the content or design.
- Rather than highlighting the negatives ("You did not respond fully to…"), try to suggest how things could be improved ("Next time, try to elaborate…" or "Perhaps you could have done…"), and lastly,
- Always conclude with a positive reinforcement.

Include automated means for learners to assess where they stand by providing:

Confirmative feedback: Acknowledging that the learner has completed the required tasks (quizzes, assessments, assignments).

Corrective feedback: Notifying students where they went wrong, and why.

Remedial feedback: Offering advice/encouragement on how to remediate deficiencies.

Informative feedback: Sharing useful information about performance improvement.

Analytical feedback: Delivering rule-based/fact-figures based feedback on individual performance.

And, remember…

Each learner reacts differently to corrective feedback. Some may take it as a slight on their abilities; others receive it positively. Therefore, it is essential to avoid making the feedback "personal," and always offer alternatives. Be specific about what needs to be changed, and avoid criticism without having specific examples of what is wrong. Finally, always summarize corrective action needed, preferably with a timeline for improvement.