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Designing Motivating and Practice-Based Learning Experiences for Adult and Professional Learners

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Abstract

Professional learning is most effective when it is purposeful, relevant, interactive, and connected to authentic practice. However, many development experiences, particularly in online and blended formats, rely heavily on content delivery rather than learner engagement, reflection, application, and assessment. This applied, practice-based paper examines the use of Professional Learning Modules as a structured instructional design model for supporting teacher development, continuing education, and graduate-level preparation. The paper is grounded in a graduate-level assignment in which doctoral candidates create a digital learning experience for a clearly defined professional audience using the STAR Legacy Cycle as an inquiry-based organizing framework. The model is further informed by motivation theory, particularly the importance of autonomy, relevance, competence, and purposeful engagement in adult learning. From a curriculum design perspective, each learning experience requires candidates to align outcomes, content, resources, activities, assessment, and application tasks around an authentic professional need. Each design begins with a challenge and guides learners through initial thinking, multiple perspectives and resources, reflection, assessment, and practice-based application. Using the assignment as a case-based model, the paper identifies design principles that support effective teaching and learning, including beginning with purpose, designing for learner agency, using multimedia intentionally, supporting accessibility, and assessing learning beyond participation or completion. Implications are discussed for higher education, teacher preparation, faculty development, continuing education, workplace training, and online or blended instruction. The paper offers a practical and adaptable approach for creating learning experiences that are coherent, motivating, relevant, and connected to authentic practice.

Keywords: Assessment; Autonomy; Curriculum; E-Learning; Instructional Design