

Barbara Carnes

Making eLearning



Techniques for Easy and Effective
Transfer of Technology-Supported Training





Chapter 3

Techniques to Integrate Education (TIEs)

TIE: Action Learning



Action learning is a process by which participants “learn by doing”: that is, they acquire and apply knowledge through actions rather than traditional instruction. Research on action learning has shown that action learning programs are at least 30 percent more effective than traditional lecturing. Action learning usually involves opportunities for small groups of individuals to solve real organizational problems while at the same time focusing on their learning. Developed first by Reg Revans in England in the mid-20th century, action learning has evolved into many different forms. But they usually share these characteristics:

- ❖ Action learning scenarios present a problem, challenge, opportunity, issue, or task. It should be significant and important to the organization, group, or area of expertise.
- ❖ While the problem can be tackled by an individual, ideally a team of four to six individuals works together to examine and solve an organizational problem. The problem should be relatively complex so that it cannot be solved

easily or quickly. The group can be made up of individuals from different areas of the organization, or from the same department.

- ❖ The action learning process begins by posing questions to clarify the problem and then reflecting on possible solutions. The focus is on the questions and the reflection, which results in learning.
- ❖ The process generates energy and creativity best when action can be taken and results can be reflected upon. There is equal emphasis on solving the problem and unearthing the learning that occurred during the process of solving it.

Action learning can be used as an activity or key learning strategy within an e-learning course or live virtual training. For example, you may design your training so that the action learning project is used as application practice following the presentation of structured learning content. While originally intended for live teams, action learning projects can be adapted for an online environment, with a focus on either an individual or a team activity.

In a face-to-face environment, most action learning experts recommend a coach to guide participants through the steps of problem analysis, and lead the discussion of how the solution was arrived at. In a virtual environment, a virtual coach could be assigned to the team, or the coaching role might be rotated among team members. As an alternative, a series of coaching questions can be posed so that in effect, the training course becomes the coach.

To use with e-learning

1. Using focus groups, interviews, or surveys of management, identify significant problems in the workplace that would benefit from in-depth analysis and resolution.
2. Determine whether the project should drive the course or the course should drive the project. In other words, should the project be introduced first and the learning content—whether extensive or brief—be provided after the project introduction, as the means to the end? Or should the learning content be presented first with the action learning project appearing at a later point, perhaps as a capstone to the course?

3. Develop a description of the problem to be solved. While a simple text explanation may be sufficient, video recordings from key stakeholders or knowledgeable individuals will add depth and meaning. Hint: Take a video camera to the information-gathering focus group or interviews mentioned in step one.
4. Decide how to assign teams. Action learning is fueled by the synergy of individuals working together. An LMS or training coordinator could assign team members based on when they register for the course, or managers could assign teams based on a specific project or need that must be addressed. While it is not an ideal action learning scenario, individual learners rather than teams could work independently on projects.
5. Incorporate coaching into the action learning project. If a virtual coach will be assigned, identify key points during the project at which the coach should be consulted. Coaching questions can also be incorporated at key points in the action learning process. The questions are meant to encourage participants to critically assess the problem and their attempts to solve it. For example:
 - ❖ What assumptions are behind the definition of the problem?
 - ❖ What types of feedback have been given to each collaborator?
 - ❖ What seems most difficult, so far, in the process?
 - ❖ What seems easy? Too easy?
 - ❖ What has the planning process been so far? How is it working? Does it need adjusting?
 - ❖ What aspects of the learning content come to mind when reflecting on the project work?
 - ❖ What aspects of the learning content have been confirmed or observed here?
 - ❖ Are there any alternative solutions to this problem? In other words, what's the second right answer?
6. Decide what will be done with the results of the project. Action learning projects work best when the team is empowered to implement the

solution, evaluate results, and make any necessary adjustments. However, this may not be possible, especially in an e-learning environment. Given the situation, what could be done with the results of the action learning?

7. When the project is completed, the course can be revised using another problem or opportunity. The same principles of problem-solving and course content are used.

Action learning projects work best when the team is empowered to implement the solution, evaluate results, and make any necessary adjustments.

Adaptations for live virtual training

1. Determine the best way to incorporate the action learning project for live virtual learning. Several different action learning projects and teams could be supported by a series of live virtual learning events, or the action learning project could be assigned after content has been delivered, as a capstone of the class.
2. When describing the problem to be solved, consider your training platform. For example, if it cannot support video, try using photographs accompanied by audio clips (record a telephone conversation or VOIP technology-assisted meeting).
3. Live virtual training events offer great opportunities for coaching during action learning projects. Coaching questions and feedback could be the focus of live virtual sessions, or you may divide the time between content delivery and project coaching. You may also want to assign a virtual coach to step into this role during the training—someone who is knowledgeable about the project.

Downsides

This TIE may not be effective if:

- ❖ There is little interest or support from management for forming teams to solve organizational problems, or implementing their solutions.

- ❖ Project teams do not have the guidance, leadership, or self-direction to move through the problem-solving process.
- ❖ The training topic does not lend itself to action learning. Topics that may not be a fit include ethics training, harassment prevention, and “how-to” technical training.
- ❖ The training is being rolled out to large numbers of people, without the resources or opportunities to identify and solve problems.

Variations

- ❖ Use live virtual sessions for project team meetings, in addition to or instead of learning content delivery. This will be easier if the technology platform allows for breakout groups. Otherwise, learning content can be presented first followed by separate “classes” for each project team, with the trainer rotating among the classrooms.
- ❖ Develop an avatar to serve as a virtual coach as part of the e-learning course. This figure could deliver the reflective questions for consideration by the project team. This technique could be used in either an e-learning or a live virtual environment, but it may seem strange or impersonal when a live instructor is present.
- ❖ Have multiple teams work on the same project and have them present to each other, to compare approaches.

TIE: Action Plans



A popular end-of-training activity in many face-to-face and live virtual training classes, and to a limited extent, in e-learning courses, is the action plan. Participants make a list of how they plan to apply their learning. More detailed and sophisticated action planning tools include sharing the completed action plan with the participant's supervisor and other participants after training, listing obstacles that may interfere with completing the steps in the plan, target dates and milestones, and desired results. There are many different formats for action plans. A browser search on "action plan images" produces many different formats which can be used as models to develop specific action plans for different courses.

A trainer's focus tends to be on *where and when* in the training to use the action plan and on the design of the form itself. But what happens to the action plan after the training is over? Most are tossed away or left to gather dust, instead of being implemented. A few trainees may implement some items on their action plan, and an occasional trainee may put to use an entire comprehensive action plan, but frequent reminders and follow-ups by the trainer are necessary to ensure that more participants put more of their action plans into use.

Less is more when it comes to action items. An action plan that has more than seven or eight actions on it can be overwhelming and will decrease chances that any of the items will be completed. Three or four action items are ideal.

To use for e-learning

1. Develop an action plan form that is appropriate for the class. You can perform a simple browser search for "action plan images" to review various templates for action plans, and settle on one that is most suitable for your needs.
2. Toward the end of the training class, before the test (if there is one), provide the form for participants to complete. Depending on the authoring system capabilities, trainees may save the form to their hard drive and

complete them as instructed, or follow a link to an online form from which data can be captured to share with the participant's supervisor.

3. You may also integrate the action plan at various points in the training, perhaps at the end of each module. Show the master form on a slide and ask the participant to access their own copies of it and add their personal action items.
4. Criteria can be provided for selecting action items, so that participants' lists don't get too long and unwieldy. Ask them to write down only those action items that are given priority by their managers, needed for current work tasks, or most important for overall career goals.
5. Design a follow-up reinforcement strategy for the action plan. Options include:
 - ❖ Email reminders (via the LMS) to the trainees to execute their plans, to share and discuss them with their supervisors, or to print and post them in a prominent place.
 - ❖ A follow-up email with trainees' supervisors, prompting them to discuss the action plans with their employees.
 - ❖ An email follow-up with the peer, coach, or mentor designated by each participant. Contact information for this person could be collected in the class registration form or via a separate email sent at the time of registration.
 - ❖ If the action plans the participants submitted were captured via the LMS, return them to participants at designated after-training intervals: one week, three weeks, six weeks, and three months.
6. Require at least a certain number of action items to be completed before credit for the class is given. While this is more difficult to implement than simple reminders, requiring this level of accountability will strengthen motivation considerably.

Require at least a certain number of action items to be completed before credit for the class is given.

Adaptations for live virtual training

1. Post the action plan form in the virtual classroom or email it to participants before the training. Ask participants to save it to their hard drive where it can be easily accessed during training. Instruct them to jot down specific steps they will take after training to apply what they have learned. Tell them they will be reminded after class to follow through with the action items they listed.
2. If there are multiple sessions in the class, introduce the action plan in an early session and ask trainees to add items to their plans at the end of each session or at the conclusion of a particular learning point.

Downsides

This TIE may not be effective if:

- ❖ Follow up and reinforcement parts of the program are not implemented.
- ❖ Action plan reminders sent via email are ignored for various reasons.

Variations

- ❖ Participants complete the action plan at the beginning of the training—after learning the objectives—so that they identify how they will apply what they are about to learn. They can then revisit their action plans at the end of the training and revise as necessary.
- ❖ Instead of cutting less important action items from their lists, have participants prioritize them.

TIE: Do Now



A “Do Now” activity is a short, individual activity that may serve several purposes simultaneously. In live virtual training, it can occupy trainees while roll is taken or other administrative duties are dispensed with. It can also be used at the beginning of an e-learning or live virtual module to reinforce learning from the previous module.

The “Do Now” activity can be used as an icebreaker, closing activity, or “homework” (between live virtual sessions), but it should take no more than three minutes. It should serve the dual purpose of making constructive use of otherwise dead time for the trainee, and providing quick opportunities to reinforce or apply the learning. Do not confuse a “Do Now” activity with an icebreaker question. This TIE asks the participant to do something, independently.

“Do Now” activities serve the dual purpose of making constructive use of otherwise dead time for the trainee, and providing quick opportunities to reinforce or apply the learning.

To use for e-learning

1. Refer to the learning objectives for a class, and then list activities the participant can do on their own in approximately three minutes, to introduce, reinforce, or apply one of the key learning concepts.
2. If each module of the training is loaded separately, provide a “Do Now” activity on the last screen of each module, that participants can do while they wait for the next module to load. For example, consider a “Do Now” activity in the context of a multiple-module e-learning course on ethics training. The first module covers common ethical dilemmas in a particular industry. The trainee takes the first module, passes the quiz. Before proceeding to the next module, a “Do Now” screen appears and

directs the trainee to conduct a browser search on a specified search term such as “ethical dilemmas in _____ industry,” and to quickly scan the first article that comes up.

3. A unique “Do Now” graphic will help trainees recognize each “Do Now” activity.

Adaptations for live virtual training

1. Identify key points in the training that will be appropriate for a “Do Now” activity: a few minutes before the training begins, or as the trainer is preparing for the next phase of the training or pausing to address a problem.
2. When designing “Do Now” activities for the virtual classroom, keep in mind how the live virtual technology platform deals with participants navigating away from it. If participants must sign in all over again, do not use activities that require them to navigate away from the classroom.
3. You may refer to the “Do Now” activity at a later point in the training, but it is intended to be a stand-alone activity. Do not “process” the activity by leading participants in a lengthy discussion of it.

Downsides

This TIE may not be effective if:

- ❖ The trainer or e-learning designer makes it into a complex or interactive activity.
- ❖ It takes longer than five minutes.
- ❖ It takes the trainee away from the training module or classroom without an easy way to re-enter, or otherwise is not supported by the technology platform.

Variation

- ❖ Send “Do Now” activities via email to participants as supplements to the training. Most LMSs can be set up to do this automatically.