

# Learner Engagement for Learning Businesses

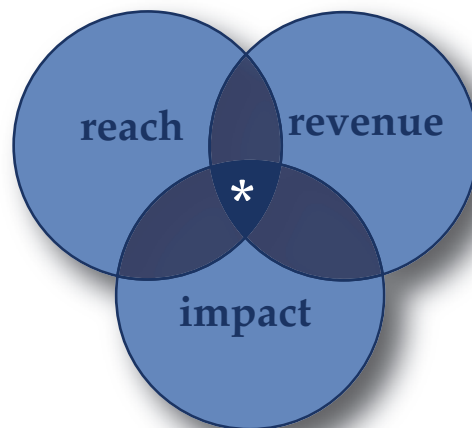
by Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele

Creating and delivering engaging learning experiences is a top goal for most learning businesses. That's because learner engagement helps increase the reach, revenue, and impact of a learning business, and successful learning businesses continually seek reach, revenue, and impact when setting and executing their strategy.

**Reach** is about connecting with as many of the right learners as you can. It is not just about quantity; quality matters too.

**Revenue** is the fuel that keeps your learning business running and growing. Even for nonprofit organizations, positive net revenue is essential.

**Impact** is what makes a learning business vital and sustainable over time. If you create significant value for—and show that value to—the learners, the organizations, and the market you serve, your learning business will thrive.



\* *learning business success*

Engaged learners are best positioned to realize the full impact of your learning offerings as they apply what they learn, to help you reach more of the right learners by telling others about your offerings, and to increase revenue through those referrals and by returning to you for additional learning products and services.

But what is learner engagement, and how can you most effectively cultivate it?

## WHAT LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IS

Learner engagement is “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that learners show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.”<sup>1</sup>

We like this definition because it recognizes the three dimensions of engagement:

- **Cognitive** (as evidenced by the use of the words *attention*, *curiosity*, and *interest*)
- **Emotional** (see *optimism* and *passion*)
- **Behavioral** (encapsulated in the verb *show*)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Glossary of Education Reform. <https://www.edglossary.org/student-engagement>.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Kahn, “Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work.” *Academy of Management Journal* 33, no. 4 (1990): 692-724.

We'll suggest approaches to providing learning that impact each of these dimensions, but first let's consider the conditions that make engagement possible for adult learners.

## WHAT MAKES ENGAGEMENT POSSIBLE

You've almost certainly been in a learning situation where there was a clear lack of engagement, whether for you personally or for other learners. Why?

Engagement doesn't happen when one of the conditions that make it possible is inadequate or missing entirely:

- **Meaning**, the sense that participating in a learning experience and the related effort are relevant and will provide a return on investment
- **Safety**, the sense of being able to participate as one's true self without fearing damage to self-image, status, or career
- **Availability**, the sense of having the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary to participate in a learning experience<sup>3</sup>

Learning experiences can be designed with meaning, safety, and availability present, thereby increasing the chances of learner engagement.

The table that follows outlines elements and practices that you should ensure exist in your learning products and services and maps them to the condition of engagement they support.

Conditions	Supporting Elements and Practices
Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant examples and practice opportunities</li> <li>• Opportunities to see or experience results and get feedback</li> <li>• Creating and resolving tension between where learners are now and where they want to be</li> </ul>
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy (i.e., those providing and delivering the experience understand the learners' needs and desires and are focused on supporting their learning)</li> <li>• Policies that make it clear privacy and confidentiality will be respected and mistakes are expected and valuable</li> <li>• Low-risk opportunities for failure (and thereby learning)</li> <li>• Emphasizing community (e.g., "We're in this together.")</li> </ul>
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chunking into manageable segments</li> <li>• Accurate leveling (i.e., alignment with learners' prior knowledge and experience)</li> <li>• Providing or making clear in advance what learners will need (required texts and supplies, quiet space, etc.)</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> Kahn, "Psychological Conditions." Cinthya C. Gutierrez, Sofia T. Baralt, and M. Brad Shuck, "The Integrated Process of Engagement in Adult Learning," in *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual College of Education & GSN Research Conference*, ed. M. S. Plakhotnik, S. M. Nielsen, & D. M. Pane (Miami: Florida International University, 2010), 33-39.

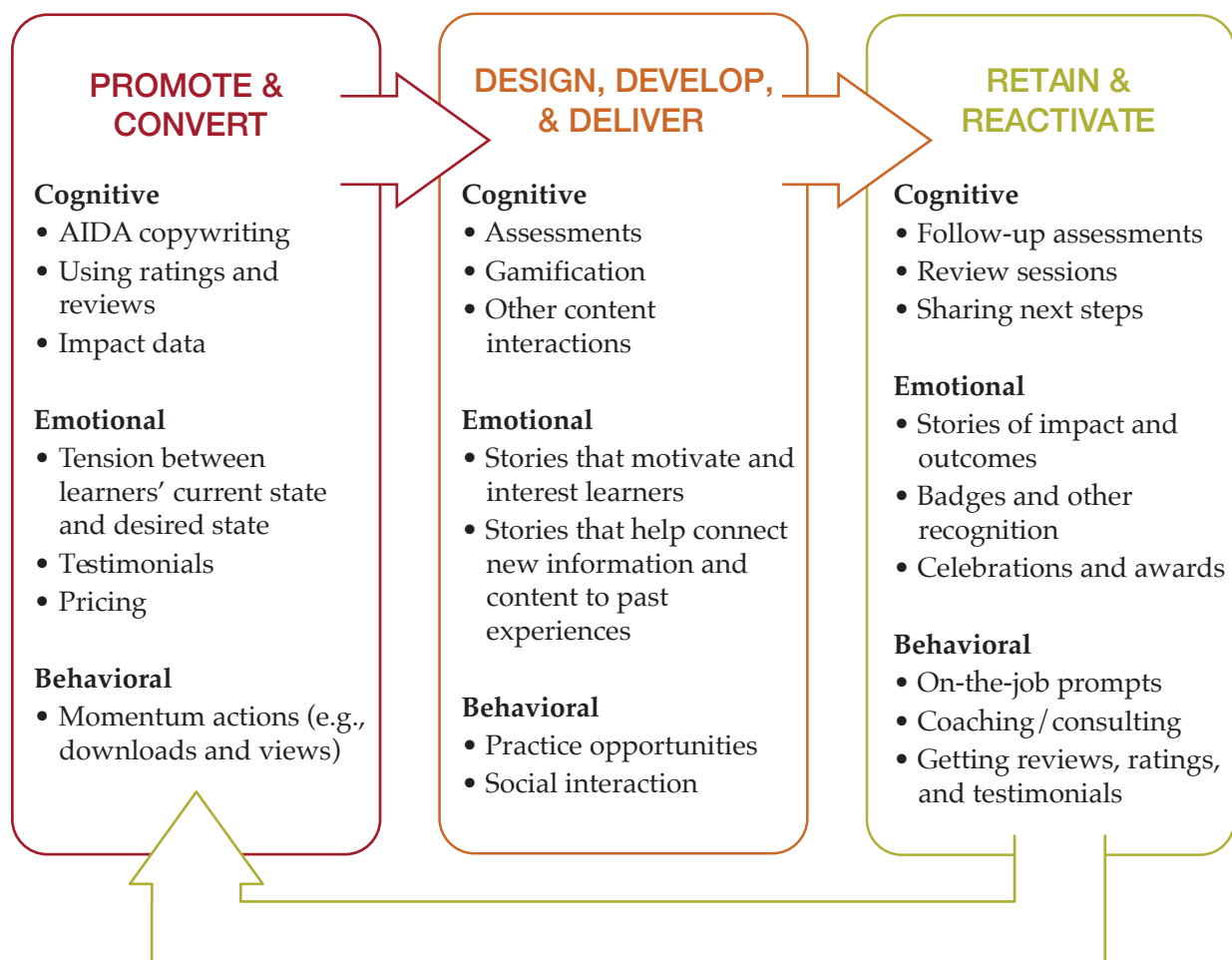
## PROVIDING LEARNING THAT ALIGNS WITH ENGAGEMENT'S THREE DIMENSIONS

Three dimensions—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—define how engagement takes place within the context created when the conditions of meaning, safety, and availability are met.

- **Cognitive => Think.**  
The cognitive dimension covers the learners' efforts to analyze content and ideas, form mental connections to prior their experience and knowledge, and construct meaning. It also covers the learners' use of learning strategies to process and remember.
- **Emotional => Feel.**  
The emotional dimension refers to the motivation to learn and the commitment to learning and includes their feelings about the learning experience.
- **Behavioral => Do.**  
The behavioral dimension refers to their active involvement in learning activities and includes their interactions with peers, instructors, and facilitators.

While the behavioral dimension is the easiest to observe, it can be deceptive. An adult learner can go through the required motions without being engaged cognitively or emotionally.

Before, during, and after learning experiences, there are ways to promote engagement—and it's worth promoting because engagement drives those common goals of all learning businesses: reach, revenue, and impact.



For maximum results, signals and supports of engagement should begin *before* the learning experience (promotion and conversion), continue *during* the learning experience (through appropriate design, development, and delivery), and be reinforced *after* the learning experience ends (retention and reactivation).

During **promotion and conversion**, activities like AIDA copywriting (focused on securing prospects' attention, interest, desire, and action), the display of previous learners' ratings, and sharing impact data (e.g., how the learning experience helped other learners achieve certain goals at work or in life) begin to develop cognitive engagement. Promotions that focus on the tension prospects feel between their current state and their desired state and how the learning experience can close that gap foster emotional engagement. Momentum actions and calls to action begin to engage learners behaviorally as they view or download related resources or information.

During **design, development, and delivery**, assessments, gamification, and other content interactions engage learners cognitively. Stories that tie to learners' motivations and interests and that help them connect new information and content to past experiences engage them emotionally. Practice opportunities and social interaction with other learners, facilitators, and instructors engage them behaviorally.

After the learning experience ends, **retention and reactivation** efforts in the realm of cognitive engagement might include follow-up assessments and review sessions to reinforce content and combat the forgetting curve, as well as sharing next steps to extend and continue the learning. Stories of impact and outcomes from other learners continue to engage learners emotionally, as do badges, awards, and other forms of recognition and celebration. Behavioral engagement can be extended through on-the-job prompts, coaching, consulting, and asking learners to provide their own reviews, ratings, or testimonials based on their experience.

These are just some ideas of how to engage learners across all three dimensions. The list is not comprehensive. Use the chart provided at the end of this document to map your own engagement efforts. There are no right or wrong tactics for engagement, but strive to address each dimension of engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) before, during, and after a learning experience.

We hope this resource proves useful as you think about how to foster engagement to help the learners you serve and to increase the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business. ►

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# MAPPING LEARNER ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

