Creating Compelling Courses

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The search for understanding motivates students to learn. When students want to know more about an idea, a topic, or an entire discipline, they put more cognitive energy into classroom investigations and discussions and study more on their own.

–Martin G. Brooks and Jacqueline Grennon Brooks, "The Courage to Be Constructivist"

This quotation encapsulating the constructivist, or learner-centered, view of education was penned in 1999, but it remains a touchstone for instructional designers. Students learn best when their minds are engaged with the material, when they understand its relevance to them and the real world, and when they feel they are directing their learning. The boom in the use of technology for learning at all levels has allowed instructional designers to more successfully tailor learning opportunities, so students can grab the reins of their own learning despite the pressure of having to pass standards-aligned assessments.

Thus, the prime objective for creating compelling courses is not marshalling impressive volumes of resources for students' use, or incorporating the latest technological advances; it is simply using and updating time-honored techniques of motivating learners to learn. Designers must focus on the best way for learners to assimilate required data, concepts, or skills. Because of professional or governmental standards, students must learn certain things; it is up to designers to provide the vehicles that are most conducive to that goal.

The Place of Performance Goals/Objectives in Learning

Whether the audience is made up of fifth-graders learning language arts or registered nurses learning to read EKG strips, students need to meet performance goals or standards set by authorities. These performance goals act as the organizing structure of any course of study.

For example, fifth-graders might have to master this Common Core standard: "Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text, identifying which reasons and evidence support which point(s)." This is a common language skill required to understand informational text. It is the educator's job to help students master all of the standards so that the learners can become productive members of society.

Happily, the bloodless words of the standards provide only the framework rather than the sum total of learning about the subject. Good designers work hand-in-hand with subject matter experts to craft innovative pathways to mastery that are relevant to the learners.

Interaction with Content

Designers must ensure that learners have the opportunity to interact with the content. This means several things:

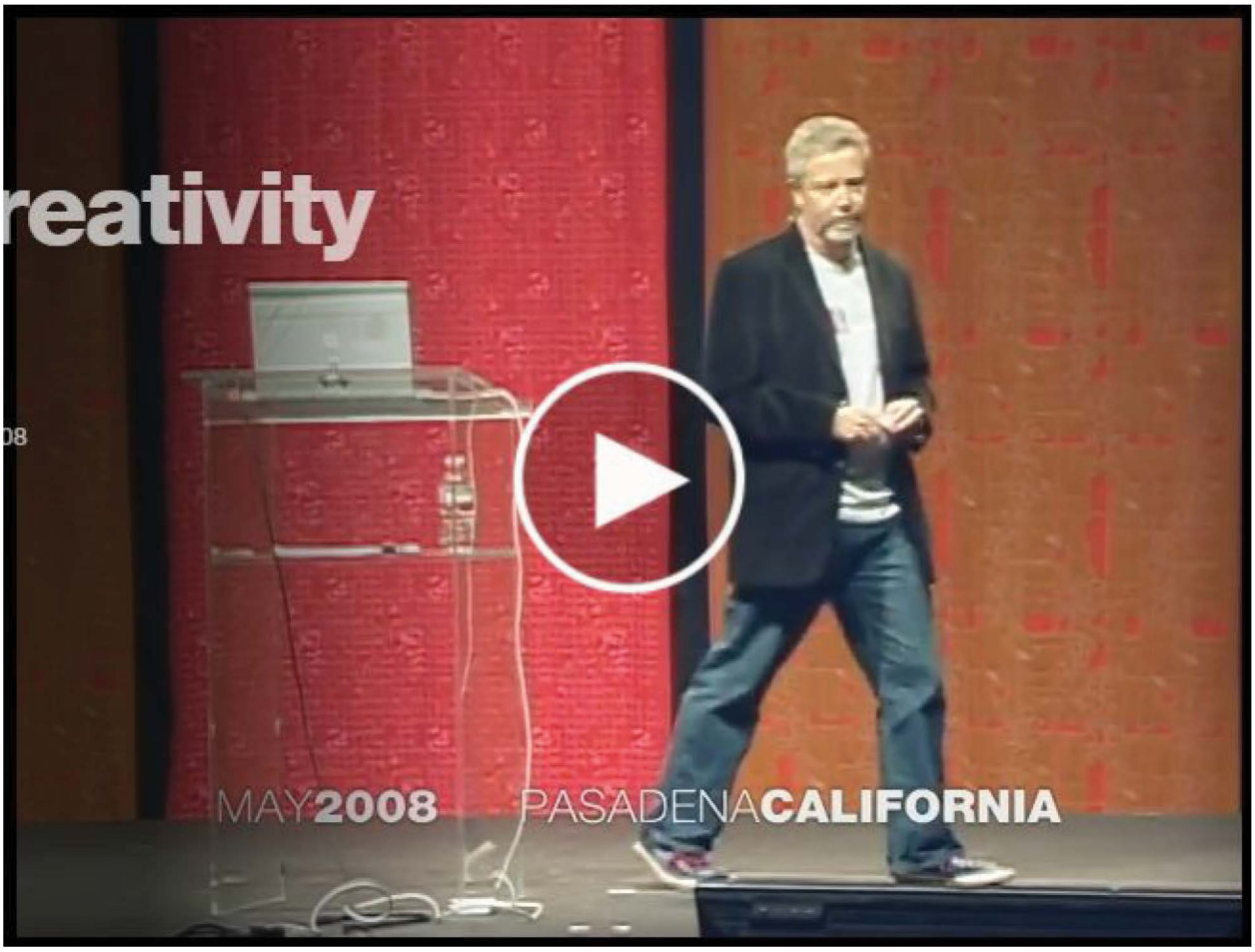
- Digital gadgets are not the be-all and end-all. Learners need to manipulate data and content, not just icons and screens.
- Learners must be active recipients of information. Courses should be designed so learners direct their own search for enlightenment by finding and analyzing appropriate information. Resources can be placed at the learners' fingertips, but learners must be able to take charge in using the resources.
- Learners must have opportunities to reflect on the information and use it to find solutions or make decisions. Learning occurs most effectively in an environment where learners determine what kind of information is needed to solve a problem, find the information, and then solve the problem. They should receive informed, helpful feedback or leads to additional learning in a timely fashion.

Visual Appeal

Creating an effective elearning course takes more than just applying instructional design characteristics to learning standards. It requires a creative approach to visual design, or how content is presented to the learner. Designers must create appealing screens to capture the audience's attention, provoke them to immerse themselves in the material, and keep them moving through the course. This means moving far beyond the classic "7 x 7" rule of designing Powerpoint slides (7 lines per slide and 7 words per line).

Good designers are constantly on the lookout for new visuals. Besides searching design blogs (such as the E-Learning Blogs on Articulate.com), they also stay alert to techniques used in industries different from their own. If you are designing a course to teach accountants standards they must know for state certification, for example, you probably want to be aware of attention-grabbing methods used by the advertising industry.

Design teams also engage in what Tim Brown of IDEO (a design and innovation consulting firm) calls "exploratory play." This activity is all about pushing the limits of creative thinking by generating lots of new ideas: about how to combine text and images, how to fascinate users, and how to guide users through screens without buttons or "click here" instructions. (Articulate.com, "3 Proven Techniques to Add Creativity to Your E-Learning Courses," 2009)



Tim Brown's TED Talk: http://www.ted.com/talks/tim_brown_on_creativity_and_play

Student-Centered Learning

Savvy educators recognize that they can enhance student learning, but that students ultimately construct their own unique meaning through their own cognitive processes. In other words, educators may control what is taught, but students usually control what they learn because all people create their own meaning for the world around them. When students want to know more about a topic, they put more energy into investigations, whether they are group-based or on their own.

This means that educators seeking to increase learning must shift their priorities, from impressing the same concepts on all students to analyzing students' understandings and customizing teaching to the audience. Instructors must do more design work, creating authentic tasks that encourage learner involvement and participation. There are a number of solid reasons for following these procedures (Grennon Brooks & Brooks, 1993):

- Educators and designers can structure lessons to challenge students' current thinking. These types of lessons ask what students think they know and why they think they know it. This permits students to construct knowledge that challenges standard ideas and allows learning to occur.
- If students attach relevance to the curriculum, their interest in learning increases.
- Exposing students first to big ideas, rather than to discrete bits of information, helps them determine the relevant parts as they refine their understandings of the ideas.
- Assessment must occur in the context of daily investigations, not as separate events. Students can demonstrate their mastery in a variety of ways.

As part of student control, learners should be able to navigate through a course by themselves. Designers can create courses that nudge the audience toward full understanding through decision trees that lead learners along multiple pathways to the desired result. Part of this process involves integrating assessments that direct each learner's path.

The benefits of student-centered learning have been demonstrated through empirical research on many occasions. Studies show that motivation and actual learning increase when learners have a hand in their own learning (McCombs & Whistler, 1997). In addition, learners gain confidence when they succeed in taking responsibility for their education. (Aaronsohn, 1996). In addition, learners demonstrate higher achievement when their success comes from their own abilities and effort (North Central Regional Laboratory, 2000).

Simply put, student-centered learning increases engagement, a crucial component of any educational process.

Designing Through the Learners' Eyes

When instructional designers and subject matter experts approach course-design from the perspective of the student, the resulting course material will tend to have greater applicability to real-life situations.

For instance, the American Institute of CPAs is the organization that certifies CPAs. Its courses and exams can be accessed online at http://www.aicpa.org/. The computer-based Uniform CPA Examination consists of multiple choice questions and simulations (case studies) that test the knowledge and skills required of entry-level CPAs. Some of the simulations are document-based, and test-takers must not only understand the information in the documents, but must be able to identify terms that are wrong, and correct them. Other simulations require the test-taker to perform sample tasks that a CPA typically does.

Designers who create CPA certification courses must therefore take into account not only what students need to know, but what they must be able to do with that knowledge. Thus, a great many interactive modules are required, based on the Interest Areas page on the AICPA website.

Interest Area Highlights

Accounting Education
- Robert Half Salary Guide
- AICPA Distinguished Achievement in Accounting ....

Business, industry & Government
- 2016 Government Briefs
- 2015 Government Briefs

Center for Audit Quality
- PCAOB Inquiry Resource
- Voluntary Model U.S. Transparency Report

Center for Plain English Accounting
- Center for Plain English Accounting Webcasts
- CPEA Membership Application

Employee Benefit Plan Audit Quality Center
- AICPA EBP Conference - December 2015
- Health and Welfare Plans Resource Center

Financial Reporting Center
- Expert Panel - Investment Companies
- Expert Panel - Stockbrokerage and Investment ....

Firm Practice Management - PCPS
- YOU Are the Value Workshop
- PCPS Exploring SSARS No. 21 Toolkit

Forensic & Valuation
- FVS Consulting Digest
- Awards and Recognition

Governmental Audit Quality Center
- Schedule of Upcoming GAQC Web Events
- Preparing for a Single Audit An Auditee ....

Information Management and Technology Assurance
- IMTA News - Current Issue
- Service Organization Controls (SOC) Schools

Not-For-Profit
- An Ounce of Prevention Combatting Fraud in ....
- Not-for-Profit Advisory Council

Peer Review
- For Peer Review Administrators and Technical ....
- Peer Review Communications Archive Page

Personal Financial Planning
- Current PFP News
- PFP Awards and Recognition

Professional Ethics
- Comment Letters For the November 25, 2015 Omnibus
- Joint Ethics Enforcement Program (JEEP) Manual of

Tax
- Tax Research Information and Tools
- Busy Season Resources for CPAs

Young CPA Network
- Career Planning & Development
- Negotiate for more than salary When taking a job

AICPA Interest Areas (http://www.aicpa.org/INTERESTAREAS/Pages/default.aspx)

Certification course designers have to create mechanisms whereby individual learners can acquire the information and skills they need. Here are just some of the actions students must be able to perform:

- Access each area of interest that they want, in any order, and at any time.
- Flip back and forth between areas as needed to check understanding of related issues.
- Link to case studies.
- Link to external sites needed for research.

- Self-check knowledge and get real-time feedback to be able to scaffold their understanding on what they have already learned.

One of the links on the AICPA's site is to research and case study materials concerning auditing. Its title is "Engaging Students in Accounting and Auditing Aspects Related to the Dixon Illinois 53 Million Dollar Fraud." The material is described in this way:

This resource highlights a case adaptable to auditing, fraud and governmental accounting courses. Classroom materials include legal documents, financial reports, budgets, and news articles that are free of charge and relevant to several courses.

All of these materials are at the learners' fingertips (as long as they are members of the AICPA) and can be accessed when and where the users need them.

Conclusion

Instructional designers have the exciting (and sometimes daunting!) task of placing the means of learning into the hands of the learners themselves. By doing so in a creative, interactive way, designers contribute to the development of students who are engaged in and responsible for their own learning.

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