

6 July 2005

Themes Add Life and Fun to Online Classes

Interactivity and the resultant fun are the missing ingredients in online classes. Online learning (like textbooks) can be very drab and boring. This is probably why most candidates who enroll in online courses do not complete them.

Despite the many advantages of online learning, fun activities and the classmate-bonding are absent in online training. The camaraderie that results from exchanging knowing smiles when the instructor makes mistakes too is lacking in online classes.

Notwithstanding its limitations for interactivity, online training can be enlivened. Having themes for each of the online classes is one option.

For example, an instructional designer couldn't think of a theme for her first online course on workplace harassment. Workplace harassment is a serious issue, and having themes could dilute the seriousness. Ultimately, she decided on "Solving the Puzzle of Workplace Harassment."

She concluded every lesson with word jumbles and crossword puzzles. These games familiarized and reiterated the terminology used in workplace harassment, along with giving the learners a much needed break from the monotony of the class.

In another instance, she used a construction theme for an online guide on contract management. The theme images pointed to the various sections of the guide, referred to as blueprints and plans. She employed construction analogies like 'well-built' and 'a good foundation' for contracting writing guidelines. The contract managers were equally excited and enthusiastic about the theme and suggested ways to enhance it.

Developing Themes

Guidelines for developing themes for online courses:

Generate ideas. Seek input from fellow trainers and subject matter experts. This trainer asked her learners to brainstorm for relevant themes on the management of government contracts. Some of the suggestions included puzzles, wrestling, pain, etc. The entire exercise proved to be fun.

Seek variety. Choosing themes with a range of analogies, metaphors and language can help the trainer/instructional designer organize concepts. Although initially mazes seemed a good theme for a contract training guide, closer examination revealed that it had only one theme. The construction theme, on the other hand, presented a various concepts related to building a good contract such as tools, stages of construction, blueprints etc. It is advisable to avoid using dated themes such as movies or dance. These lose their novelty once the movie or dance becomes passé.

Employ language links. Themes allow developers to streamline writing and organize content. For example, only after writing the introduction to the Contracts Construction Guide did the writing style and format become clear.



TenStep Supplemental Paper

Add images. Find suitable images that match the theme. It is better to find the images early in the process. Sometimes the availability of images can influence the choice of the theme.

Once the theme is decided upon, the related graphics can provide further ideas on applying the theme. Developers who are novices in graphic design tend to use too many images. Consult a designer and test the images for the layout and format prior to the class. Ensure that instead of being distracting, the images used gel with the theme. Animated images must be used sparingly and should not be added to pages that require extensive reading.

Suggestions for themes

- **Road Maps.** Almost all topics can use map themes. Rest stops can be used to mark learning breaks. A sports car can be used to indicate when a learner is using a fast track route and a station wagon to indicate a thorough, step-by-step route. Common road signs can guide learners through the course.
- **Music.** Music can be used as a theme in various ways. For example, navigation can be designed like a juke-box image and relevant song titles can be used to link the course sections. Ensure that learners are familiar with the titles used.
- **Detectives.** Provide the learner a case to solve. Also provide clues for various concepts. For instance, in a course dealing with sexual harassment, apart from presenting a report of sexual harassment the learner could interview people. This will help the learners know the procedure for filing a complaint as well as the terminology involved.
- **Team sports.** Baseball is a good theme for soft skill courses like team building, leadership, motivation etc. Online experts could function as coaches. Effective and ineffective ways of managing a team can be described by using terms such as runs, hits and errors.

Themes related to concepts both old and new hasten and improve learning capabilities.