

# The Art Of Aesthetic eLearning

## 5 principles to follow when pruning courses

 By Sean Stoker

For over a thousand years, the Japanese have cultivated a unique art form known as bonsai. The objective of this art is to strategically prune the branches and roots of a tree or shrub so that it appears to be a normal, mature tree, shrunk to a miniscule size. What a lot of people are unaware of is that these trees are not naturally that small. Most are made from what would be regular-sized trees, artificially kept small through the selective pruning process.

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There are many principles that govern the aesthetics of this ancient art, but today we'll focus on a few key elements that eLearning professionals would do well to follow when pruning their courses.

### 1. Miniaturization

While some courses, like a mighty redwood, can afford to be large and all-encompassing, most of them should be concise and to the point. Even the longer ones can [achieve miniaturization through segmenting](#). Perhaps the greatest strength of eLearning is its flexibility. Like any type of learning, it requires attention and effort; but eLearning should also be easy to work into a busy schedule. Truly useful information with a touch of brevity can go a long way.

### 2. Proportion Among Elements

In bonsai, well-proportioned trees are the aesthetically pleasing ones. If a tree has branches that are thicker than its trunk or leaves that look comically huge in comparison to the tiny plant, it typically doesn't meet the standards of an experienced bonsai-ist (bonsai-er? Bonsai-ition?). Once again, the intent is to make it look like a regular tree, just smaller.

Similarly, an eLearning professional would be hesitant to make a course that placed undue emphasis on irrelevant points. The flow of the course should seem natural. If certain parts of your course seem unnaturally bloated or brief, consider shifting your focus to emphasize what really matters.

### 3. Asymmetry

In many styles of bonsai, things tend to look odd or distorted when they are too symmetrical. Instead of a natural beauty, it looks like a cold and calculated man-made structure, like one of those weird cellphone towers that's supposed to look like a pine tree.

Not every section in an eLearning course is created equal. If you have a 60 minute course that is made up of 6 sections, there's no law

that says each section has to be 10 minutes long. Give each section the emphasis it deserves, whether that means more or less, and let the importance of the content determine how much time you spend on it, even if that results in lopsided coverage.

### 4. No Trace of the Artist

Just because you're artificially modifying a tree doesn't mean that it should *look* artificial. An important principle of bonsai aesthetics requires that you maintain a natural appearance. You want the tree to look like it naturally grew that way, not like an artificial hand had been guiding its growth the whole time.

A designer should make bold decisions in their eLearning courses, but they should implement those decisions with a light touch. A bold design can become loud, bombastic, and just plain unnatural if taken to an unhealthy extreme. Make sure that all your choices lead to a smooth and organic experience that isn't jarring or overstimulating.

### 5. Poignancy

Bonsai also involves wabi-sabi, which is a Japanese principle dealing with a sense of melancholy and the realization that all things must come to an end. Wabi-sabi is prevalent in Japanese aesthetics, and bonsai is not excluded. If a bonsai design prompts you to ponder the passage of time, and the impermanence of all things, then you know you've got a winner.

Depending on the subject matter you may or may not want to take wabi-sabi to such an extreme in your eLearning. You don't want people meditating on the fragility of life while you teach them about forklift safety. A more useful way to incorporate this principle into your courses would be to instill a sense of humanity.

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*This article first appeared on [eLearning Brothers blog](#).*



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