LEARNING EXPERIENCE DESIGN:
BALANCING FORM AND FUNCTION

We are failing our users if creating anything other than fabulous user-friendly learning that works, says Rob Hubbard.

I recently stayed away from home on business. I was in a lovely four or five star hotel, ultra-modern and very trendy. I had a big room with a sitting area, a kitchenette and large bathroom with shower and bath. So far, so good. After a peaceful night's sleep, I got up to take a shower.

Instead of a full enclosure, the shower had glass panels attached to the wall with a small gap. Everything was gleaming chrome and glass. I turned on the shower and was greeted with masses of hot, steaming water. After luxuriating for some time (as I do), I got out of the shower to find I'd flooded the bathroom – *Grrr!* It seemed while the shower enclosure looked great, it didn't actually keep water inside its casing. Down on my hands and knees, I used the spare towels to mop up the water.

Next, I moved to the washbasin. It was large, square and shallow. It was beautifully shaped and sported a tall, highly polished mixer tap. I needed to have a shave and so looked for a way to close the plug. I tried pushing it, twisting it, I checked behind the basin for a lever, down the side, underneath – nothing. (I should point out that I have an engineering design degree and am not usually out-foxed by bathroom fittings, even first thing in the morning.)

It seemed that there was, in fact, no way to block the plughole. Now, holding water is surely one of the fundamental functions of a basin. *Grrr!* OK, I thought; I'll run the tap while I shave – quite wasteful, but it can't be helped. I turned on the tap. The water from the tall mixer tap hit the perfectly flat bottom of the sink and bounced straight out, soaking me and the surrounding area. This time I didn't say "hmph" or "grrr" – my turn of phrase was somewhat more colourful.

These objects looked lovely but failed to serve the most basic function for which they were designed – it was a triumph of form over function. Whoever designed them needs a good slap and a return ticket to design school.

When designing a learning experience, it is all too easy to fall into the same trap. Whether an in-person interaction or something digital – if you don't balance both form and function you will fail your users, annoy them and not achieve your project's objectives.

The graph overleaf shows the combinations of form and function your learning experience might achieve.

1. It has neither form nor function – it looks awful and it doesn't work. If you think something you are designing falls into this category – *stop!* Do not launch it. It will do you more harm than good. It will tarnish your reputation and colour users' opinion of anything else you produce.

2. Function but little form – you've done a great job at designing a solution and it works well. The trouble is that the user experience is poor – people find it difficult to use, it's not intuitive and it looks naff. Most people won't engage with it, though a few die-hards will love it.
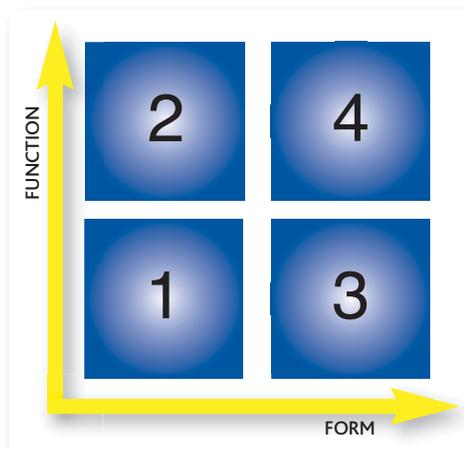
• What challenge(s) do they face?

• What level(s) of experience or knowledge do they have?

• How might they access this learning experience?

• What are their working patterns?

• How comfortable are they with technology?

• What connectivity do they have?

• Does the audience segment in any way?

• What are their typical demographics?

• What will success look like for them?

3. Form but little function – that was my hotel bathroom. This stuff looks great but fails to meet some of its basic functional requirements. The challenge is it's difficult to tell initially from something with *both* form and function. It is only through use that the weakness of its functional design is revealed.

4. Both form and function – clearly this is where we want to be. This solution both works really well and looks fabulous. You have followed a rigorous design process, involved users throughout and been through multiple iterations to get here. You've also had a kick-a$$ user experience or graphic designer lavish care and attention on it. Champagne all round!

So, how can you ensure that your learning designs fall into this fourth category and balance both form and function? Here is how we try to do it.

SCOPE THE PROJECT AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE

Take time to identify the stakeholders in the project and ensure you get their input, either directly by speaking to them, or indirectly via the key stakeholders consulting them. Speaking in person is best of course, but this is not always possible. I ask them a range of questions in order to understand the project fully.

GET TO KNOW THE AUDIENCE

The most important stakeholders of all are the end users. It is absolutely vital that they are involved and consulted from the early stages of a project. The more you understand them, the better your solution design. The kinds of questions you should explore include:

• Who are the audience?

• How many are they?

• Where are they based?

• What languages do they speak?

LOOK FOR THE PROBLEM THE PROJECT IS TRYING TO SOLVE

Somewhere in among the information you gather about a project will be the specific problem that it seeks to solve. Take time to identify this and how it manifests – what are the symptoms being seen within the organisation? What are people doing that is causing this? What change in behaviour would stop the problem occurring? Analysing the project in this level of detail will give you a clear target to aim for, give you the measures to prove whether you have hit it, and a clearer understanding of the behaviour change you are aiming to achieve.

TAKE TIME TO DESIGN THE BEST SOLUTION

Resist the urge to immediately suggest a solution. Just because you have an e-learning author tool, don't assume a traditional e-learning course is the best solution. These days, it seldom is (if indeed, it ever was). Think beyond what you normally design, produce or commission and consider other approaches. Take time to do this – the aim in learning experience design is to come up with a solution that is both effective and efficient. Effective, in that participants achieve the levels of skill or knowledge that you want them to. Efficient, in that they do so in the minimum of time and the solution is an appropriate cost. This interactive Prezi *http://tinyurl.com/laslxd123* outlines a few different learning experience solutions. Use it to prompt your thinking.

TAKE TIME TO MAKE IT LOOK GREAT

User experience (UX) and graphic design skills take years to develop. This isn't about being able to use Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator or Fireworks, though that is part of it. The best designers follow a logical design process. Yes, they consider the organisation's brand, but also the user's needs – on each screen what are they most

likely to want to do? What is the user 'flow' through the site, tool, app, simulation, etc?

GET USER INPUT AND ITERATE YOUR DESIGN

As quickly as you can, get your ideas in front of stakeholders and end users. Communicate with sketches, wireframes and rough prototypes – anything to get your ideas across and gain some rapid feedback. I often record screencast videos of me talking through designs or wireframes. These really help the stakeholders understand my thought process. I can also highlight anything I'm unsure about or that I specifically want feedback on.

MEASURE AND IMPROVE

Whatever you design and build – once you launch it, gather user feedback, measure effectiveness and look to further improve your solution. Don't view this as having 'missed something' or 'got something wrong' – the design and development process should be viewed as iterative and on-going, extending beyond the launch. Schedule regular reviews and updates. This keeps your solution fresh and relevant and shows how you respond to the business.

Clearly, taking this approach to a project is a highly consultative way of working. It takes a time to build the confidence to work in this way and it takes time to work through this approach. The good news is that this method is logical, simple and straightforward to apply – it's not rocket science (though if you were designing a rocket it would be).

I am a firm believer that we don't need complicated new design models or learning theories. Instead, we need to focus on simple approaches that yield great results, work at them and develop our expertise. Learning experience design is a craft and like any craft; it takes practice.

Rob Hubbard is the editor and co-author of *The Really Useful eLearning Instruction Manual* published by Wiley and featuring contributions from the brightest and best e-learning minds on both sides of the Atlantic.

Rob Hubbard is Managing Director and Creative Lead at Learning Age Solutions www.learningagesolutions.com/ http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id -350181.html Twitter: @WileyUK @RobHubbard