



THE POWER OF EMOTION

aAron Pont reveals why getting in touch with emotion is essential for any e-learning designer.

Attitudes to emotion and the role it plays in human thought have changed a lot over the last 50 years. Mainstream science used to be dismissive of its impact and emotions were generally sidelined as either unimportant or irrational. This is perhaps best illustrated in popular culture by the character of 'Mr Spock' the Vulcan First Officer in *Star Trek*. The key to his superior intelligence was his ability to reject emotion and use only logic to make decisions.

Even today the idea that emotion is something negative persists in some quarters, but nothing could be further from the truth.

The breakthrough came in the early 1990s, when neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, published his research on emotions and decision-making. He had been studying a patient named Elliot who, after a brain tumour, suffered damage to the part of the

brain that governs emotion. The perceived wisdom of the time was that Elliot would be able to make better, quicker choices without the distraction of emotion. However, the opposite proved to be true and Elliot was unable to take even the most basic decisions despite all his other mental abilities being fully intact. Damasio had proven the link between human cognition and decision-making, and he went on to inform thinking about the role emotion plays in memory and consciousness itself.

So, emotion makes us what we are. It drives our decisions and influences our thoughts – even when we think it does not.

No sector understands this better than advertising. A great example is the most recent John Lewis Christmas TV advert in which a small boy seeks a soulmate for his best pal, who appears to be a real Penguin. There is virtually no dialogue just the soundtrack of John Lennon's *Real Love* sung

by Tom Odell. It had millions of us teary eyed and saw a huge increase in the sale of toy penguins. The advert taps into emotion to influence behaviour, and good e-learning does the same. Conversely, unsuccessful e-learning often fails because it does not make an emotional connection with learners.

EMOTION AND LEARNING

In 2001, the link between emotion and learning was explored in an interesting way, by Dr Julie Taylor, an associate professor of family medicine in the US. She told a group of medical students at the start of a lecture that they would have to sit an extra exam. They were full of concern and anxiety about the thought of an unexpected test, but their distress was short-lived when Taylor revealed it was not true. The purpose was to use emotion to help the class understand the impact on patients of receiving bad news about their health.



Taylor observed that emotion leads to better retention of cognitive material. She said: "Without including emotion in the learning process, it is impossible to truly engage students."

The trick for e-learning professionals is to find the *right* emotional devices to connect with adult learners in the workplace. There are many techniques to choose from and all of them can help learners to engage, pay attention, care, understand and ultimately learn.

The starting point for me is to 'go deep' into understanding the audience. What exactly does their job involve? Why do they do it? What do they like most about their job? What do they worry about? Armed with this 'go deep' information it is much easier to select the most effective techniques to evoke emotion in your e-learning.

Here are some of the devices I use most frequently to generate an emotional connection with learners:

TELL A STORY

"After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world," said award-winning author, Philip Pullman. There is something fundamental within a story that connects with us and helps us make sense of the world.

Narratives that elicit an emotional response are the most powerful (as in the John Lewis ad) but in e-learning they also need to be authentic and relevant to the workplace. The choice of characters is important in helping to create empathy. Some of the most effective stories for engaging emotions involve a metaphoric journey or some type of revelation.



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USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Language is very important to set the tone and create the desired emotional response from the audience. For instance, if you are hoping to inspire or motivate learners (as you might in an induction module) then the words need to be positive and active. The author, Karl Iglesias, has created an emotional thesaurus to help scriptwriters find the right words to generate the desired emotional response from an audience, which can be handy if you need some inspiration.

SELECT EVOCATIVE IMAGES

Many learners will engage with an image or photo before they read anything so those elements can play a big part in creating mood and supporting emotional connection. I will often create a mood board of images before starting an e-learning project and, sometimes, paste these images around my desk to remind me of the emotions I am trying to engage in the learners. The simple rule of thumb is 'evocative not bland'. Instructional designer Cathy Moore, whose tagline is "Let's save the world from boring training!" warns against the temptation to use "sterile images of bland business people" in corporate e-learning – it's hard to connect with a picture of two people in suits shaking hands.

CONNECT WITH MUSIC

Music in e-learning can really divide opinion. This is because it is perhaps the most powerful switch for our emotions. The scientist, Steven Pinker calls music 'cheesecake for the mind' because it is such an indulgence for our emotions. The John Lewis ad would be diminished without the soundtrack. Within e-learning, music can set the mood, support a narrative, add drama and tension or provide an emotional cue, but it needs to be used appropriately and sensitively.

So, if you want to evoke strong emotions – for example, in an inspirational induction module – then music is a key tool.

EMBRACE VIDEO

Video can tie together many of the key elements already discussed and punches above its weight in delivering emotional connection in e-learning. Narrative,

character, images, music and language are all at play but how it is used it really key. Interactive video (or interactive animation) can engage emotions but also requires learners to make decisions, explore and become actively involved rather than remain a passive viewing. This can be particularly heightened in first person interactive video scenarios.



EMOTION TECHNOLOGY

It would be great to have some proof of how learners are responding emotionally to an e-learning experience, and wearable technology could deliver this capability sooner than we think. Some really fascinating emotion technology is already available which measures skin conductance response, where the skin sweats a small amount in response to emotional arousal.

The devices that measure this phenomenon are becoming smaller and more affordable, so it is no longer science fiction to imagine a time when we will be able to accurately measure the emotional engagement of learners in real time. Until that day arrives, there is a much simpler way to illustrate the vital role emotion plays in e-learning.

Try creating a module completely stripped of any emotional references or triggers, and then seek some learner feedback. As writer Arnold Bennett put it: 'There can be no knowledge without emotion'.



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