

Blur Your Course into Focus (Jan 09)

A good e-learning course always starts with good content. However, content alone isn't your only consideration when building e-learning courses. How your course LOOKS plays an important role.

One of the beefs people have with rapid e-learning courses is that they tend to look like PowerPoint slide shows. Even if the content is good and well presented, odds are that many of your learners will quickly tune out of your course.

There's no reason that has to be the case because there are simple things you can do to make your courses look different and be more effective in teaching.

To get started, I highly recommend books like [Beyond Bullet Points](#) and [Presentation Zen](#). One that I've heard a lot about, but haven't read yet, is [Slide:ology](#). These books help you think about how to present information in a new way. You'll learn to craft a better message and make screens that are more visually interesting.

If you have the budget, it's always a good idea to bring on a graphic designer. But the reality is that a budget and rapid e-learning usually don't go hand-in-hand. In that case, you're kind of left to fend for yourself.

In today's post I'm going to talk about using blurred images. Normally you don't want a blurry image...like when you're out walking and take a picture of a UFO hovering over the neighborhood. However, when building your e-learning course you can use blurry images to your advantage.

Direct Where Your Learner Looks

If you shoot a photo or video, you can change the focal depth. This allows you to blur the background and focus on the subject. You do this; so that the eye is naturally drawn to the area that's in focus. It's also a good way to take the focus off of background items that might interfere with the subject.

Suppose you're presenting a scenario in your course. Dave the accountant is on safari. His driver was attacked by a baboon and carried off into the brush. Dave's stuck in the middle of nowhere by himself. What's he to do? Compare the two images below.



What do I focus on? Dave? The guy stealing the gas can? The brontosaurus femur?

There's a lot going on in the screen above. It might confuse your learners. However, if you apply a simple blur to the image, you pull the focus away from less important information and transfer it to Dave where it belongs.



Now, your focus is on Dave.

In the past I've used this to clean up images where there was a lot of noise in the background. I even recall one project where there was an obvious safety violation in the picture and we couldn't reshoot it. So all I did was blur the background to hide it (and then prayed no one lost an eye).

Something that a lot of people don't consider is that everything on your screen should be planned. Whatever you put in front of your learners should contribute to the course. You definitely don't want irrelevant information competing with what you're trying to convey.

Add Some Action to Your Image

Motion blurs are a good way to convey a sense of action without explaining a lot or having to spend the time to set a scene. Look at the two images below. If you saw them in a course, what do you think they say?



While the examples above are simple, the main point is that with some creativity, you can use the motion blur filter (or even a radial blur) to help set the tone for content in your e-learning course.

You can get some good ideas of how to use a motion blur by looking at examples on some of the stock photo sites. Just type in: *motion blur*.

Here's a screen shot of a course I saw online a while back. Unfortunately, I can't recall where it's from. I did the screen grab because I thought it was a great example of how you can take a still image and give it a sense of action. Add some busy office background noise and you can easily convey the sense of a lot going on...without having to explain it.

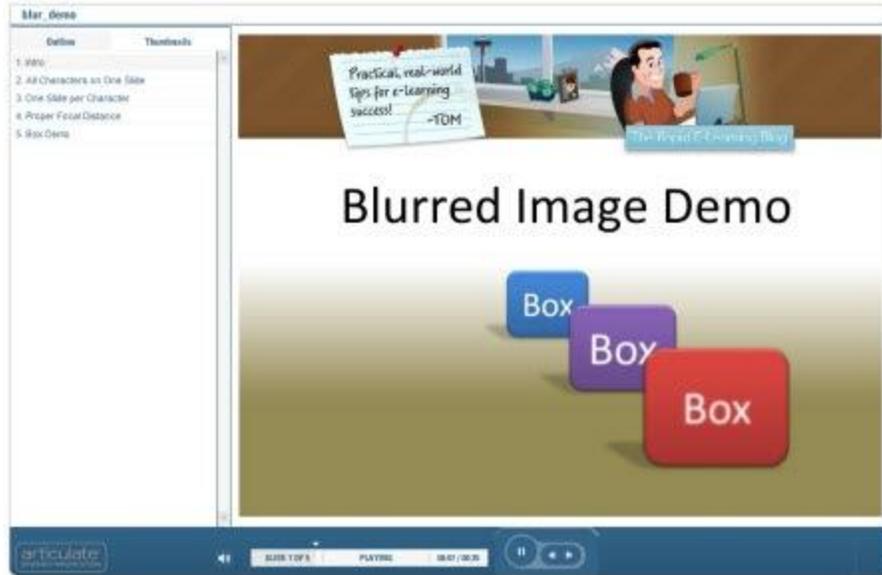


Layer Images to Create Activity and Focus

Something that I like to do that doesn't require a lot of work is to layer images that are out of focus. By switch between them, I can direct the learner's attention. It's kind of like the technique you might see in a movie.

For example, you focus on a flower, but then the focus shifts from the flower to something in the background. You end up with the background in focus and the flower out of focus. You can do the something similar in your courses.

Check out the quick demo to give you some ideas and see it in action.



[Click here to view the demo.](#)

Here are a few points from the demo:

- A blurred background can add visual interest to your course. It adds some depth and helps pull your other content into focus.
- You can mix and match clip art and photos. Even if you don't use the blur on your images, don't be afraid to experiment. The worst that can happen is that it doesn't work. In the demo, the background is a real photo and the characters are clip art. I think it works on those slides.
- You don't need to put everything on one slide. The first example is one slide. The others are stretched over multiple slides. I just hid them in the navigation panel.
- As you can see, you can apply the effect to more than just your pictures. It works great on text and shapes.

That's a quick overview of how you can use blurred images in your e-learning courses. You'll have to learn how to do that with your graphics editor. However, it's usually a pretty easy process and the blur filter is standard.

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