

No Fear = No Budget (Aug 06)

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One of the areas I cover in my instructional design course is how to understand the learner. Six levels of learner have emerged, and each will use the highly interactive learning in a different way. There is also a seventh emerging. Not every person falls into a set category. There are always exceptions, and many will be on the cusp between two groups. But for most of us creating training courses whether in the classroom or in e-learning, understanding the group you are trying to teach and then defining the learning style of the group will impact how our finished training product looks and feels.

Level 1 - School Leaver: This learner has emerged from high school but has not explored further education. You will find the level 1 in all walks of life. They often work in areas of high staff turnover and may require job specific training before they can start to work. Training this group using e-learning often results in games, brightly colored screens and simple instructions. The amount of interaction, animation and use of video is high, and therefore the cost of production is high as a ratio to the length of service the employee will give in return.

Level 2 and 3 - Blue- and white-collar workers: High school graduate and university graduate alike, research results show that most of the 'office' population fall into these two categories. Learning can be varied and has, in areas of compliancy, often resulted in the style of learning many refer to as 'page turners.' This group now is asking for more challenging e-learning. Interaction and animation help to engage this learner but they are not the key to great learning. A higher level of thought provocation is the secret to success with this group, which means less telling and more 'dancing in the moment.' (see last months article) Workflow techniques suit this group more than any other.

Level 4 - The C's: C's include senior management and often the 'boss,' but does not include the CFO (see level 5). This group has no time to attend training courses. Smile you may, but when was the last time you saw the CEO in a training course? This group considers 'learning' a chore but still recognizes that good training is the way for the business to be successful. This learner requires a different learning technique. The key to success with this group is to focus training on a simple, single, narrow subject. The five or 10-minute training course that can be accessed on an 'as needed' basis is a real winner.

Level 5 - The Strategist, including the CFO: Now here is a real challenge. The strategist wants to learn. He/she needs to know all they can so that they can do their job at a far higher level than the people who work around them. The serious question here is how do you create learning for this demanding strategist? If you know what they need at a level high enough to satisfy them, why are you not the strategist?

Level 6 - The PhD: If you work in the pharmaceutical industry then you know this group very well. Again, they have a different way of learning. It was once said to me that you can't teach a PhD anything. I questioned this and was told that a PhD will learn by listening to everything offered, reading reams of relevant and non-relevant information, then open dialogue with a peer. What is agreed upon is committed to memory and what is not, is never discarded, but placed on a shelf for later discussion with another peer. I was also told to watch for the PhD in my training courses, they are the ones sitting at the back reading a book on a completely different subject. When you ask them a question or place them on the spot they can repeat what you have said verbatim. Try it next time you are in class.

If you stand back and look at these six defined levels you will see it is almost an impossible task to write a course that can be rolled out to the whole organization. I have experimented with many courses over the past years, and the results are that you can create a course for two touching

groups, but no more. Consider creating a health and safety course in a fast food business that will suit the customer facing staff and the CFO all in one. No go. Consider customer facing staff and cleaning staff, and it's more likely to succeed.

My tip for this month is to ensure you create content for the correct group. That way you have a much higher chance of them completing and using the content, not going back to the office and doing the same old, same old.

I mentioned a seventh level. A person at this level can come from any of the six levels above. I call this level the 'No Fear' level. These are the people around us who live in the world of 'No Fear'. Not only the young school leavers playing electronic games, but those who push the envelope in everything they do. Extreme sports, extreme holidays and one I heard of recently, featured in a book no less, of Extreme Ironing, the latest danger sport that combines the thrills of an extreme outdoor activity with the satisfaction of a well pressed shirt. It's for real, go and Google it.

As for the games these people play, let's play devil's advocate with your future budget and ask you to consider this. I entered into a discussion with a 23-year-old, the same age as my eldest daughter, absolutely 'No Fear'. We were talking about roller coasters and how they have changed over the last 30 years. When I was that age a great roller coaster was made of wood, took you up to a pretty scary height, ran you out of control down a steep hill or two, around a couple of sharp bends and the highlight was often a soaking at the end as you went through water. Offer that experience to a 'No Fear' gamer and the answer you will be faced with is "Duh." Today the roller coaster has to be four loop-the-loops and go backwards at Mach 3. Do it once and it's over. Now the 'No Fear' gamer has to seek the bigger and better to get the thrill. The next roller coaster has to be in the dark, three corkscrews, upside-down and at Mach 5.

The games and experiential scenarios we are considering in e-learning will have to be the same. At the time of the wooden roller coaster, early computer games like 'pong' were arriving and by the late 70's Atari home video games machines were hooked up to almost every TV. Today the games are much more interactive. The user gets involved in a completely embedded scenario and plays the game in a number of different ways, even online against complete strangers. I spent a day this week at a company that designs and builds the complete safety rail systems for the U.K. During lunch, I found a group playing a shootout game online. I was amazed to find out that no less than 12 staff in different departments were playing against each other simultaneously via a network sever. This had been put online by one of the IT staff just for this purpose. One problem in creating such games is that each level has to be more taxing, harder to win and more engaging than the last. Sound like e-learning? Moreover a higher level of interactivity and realism has to be integrated to keep the attention of the 'No Fear' gamer. Of course at each stage the cost gets higher and the development time gets longer and more complex.

So, what happens after they play the big budget, highly interactive training course? Can you afford to follow it with another bigger, better, more expensive production, maybe networked, in the dark with a corkscrew or two? Will the level 2 or 3 'No Fear' learner be happy or even willing to revert to the 'boring' page turner when you decide to roll out a standard compliance course? Or do we make a rod for our own back, so that when we create our first e-learning game we start on the rocky road to build the next thrill fulfilling rollercoaster of the future?

How is your budget for next year?

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