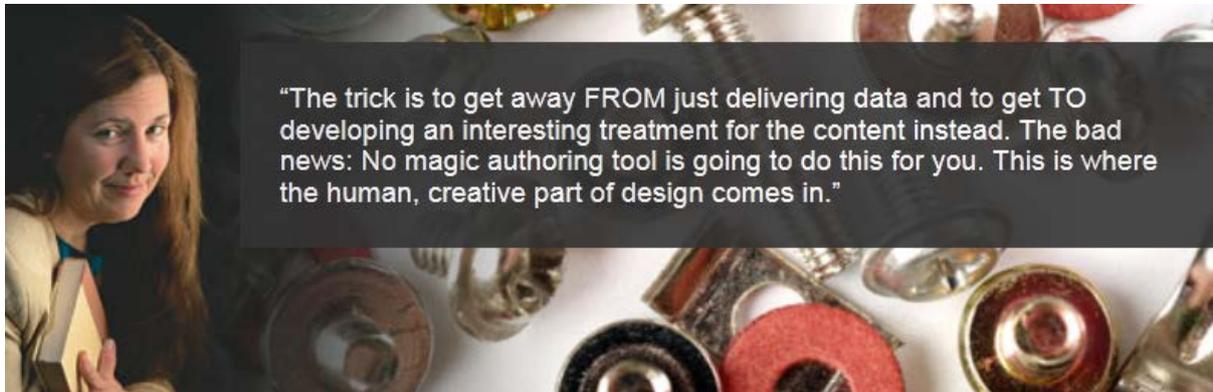


What's Your Story? (Aug 11)

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"The trick is to get away FROM just delivering data and to get TO developing an interesting treatment for the content instead. The bad news: No magic authoring tool is going to do this for you. This is where the human, creative part of design comes in."

Designers attached to company HR departments or other areas that deal with compliance and procedural concerns have all felt the pain. Tasked with developing training on policy, procedures, and other distressingly dry content, even the best designers fight to keep eLearning from devolving into "ePresentation."

The trick is to get away FROM just delivering data and to get TO developing an interesting treatment for the content instead. For instance:

From this: "Facts about the Cascade" – For UK-based veterinarians, circumstances under which they may use drugs not formally approved. Screens provide details about the policy and a printable "do/do not" job aid.

To this: "The Gamekeeper's Conundrum" – Provide an overview of the Cascade prior to accessing the eLearning course. Challenge: Faced with an angry farmer whose partridges are dying, the new field veterinarian must correctly decide whether conditions warrant administering a non-approved drug.

Another example:

From this: "Reporting Harassment: The Supervisor's Role" – Screens outline circumstances, rules for, and processes required in reporting unlawful workplace harassment. Program includes multiple-choice and true/false assessments.

To this: "It's About Richard" – Using still images and audio voiceover, a stressed employee comes to her supervisor (the learner) to report harassment by a coworker. The learner must choose appropriate supervisory responses as the situation escalates.

And yet a final example:

From this: "World Hunger" – Slides of facts and data about world hunger, including some interactive maps.

To this: "Hunger Banquet: A Seat at the Table" – User is offered a choice of cases to review. Each case focuses on one person dealing with hunger in his/her own environment and culture. Cases include the person's full name, a brief biography, and the reality of life for the person, often struggling against impossible obstacles. Facts and data are built in alongside the main portion of content. (See <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/multimedia/flash/a-seat-at-the-table>)

What do the “**To this**” examples have in common? In every instance, a designer took dry, static content and found an engaging storyline, a meaningful context in which to situate the content. In two of the three instances here, the story asks learners to make decisions and experience the consequences; in the third, there are dire consequences for the case subjects.

It’s frustrating that some people view the word “story” as “soft and squishy.” So let’s try some other words: Narrative. Detailed case. Contextual example. Scenario. Diegesis. There are no cutesy fairy tales in the examples here. “A Seat at the Table,” for instance, offers vivid realistic details about humans who are struggling to live.

Making it happen

The good news: There is nothing expensive or technically complex about this. It’s where the designer is able to apply some imagination and creativity, where art meets technical skill. In looking for your narrative thread, remember that stories can have many roots.

Consider sending a character on a journey to a destination, on a quest for a resolution, or in search of the solution to a mystery. Look for workplace anecdotes or problems. Listen for metaphors (“dealing with that policy is like navigating a maze”). If you’re adapting an existing classroom program, sit in and watch for trainer war stories.

Learn the basic arc of a story: **setup** (who are the characters? Why are they here?), **conflict** (what is the problem? A harassment complaint or a sick child in need of a doctor?), **crisis** (some turning point, in which a decision is made or action taken), and **resolution** (the outcome).

The bad news: No magic authoring tool is going to do this for you. This is where the human, creative part of design comes in.

So don’t fall into the trap of blaming your content. If people can find compelling approaches to harassment, and world hunger, and veterinary-drug-administration rules, then surely there is help for your content as well. Put your hands in the air and step away from the computer, and find the narrative that will make this experience interesting, memorable, and useful for your learners.

Want more?

Atkinson, C. (2011). *Beyond Bullet Points: Using Microsoft PowerPoint to Create Presentations that Inform, Motivate, and Inspire* (2nd edition). Microsoft Press.

Bozarth, J. (2008). *Better than Bullet Points: Creating Engaging eLearning with PowerPoint*. Pfeiffer.

Gargiulo, T. (2005). *The Strategic Use of Stories in Organizational Communication and Learning*. M.E.Sharpe.

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