

CHARACTERS AND ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL LEARNING

Charles Foot advocates getting your learners to invest emotionally in any characters you create to enhance digital learning.

Think of your favourite film, your favourite book, in fact think of any situation that you've encountered that sticks in your mind. Now imagine that same film/book/situation without the key character that brought it to life. Hard, isn't it?

So why do we see so many half-hearted attempts to include characters within digital learning? This may be a strong statement, but it's borne out in our experience. Take this article, you've probably already started making assumptions about what kind of 'character' is writing this article, and whether you can relate to 'me' or not.

SO WHY USE CHARACTERS?

Personalisation is one of Clark and Mayer's key principles of successful e-learning: it 'induces learners to engage with the computer [or device] as a social conversational partner'. As a character in an e-learning module, I may simply serve as a human face to present the material, replacing a face-to-face tutor, or I may have a role to play within a scenario or case study.

In my view, effective e-learning programmes don't just impart knowledge, they also provide opportunities for experiential learning: they give learners

opportunities to apply their new knowledge to practical issues in real-world contexts. This is what Ken Spero calls the "when and why" of learning, as opposed to the "what and how". All too often, however, the characters found in e-learning modules fail to convince. Stock figures are introduced briefly, speak in an unnatural, formal style and may never appear again. They are simply stereotypes, without personality, who do not act or speak like real people. As a result, learners do not really identify with them or take them seriously.

At the KPMG Learning Academy, we believe that if you're prepared to devote time and effort to presenting your learning content

Character DESIGN SET



and devising engaging interactions, you should also take some care in creating interesting, believable characters that learners will relate to and care about.

CREATING CONVINCING CHARACTERS

We're convinced that it's well worth creating memorable characters that challenge and support learners, while providing a structural framework for the learning journey. We've learnt from the way fiction writers and scriptwriters approach character development.

Luckily, e-learning characters don't need to carry the overall structure in the same way as in novels and film or on TV. If characters only feature a limited number of times across an e-learning module, a little effort can go a long way.

The first thing to decide on is each character's function. Who are the typical stakeholders (colleagues, customers, suppliers, specialists, members of the public) your learners will interact with when applying what they've learned?

Next, consider the role the characters will play in relation to the learner. In descending order of authority and reliability, these are:

- **Narrator/tutor** – the all-knowing dispenser of knowledge (e.g. your Sir David Attenborough, or Morgan Freeman in *The Shawshank Redemption*)
- **Manager/mentor** – similar, but with more context and opportunities for dialogue and collaboration with the learner (e.g. Sir Alex Ferguson, Mary Poppins or Mr Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*)
- **Learner equivalent** – an avatar that can act in place of the learner within scenarios, and can be prompted or critiqued when required
- **Struggling colleague or customer** – here the purpose is more to observe the

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character's needs or shortcomings and act as a problem solver, suggesting alternative approaches

- **Rival/villain** – a role reversal from the mentor. This character seeks to discourage or challenge the learner to beat them (e.g. 'Death' in a Health & Safety module, or a criminal in a security programme)

If you use characters in different roles, try to avoid using more than four or five main ones, to avoid confusion (think of the dynamics of sitcoms). Work out how you could re-use the same people in different scenarios, while still retaining plausibility. That way you can reveal more of each character's personality each time they appear.

BRINGING CHARACTERS TO LIFE

The next step is to bring your characters to life – not just characters in scenarios but also your presenter figures. Think how public speakers project their personalities, using humour to put their points across, or backing them with stories from their own experience.

There are various approaches here. You could adapt real people (such as Lord Alan Sugar or Sir Richard Branson) or fictional figures (like Sherlock Holmes). This can save presentation time, because your learners will already know their key characteristics. Or else base your characters around people you know, or have observed in the past. Alternatively, start from a photograph – study the person and think about what they may be like.

Focus on the character's personality and attitudes. Is there something that drives

them: success, recognition or a search for truth? Think of Rocky, Katniss in *The Hunger Games* or even the whale-obsessed Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*. Do they have any flaws or eccentricities? Do you want your learners to identify with them, sympathise with them or be antagonised?

Invent a backstory for them – how they came to be in their current situation, their previous experiences – to explain their motivations and reactions. A customer who seems unreasonably demanding may have been let down by other suppliers in the past. Professional scriptwriters sometimes fill in long forms describing a character's background – but this is likely to be overkill for our purposes – just work out a few relevant details that you intend to bring out in your storyboard.

If using a number of characters, make sure they are distinct in terms of characteristics and appearance. This will not only reflect the diversity and inclusiveness of your target audience, but will also make it easier for learners to immediately recognise each character.

SCRIPTING YOUR CHARACTERS

Next, decide how to present your characters. Instead of describing them, we believe in using their own dialogue to tell their stories and express their intentions and concerns (think film and TV). The messages need not always be intentional. Using subtext is very effective: "Right, you've got five minutes. Sorry about the coffee – my assistant never seems to get it right," not only tells you the character is rushed, but is also demanding and perhaps unreasonable.



Think how spoken language differs from written text (even if you're not actually using audio). Use informal expressions and short – even broken – sentences. Might your character use local or slang expressions, humour and friendly banter in their dialogues?

Observe the dynamics of real conversations. Instead of "Have you completed the report?"/"No, I've had no time". Or "That report – you're about to send it to me, right?"/"You must be joking, I'm swamped". Don't be afraid to experiment in early drafts – it's easy enough to edit out colloquialisms, if, for example, your module is intended for non-native speakers. It's a lot harder to make stilted dialogue ring true.

CHARACTERS AND CHANGE

Finally, consider whether a character should change over the course of your learning programme. This may not be necessary or possible in shorter courses, but can be valuable in longer courses, especially if they deal with behavioural change. Scriptwriters talk about describing a 'character arc': the individual starts off with a behavioural or competence issue, then faces a series of crises or challenges, which they respond to with varying degrees of success.

By the end, they've learned certain lessons – the ones you're trying to get across. For instance, Oscar Schindler in *Schindler's List* changes from cynical businessman to someone dedicated to saving lives, whereas Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* becomes increasingly cynical and ruthless.

To be convincing, beware of making the change too abrupt. For example, in a sales training course, the character may start off not knowing why they get poor results, observe a colleague successfully implementing the recommended techniques, then try them out

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encountering further obstacles, and only at the end turn into a successful salesperson.

REALISING YOUR CHARACTERS

In our view, once you have storyboarded your characters, it's a good idea to get some feedback on them from other people. Subject Matter Experts and clients can check characters for authenticity and acceptability with the target audience. Colleagues or sample learners can tell you how well they relate to the characters and suggest possible enhancements.

Now it's time for the production phase. If you're shooting video or recording audio, set aside time to prepare the actors/voiceover artists: explain your characters and what they're trying to express. If you're shooting your own still photography, it's still worth briefing the person involved so that they can pose 'in character': looking assertive, evasive, outgoing, lacking in confidence or whatever character trait(s) you've given them.

If you're still unconvinced of the value of characters in digital learning, next time you watch a film, watch TV or read a book, consider how engaged you'd be without the emotions those characters evoke in you. Now think of your learners and how you engage them.

At the KPMG Learning Academy, we believe that creating interesting characters can be very effective in making digital learning more compelling for the learner. As Andrew Stanton of Pixar said in his 2012 TED talk on storytelling: "Make me care please – emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, just make me care."

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