A Model for Informal Design and Learning Delivery (Oct 06)

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There has been much written in the field of instructional design and much confusion as to the difference between model design and cognitive theory. Charles M. Reigeluth, professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University has said much of instructional design theory is no longer applicable in the current context of rapid change, global communication and high technology. He also said instruction is "anything that is done to help someone learn."

Instructional models are guides on which approaches to teaching are based, whether they are implicit or explicit, formal or informal or derived from impulse. A model offers a plan, making it possible both to visualize the whole picture and break it down into discrete, manageable units.

In the context of learning, theories describe the ways people think we learn, as well as new ideas and concepts, and they often explain the relationship between information we already know and the new information we are trying to learn.
This month I would like to introduce to you a new model for informal learning: "The Four A's."

"The Four A's of learning" design is an instructional design model for task-based and workflow e-learning. Applying this model will ensure the design of a module of learning fits into today's context, delivering the correct content to fit an environmental need when development falls to the technologist rather than the trainer.

The goal today is to deliver context based learning to meet the user need. Note the use of "need" as opposed to "want." This defines the difference between formal and informal learning. As you will see in the model, however, the "want" is still a very important factor, especially if we are to deliver learning rather than training. To reach this goal, a shift is required in the approach we take to "train" staff or, in today's world of e-learning, ask our staff to "learn." We need to predict the user's "needs" and quickly move to select the most useful content. We need to use techniques to deliver this content in the quickest manner — we cannot expect the user to spend all day, every day learning. Instead, today's staff members are more likely to search on Google as they require information to complete their task.

This model will help you create learning objects that are small, precise and fit an exact need. The objects will be designed with useful and correct content and won't leave users to find something they think fits the bill in an Internet search. The model consists of four key areas:

1. **Attraction:** An attractive module draws in users, engages them and leaves them satisfied. "Attraction" will ensure users want to use this intervention instead of another.
2. **Attention:** Most models focus on how to get users' attention. This model shifts the focus to the content. The first 'A' already has attracted users, therefore, "attention" can be about the content, narrowly focusing the learning.
3. **Availability:** Albert Einstein once said, "It's not what you know but knowing where to find it." Availability ensures the content is up to date and always retrievable.
4. **Application:** The most important stage of the learning intervention design is to entice users to apply what they have gained to a real-life situation. "Application" drives the motivation to use the new information.

Attraction

Why This – Why Not an Alternative?

The design of each module first should take into account the reason for the module itself. Is it necessary? Does it fulfil a particular need? Does it have an objective the user will be able to use today? What makes it attractive, and why should the user want to use it? Is it engaging, even if it is short? Will it draw in the user and leave the user satisfied? Does it contain the information the user needs in a simple, transferable format?

Easy to Use

Each module should be intuitive — no module should contain instructions for use. The module should have a logical flow to inform users, not try to trap users or get them to answer a question incorrectly.

Quick to Finish

Each module should be relatively quick to finish. Users gain the best knowledge transfer and longer-term retention from shorter task-related modules. This begins the overlap into the second "A": attention.

Attention

Focus to the Point

Modules should be narrowly focussed to a single learning point. Consideration should be toward understanding rather than on simple knowledge transfer.

Consider Users' Needs

Users have stated repeatedly in many surveys and feedback forms what they like and why they leave courses incomplete. The design of the small module must take the cultural knowledge of the user group into account. The user who is requesting how to do something does not need to be led to the "something" via a number of previous steps. Consider providing a direct, single intervention that will be exactly what the user needs and no more.

Availability

Learn, Use and Forget

The Internet, with its direct access to vast quantities of information, has changed the way we work (back-to back-meetings, high volumes of data, ease of access and less time to think). In doing so, it has changed the way we think about the need for information and the way we learn what we see or read.

Information is changing in many areas at such a vast rate that what we might learn in an intervention today is no longer relevant tomorrow.

Focus on the short-term memory rather than the longer-term memory for the actual information being delivered in the intervention. The short-term focus is to deliver information in a way that the user can easily and instantaneously transform it to fulfil the need of the task. Instructional design considerations should be toward helping the user complete the current quickly, on time and without error.

On completion of the task the user can afford to forget the information used, as the next time the user requires the information, the new culture suggests he can return to the module, as it might have changed.

The module design must accept that not every user is here for the first time, so the layout for recall is very important. Further, it is vital that the module is always available, even if you have to add content to suggest it might be no longer relevant. There is nothing worse than going to retrieve a document or some information about which you have some expectation and then waste time trying to find what no longer exists.

Up to Date

Modules may contain both process and data, either of which may change with version. Each module should set out as part of the learning if/where the module has changed since the previous version. The significant data in the module might be the reason the user is returning to this module, not to relearn the process

Application/Motivation to Apply

Content must suggest usage

Maybe the most important area of this instructional design model is the motivation to apply. Each intervention must not be purely theoretical. Each should provide different options for different user circumstances, including seniority, experience, organizational context, etc. Highlight the different outcomes if the process or data you are offering is used. Excite users during the intervention so they will want to use what the module contains. Each module should suggest that users go and use the information they have gained or process they have learned now.

Real-Time Application for Use — Do Not Overcomplicate — No Assessment

It is tempting at this stage of an instructional design model to follow all those that have gone before and throw in some form of assessment. Did the users learn what we just told them?

This model does not suggest the user always is assessed at the end of a module. We do so for two reasons: because the technology allows it, and because collating results often gives the training department the ammunition it requires to show what a good job we have done and therefore a bigger — not smaller — budget for next year.

Provide assessment at the right time and as a separate intervention when the users have had time to reflect, explore the theory or actually use what they have learned. Assist the users by providing checklists or job aids as part of the learning intervention. This is something they can take away and follow to complete a task when it is complicated.

Do not overcomplicate by asking a set of questions that might confuse the users, especially when most questions that can be posed in e-learning require users to think only at the lowest possible level: information recall. Now that you have read the model, take a few minutes to look at the course on which you're working. Consider how this model could be implemented, how the lessons could be shortened and how you can motivate your learner to use your program.

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