

The Scoop on Interactivity

Carmen Taran

A few years ago, BMW released the 745i model—firm and sporty, smooth, and exceptionally quiet. Yet it was deemed driver-unfriendly. Why? Because the onboard gadgets and gizmos were suggestive of a space shuttle cockpit. For instance, it took six steps just to change to a new radio station! The car also came with a manual that owners had to give to parking attendants, because the only thing intuitive about the car was how to open the doors.

Certainly, BMW meant well. And so do we, designers, when we incorporate extraneous interactivity in corporate online instruction. Lately, I have heard so much self-conscious and plaintive talk from training managers, clients, students, and

other corporate luminaries. The theme is reoccurring: we deliver beautiful and achingly brilliant interactions, yet they are often woefully inadequate for the task.

At what point does interactivity become unnecessary in corporate online training? First, in very generic terms, let me describe interactivity types, as seen in online instruction:

- Click-me activities and rollover effects to view additional information.
- Practice exercises, such as multiple choice, true/false, drag-and-drop, fill-in-the-blank, and so forth.
- Simulations (mainly of software or Web-based applications) in which students are asked to follow a set of instructions to learn how to use an application.
- Games, such as word search, hangman, concentration, or Jeopardy.
- Virtual labs, which allow users to interact with an online representation of a piece of equipment (e.g., learn how to build an electric circuit).

The complaints I hear revolve around the fact that designers have the tendency to include interactions in online reference materials or online job aids (versus including them in traditional Web-based training). One of the differences between online job aids (or electronic performance support systems) and pure online training is that the latter provides content that needs to be remembered and therefore rehearsed properly. In such a case, a large amount of interactivity is appropriate.

Why do designers include unnecessary interactivity in online job aids? Some do it just because they think students may get



Carmen Taran, R&D Specialist, AT&T Training.

bored viewing a Web site; or, because some interactions (exercises, click me events, some simulations and games) are seductively easy to develop; or, because they are simply told to do so.

Interactivity in online instruction has been addressed in the literature, but little information exists on how and when *not* to use interactivity and what the consequences are when interactivity is used inappropriately. The goal of this article is to provoke some thinking about the missing research data.

As a designer, I report from the trenches, and here is the scoop: interactivity is indisputably a catalyst for learning, but it is needed mainly in those situations when training content needs to be memorized. When you're developing online reference materials or online job aids, interactivity is not going to help. For instance, in Figure 1, the rollover effect (which took some time to develop) is an unnecessary step. There is no reason you should "hide" information users may need—such as how to set a password—behind a rollover effect. Superfluous and unnecessary, such interactions often transform the review of online materials into a time-devouring task and do not maintain users' motivation.

The instance when rollover or click-me interactions would be appropriate in online job aids is when you have very little screen real estate. However, with modern users' ability to use increased screen resolution, that is rarely the case. For producing effective online job aids, an intuitive interface and navigation system, accompanied by a reliable search engine in case of complex content, is all you need to satisfy and help students.

Do you ever experience an almost irrational exuberance because you can easily program interactive components and hence want to include a few in all your instructional products? I know I am guilty. We often impress our clients and managers with our technical skills at the risk of making our students cranky because unnecessary interactions clutter and slow down access to pertinent information. If professional recognition is what you need, do not base it on the amount of programming you do, but rather on quality comments received from satisfied students.

When you do fall victim to computational fashions that demand that you include interactivity in anything you design, at least be sure to produce a *meaningful* interaction. Take a look at Figures 2 and 3. Clicking on objects to reveal informa-

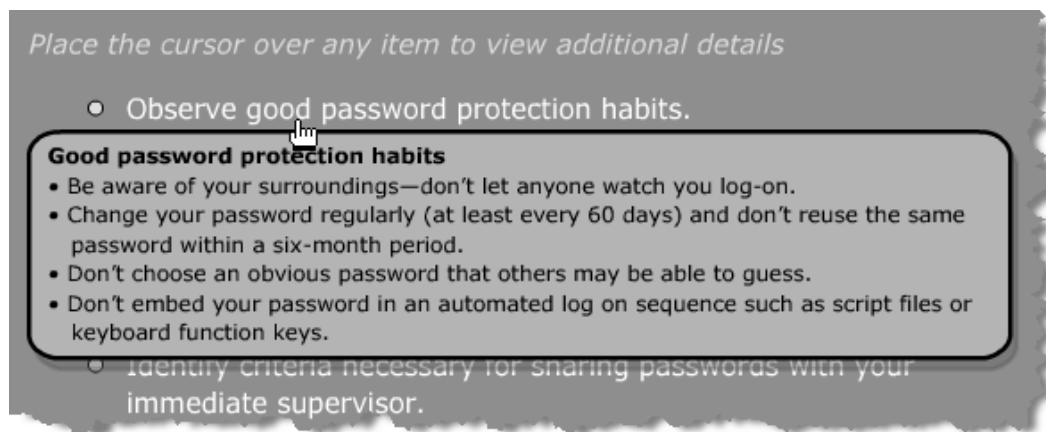


Figure 1. Click-me interactions are often unnecessary in online job aids.

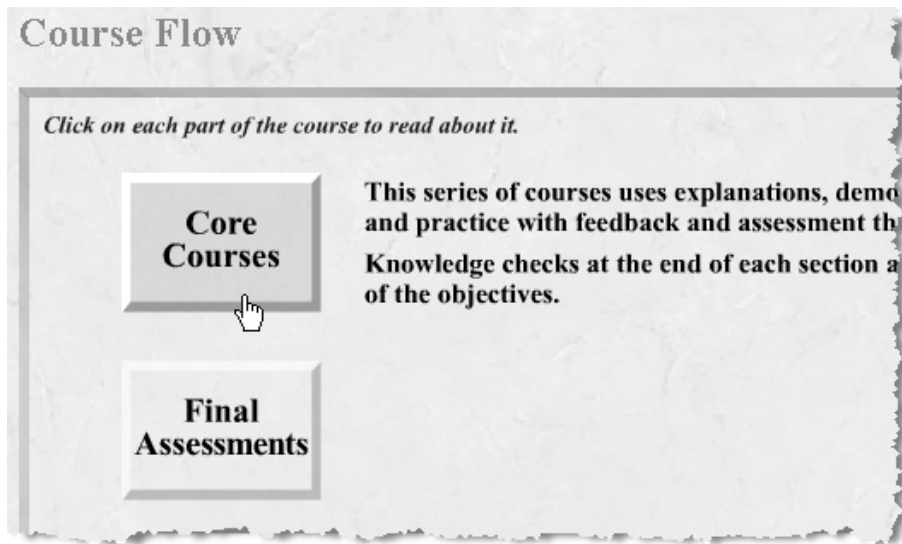


Figure 2. Example of a click-me interaction with no instructional value.



Figure 3. Example of a click-me interaction that is instructionally meaningful.

tion has no instructional value. Clicking on objects to solve a conceptual problem does.

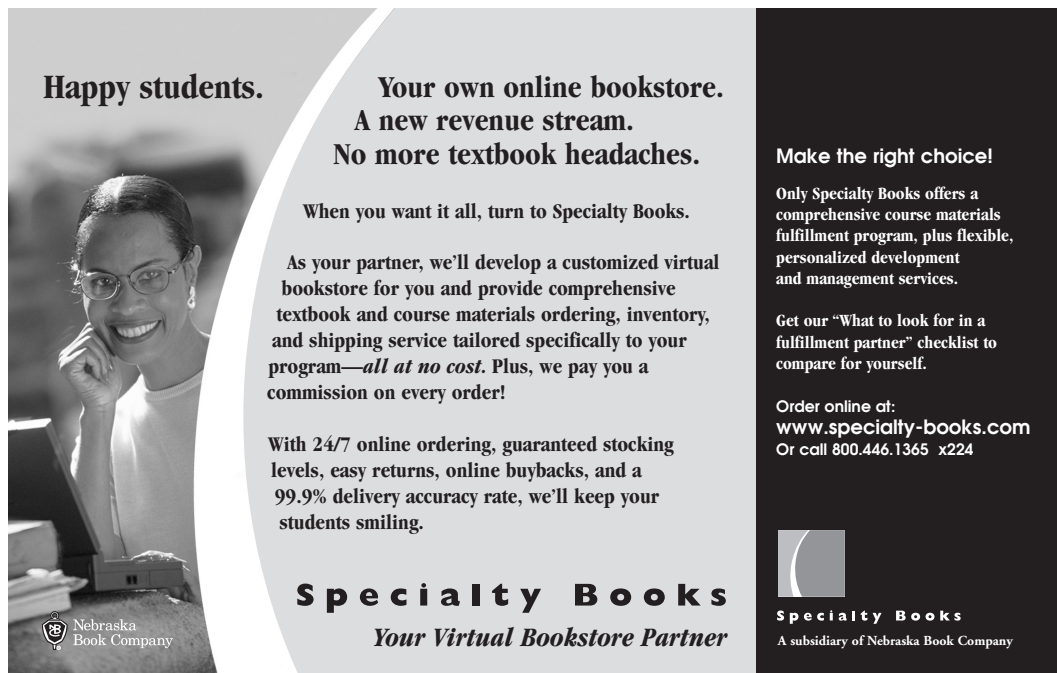
Unfortunately, I hear that there are times when designers are simply told what to do and how to do it. In those cases, I say don't

be shy. Reveal the bold reality to your clients: not everything needs interactivity. An effective statement to practice in such situations—with diplomacy—is “Don’t tell me you need a bridge. Show me the canyon.”

The best judges of the amount and type of interactivity needed should be your users anyway. Verify with them often so you can generate the kind of online materials that are hardwired to users' work place and preferences.

Sometimes, if the desire to get a little nerdy is too strong, do include some interactive elements in online reference materi-

als, but in moderation. The 745i model released by BMW certainly had some features—such as eliminating the ignition key—that may soon become common in the automotive industry. However, it had too many unnecessary features all at once. Be moderate. A little nonsense interaction is relished even by the wisest of the students.



Happy students.

**Your own online bookstore.
A new revenue stream.
No more textbook headaches.**

When you want it all, turn to Specialty Books.

As your partner, we'll develop a customized virtual bookstore for you and provide comprehensive textbook and course materials ordering, inventory, and shipping service tailored specifically to your program—*all at no cost*. Plus, we pay you a commission on every order!

With 24/7 online ordering, guaranteed stocking levels, easy returns, online buybacks, and a 99.9% delivery accuracy rate, we'll keep your students smiling.

Specialty Books
Your Virtual Bookstore Partner

Make the right choice!

Only Specialty Books offers a comprehensive course materials fulfillment program, plus flexible, personalized development and management services.

Get our "What to look for in a fulfillment partner" checklist to compare for yourself.

Order online at:
www.specialty-books.com
Or call 800.446.1365 x224

Specialty Books
A subsidiary of Nebraska Book Company