

Online Course Development

Why a Regular Web Designer Doesn't Make the Grade

James Bandy

The facilities expense and that of hiring qualified professors, combined with the rising trend of busy professionals not wanting to travel to a physical classroom, makes the decision to build out the cost-effective infrastructure of online learning an easy one. That's why many distance education departments and corporate executives turn to Web designers to develop courses to train their students and employees. Many times, this

decision results in a waste of time and money and can be frustrating to organizations simply because Web designers are not trained in the area of creating effective e-learning courses; usually their focus is visually appealing aesthetics. For successful online course production, you need to work with a developer who has proficiency in building programs from start to finish while accomplishing educational objectives in every step of the process.

It's a common misconception that if you can put together a Web site, then you can make an e-learning course. In reality, an effective course needs to have the same care and expertise put into the educational aspects as the design elements. While a Web designer is happy to catch a person's eye through bright colors, graphics, and flash, a course developer ensures that the learner is receiving and retaining the right message. This means that simply drawing a student's attention with a visual image is not enough. Course developers understand that images cannot be used as entertainment, but as learning tools, since students must be able to recall specific material at test time. Since Web designers aren't usually trained in teaching, or knowledgeable about the factors of educational design, their e-learning course design tends to distract a student from learning. For example, in a project management training course, a Web designer



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used a moving image of a crane repeatedly picking up an object. When students were asked what that page taught them, they recalled the moving graphic over any piece of actual information. In courses made by competent developers, pictures are not chosen at random, but are picked carefully for their educational value and are often incorporated with an audio track for further impact and greater memory retention.

Not only does an effective e-learning course incorporate graphics of educational importance, but all pieces of information must be placed in a specific order on the course page. This idea, rarely considered by Web designers, is implemented by experienced course developers so that learners are presented with information in proper sequence in order for maximum memory retention.

Also, course content must be engaging and needs to build the right foundation. Trained developers can incorporate multimedia-rich training tools, like streaming video and audio files that contribute directly to a learner's comprehension of the curriculum. These interactive technologies involve users and allow them to better comprehend concepts and remember complicated sequences. While Web designers may work with an educator and directly receive quality curriculum, they still lack an ability to show it in a clearly arranged way. Simply uploading it to a page and making it visually attractive is not enough and can turn out to look similar to a PowerPoint slide presentation. For a course to be effective, good course developers understand the "take-away" the learner should get from each page and strategically develop each so that learners retain the content and take away a specific educational message rather than remember what image appeared or what sound they heard.

Many times, training programs need an administrative tool that manages learners and keeps track of their progress across all types of course activities. In e-learning, this

element is called a learning management system (LMS). It provides a way for you to do things like enroll students into courses, handle grades, deliver test material, upload study resources, and keep records (which acts as a paper trail and is especially important if school credit is involved). Course developers understand learning management systems and are skilled in working with many different kinds (LMS' vary in their design, features and strengths). For example, does a LMS allow two-way communication between the instructor and the student? Does it support Flash applications when students take quizzes? These different features may not all apply to your training environment, and a course developer knows which ones to include and which ones are unnecessary for your needs. Course developers are able to seamlessly move students through the course process and record their progress appropriately with any LMS. Many ineffective course designs have spots that leave the student thinking "What now?" To avoid this, it is important to have a competent course developer recommend an LMS that fits your specific training needs. Some course developers may even be able to build the technology into the course and host it for you.

Incorporated into an LMS, two-way communication is another technique instrumental to a student's success that may not be completely utilized by a regular Web designer. Course developers know that, first and foremost, students need to be able to interact with their professor for support in understanding tough concepts or when further explanation is needed. Developers integrate the use of video conferencing, discussion boards, live chat, or simple e-mail functions to accomplish this. Communication among the students in an e-learning course is also important, and course developers often set up a forum or Web application used for holding conversations and posting questions and concerns generated by users. With Web

designers, the problem is that they may not be familiar with the different types of contact tools. It is important to employ someone who can not only incorporate communication techniques into the course, but can provide suggestions as to which ones will work best for meeting the needs in each unique situation.

When it comes to effective e-learning programs, course development is more

than just making the pages look good. Skilled developers build courses that are carefully aligned to students' needs, allowing them to directly achieve their learning goals, making e-learning an essential part of education. To a course developer, the goal is to give students the exact skills and information they need at the right times, not just entertain them with a fun design.

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