THE ACCIDENTAL INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNER, 2ND EDITION

Learning Design for the Digital Age

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5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **The Intentional Instructional Designer:** Like many who design e-learning, you might have become an instructional designer "by accident." But you can become intentional about designing effective, engaging e-learning.

2. **Become a Learning Mixologist:** Just as a mixologist goes beyond tending bar to apply the art and science of beverage-making to creating innovative new cocktails, a learning mixologist goes beyond text-filled screens and next buttons to design an array of innovative learning tools.

3. **Stories Form the Heart of Memorable Learning:** A great story provides mental hooks to content, making the story and the content more likely to stick with learners.

4. **Strong Writing Skills Make or Break E-Learning:** Well-written content makes the difference between boring e-learning and a compelling experience. Write for real people—the ones in your learner population—and keep it brief, approachable, and relevant.

5. **You Don't Have to Do Everything Yourself:** Accidental instructional designers have varied backgrounds and skills. Know your strengths and when to find the right partner. That could mean calling in a graphics professional for visual design assistance or purchasing high-quality templates and images.
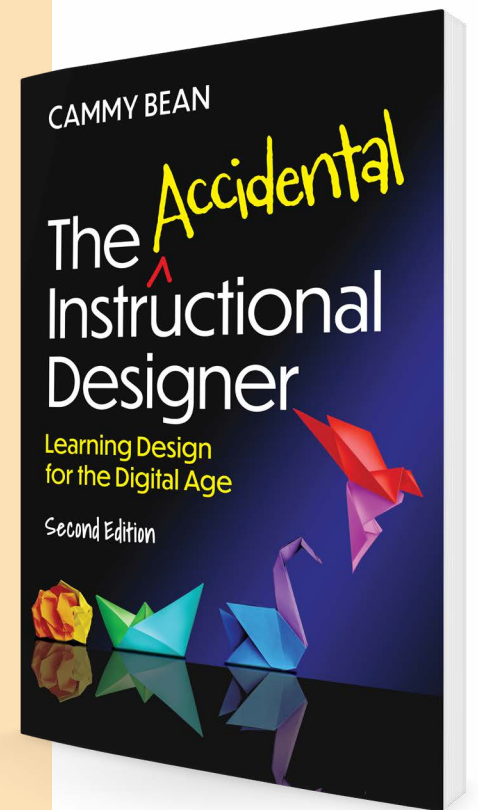
LEARNING PIE: YOU'LL NEED FOUR SLICES

People become e-learning professionals via many paths. They might be good at explaining technical concepts or have a way with PowerPoint. Skills needed range from having the ability to analyze a problem to being able to write cogent assessment questions, with some desktop publishing, graphics design, and technical skills thrown in, along with a heavy dose of adult learning theory.

"Accidental" instructional designers (IDs) may start out as specialists in any (or none) of these areas. IDs' skills fit into four broad categories or "slices" of a large pie:

- Learning
- Creativity
- Technology
- Business

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A "Pinch" of Theory

Effective IDs must know how adults learn and remember new information, as well as how to assess whether someone has learned. You'll also need to know what is and is not effective at changing behavior, the definition of a learning objective, and how to structure content to achieve learning goals.

A "little pinch" of theory can help the accidental ID learn the "secret handshakes" of the profession by gaining insight into:

- Adult learning
- Instructional design
- Cognitive science
- Behavior change

While most practicing IDs do not have degrees in instructional design—in 2022, more than half lacked an advanced ID degree—an intentional ID should do some reading on these topics.

Design Great Learning Experiences

Even instructionally sound content won't be effective if it puts learners to sleep. The writing, graphics, visual design, videos, and interactivity like games and scenarios—the elements that enable the ID to deliver content in an engaging and memorable way—rely on creativity.

> *"Without having any creative talent in our learning design process, we might just end up with lists of really boring learning objectives."* p. 26

Technology Pulls It All Together

IDs rely on technology to create and deliver e-learning. That's why an ID's technical skill set includes proficiency with one or more authoring tools as well as a basic understanding of:

- Standards like SCORM and xAPI
- How a learning management system works
- How to track and analyze key learning metrics

- Simple coding such as HTML5, JavaScript, and cmi5
- The technology learners will be using and any limitations (for example, low bandwidth)

An intentional ID also knows when to call in a technology expert.

Align With Business Goals

Ultimately, e-learning should solve a business problem. The ID must consider the strategic goals and vision of the company purchasing and using the training while also delivering a project that is on time and within budget, is consistent with the company's culture and values, and meets business needs.

DESIGN WITH PURPOSE

A design has a purpose and intention. Every element is necessary and relevant. The e-learning content—what the ID is communicating—supports the purpose and informs the intention.

A good design answers:

- How does it look?
- How does it feel?
- How does it make you feel?
- What can you do with it?
- Does it solve a problem?

Well-designed e-learning looks inviting and pulls in learners. It may evoke a pleasing tactile experience. The ID wants the e-learning to make learners feel a particular way and respond by doing something specific: feel inspired or motivated to perform better, improve safety compliance, or avoid terrible consequences; and feel eager to try new skills. E-learning should solve a problem or fill a need, and learners should be able to figure out how to use e-learning **and why.**

> *"Think about the purpose of the program and approach the content with that in mind. How do you want people to feel after completing your program, and what do you want them to do with that emotion?"* p. 44

CHOOSE A DESIGN MODEL

A learning pattern or design model guides the creation of e-learning. This pattern of interactions and activities provides structure and helps you create effective e-learning. Using a set of learning models also helps your team explain your approach to clients or e-learning stakeholders, show them examples, and explain how the model applies to their content.

Depending on the learning goals, your model may focus on:

- Sharing or communicating information, making it easy for learners to explore a topic to the depth they want or need

- Building skills and knowledge, including offering opportunities for learners to apply knowledge and practice skills

- Solving problems or changing behavior. By veering into more complex problem-solving skills, this e-learning may feature branching scenarios or simulations

Potential models include:

- **Search and Find:** Curate the best content available on your topic and allow learners to search for and access the resources they need from within that collection.

- **Explore the Process:** Create awareness of or share information about a new or changed workflow or process. This permits learners to the jump around rather than requires them to go through content in a linear fashion.

- **Guided Stories:** Build an entire e-learning course around a story to reveal information in the context of that story.

- **See It in Action:** A demonstration that may model poor performance as well as desired performance and teaches learners to avoid common mistakes.

- **Sharing Expert Views:** Podcast or video of an interview with an expert or with multiple peers who share tips or explain how they solved a problem.

- **Goal-Based Scenarios (Branching Scenarios):** Allow learners to fully explore a topic by trying various options at each decision point and experiencing the consequences.

These models are far from an exhaustive list. IDs can develop their own and network with peers to come up with additional models.

THE ELEMENTS OF WELL-DESIGNED E-LEARNING

Effective e-learning requires:

- A strong hook

- Relevant interactivity

- Well-written content

- A compelling story

- Strong visual design

Grab Learners' Attention

A strong hook grabs learners' attention and pulls them in. It answers the question, "What's in it for me?" and taps into their motivation. Your hook may:

- Use learners' fear of consequences if they make a mistake or share the story of other people's failures.

- Offer a startling fact or attention-grabbing statistic.

- Connect the content to the learner's experience, job, or something they've struggled with.

Once you've got them interested, you must hold onto learners' attention. Varying the content presentation can help—drop in an exercise or mix up the media by adding audio, video, or animations. Don't present identical page after identical page filled with text, bullets, and a next button.

"When you attract and sustain someone's attention, you get very different results than when you force them to sit in front of your screen with their eyes peeled open A Clockwork Orange style. If you attract someone's attention, they're going to want to stick around to see what you have to say; their curiosity is piqued, their radars are up, and they want to know what's going to happen next." p. 135

The Dangers of Clicky-Clicky-Bling-Bling

> *"What is clicky-clicky bling-bling? It's an experience with lots of whiz, lots of bang, lots of clicky-clicky in a sad attempt to add pizzazz to dry content and make it more engaging. Once you unwrap the sparkle, sadly, all you're left with is a load of junk. Just because your learning sparkles and shimmers and gets the learner clicking on lots of fancy hotspots and dragging things all over the screen does not mean that you have engaged anyone."* p.53

Adding flashy interactives and graphics does not equate to creating engaging and interactive e-learning that will be effective.

Interactivities in your e-learning are about making things happen: Interactive e-learning enables learners to search and discover, watch videos, read text, and make choices and see the consequences. Gratuitous interactivity and flashing bells and whistles—clicky-clicky-bling-bling or CCBB—is not meaningful and does not enhance learning. Relevant interactivities engage learners' minds and make them think, feel, do, reflect, or connect. It promotes cognitive interactivity.

It's All About the People, Man

> *"Good writing is the single biggest factor that can make the difference between a learning program that bores people to death and one that gets them to pay attention. It's all in the delivery and how you present the information."* p. 171

Good writing is approachable and human. It uses active voice and avoids jargon. Good e-learning sounds like a conversation between real people. Depending on the topic and the company culture, it may include a bit of levity. Even where humor isn't appropriate, the tone and voice can be light and avoid legalese and regulatory mumbo-jumbo.

Good e-learning is concise and leaves the deep details to additional resources. It's presented in simple, digestible chunks. And it does not patronize the learner. Write as an adult addressing other adults, and respect learners' time and intelligence.

Finally, good writing has a coherent underlying structure that makes the content flow. Earlier slides or activities build a foundation; later content uses the foundational material to build an understanding of complex ideas or processes.

Storytelling Enhances Learning

Humans are primed for stories. Throughout human history, we've enjoyed and learned from stories.

Seeing how a process works through the eyes and experience of a relatable character makes it relevant, engaging, and sticky. The right story is memorable. It instructs as well as entertains.

You'll find the right stories by asking the right questions. The subject matter experts (SMEs) may provide you all the factual information you need in a manual or PowerPoint. But you need to dig for the stories: The right questions can reveal the reasons behind a particular way of doing things, common mistakes and their consequences, and where gaps in understanding or performance typically crop up.

> *"Good stories stick us with context and ooze with humanity. When we immerse ourselves in stories, we empathize with the characters, we visualize the scene, and we often put ourselves right into the action. As a learning vehicle, stories add context and details that make the content relevant and relatable."* p. 186

Don't Design Ugly Courses

First impressions matter. If learners reject e-learning because the user interface is confusing or unattractive, they'll never get to the content or decide whether it's credible.

Your company's or client's brand plays a significant role in the visual design of e-learning. It may determine the color

palette, for example, and influence the personality, key messaging, and tone of your e-learning.

Working within the branding, the visual design must be clear and coherent. Visuals should guide learners' eyes to the essential information and convey the hierarchy of the content.

Every image should be relevant and add meaning, not simply decorate the screens. Motion draws the learners' eyes; animations need purpose and meaning and should not pull learners away from key content.

Use caution when choosing templates and images. Avoid clichés and cheesy stock images. Use professional networks and follow L&D bloggers to find effective sources of templates and graphics, and always follow proper licensing and respect copyright. Call on a professional designer if graphical or visual design is not your strong suit.

> *"Remember, looks matter. Spend some time and energy to give your program some intentional and meaningful zing."* p. 205

BECOME A LEARNING MIXOLOGIST

Self-paced e-learning is but one tool in the ID's toolbox. To provide learners with access to information, offer opportunities for them to build and practice skills; enable them to reflect on and improve performance; encourage collaborative learning; and facilitate independent problem-solving. Simple training is not enough.

> *"A learning mixologist looks for the right blends to support the needs of the organization, choosing from a wide array of ingredients and techniques: social learning, collaborative tools, performance support using mobile devices, self-paced programs, augmented reality, virtual instructor-led classes, webinars, video, live classroom sessions, immersive digital experiences, serious games, formal and informal programs, coaching, and mentoring."* p. 154

Delivering the same content year after year doesn't work. A learning mixologist keeps up with technological progress, tries out new approaches, and finds innovative learning solutions to address business goals and solve problems.

That mixologist recognizes that learning is continuous and social. They use cognitive science to their advantage, adopting approaches like spaced learning and personalization to boost the effectiveness and stickiness of their e-learning. They move learning beyond the LMS to mobile devices and other learning portals and shared resources that allow learners to interact and solve problems.

You may have become an instructional designer by accident, having been tapped to turn a PowerPoint into e-learning or evolved from classroom teaching to online instruction. But your ID journey doesn't have to stay accidental.

> *"We may have gotten here by accident, but it turns out we like it here. We like learning and development, we like instructional design, and we like helping people perform better. We think we make a difference . . . Let this book be a gateway—a first step on your journey from an accidental instructional designer to an intentional one."* p. 240

To bring intention to your instructional design practice, network with peers, read books and blogs, attend conferences, and learn from colleagues whose experience and background complement your own. Mine the resources in this book and online to build a network and deepen your knowledge. Above all, never stop learning.