

More is less

Here's an imaginary exchange between an e-learning developer and the client paying for the training:

DEVELOPER: "I don't think we're going to fit all that text on the screen."

CLIENT: "Let's make the text smaller."

DEVELOPER: "Er...we could drop a couple of points. But it still won't fit. Perhaps we could cut it down?"

CLIENT: "Try making the graphic smaller."

DEVELOPER: "Still not quite."

CLIENT: "Oh, well. We'll make this a scrollable page."

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A dumping ground for content

An exaggeration perhaps, but it makes the point that e-learning is often used as a dumping ground for content, particularly when it involves a word-by-word conversion of existing material such as a company manual or legislative documents (which are often verbose and lack clarity in their own right). There's just one aim: get everything from these printed pages into an electronic format.

In designing a course, we would usually aim for around 80 words on the screen at one time. In reality this often expands, but providing the amount of text sits comfortably within the design of the screen, it doesn't need to adversely affect the learner.

Expanding course content

However there is a constant pressure as the course design evolves to expand the amount of content in the course. There is a real risk that text is crammed onto a screen to avoid increasing the overall number of screens (perhaps because this was the way the course was originally budgeted) and to falsely manage the overall perceived length of the course. Client and developer may feel they've completed the job to the satisfaction of both parties. But the result is yet another e-learning course that swamps the reader with text which manages to be both unsuitable and unusable.

This is not good practice and too much content is actually hugely counterproductive.

We've learnt that the one question you should always ask yourself if you think the source material is spiralling out of control is: "Be honest. Would I want to read this stuff?" If the answer is no, there's a problem. So what's the answer?

If the source material really is immovable, then the solution we believe works best is not to change it at all. It's probably fine in whatever form it is. There's no point squeezing the same material into an e-learning format. So we would drop the material into the course as a PDF or Word document which can be opened within the e-learning by clicking a button on the toolbar.

Then you might ask: "What's the point of an e-learning course? Surely I may as well stick it on the internet/intranet?" True, but who would read it? What the e-learning course can do is bring the key points to life and persuade the user to read and absorb the full content - possibly as a separate activity. Typically scenarios will bring the document to life.

e-Learning as the foundation course

Put another way, think of the e-learning course as the foundation course and the document, the degree. One provides a broad knowledge of the subject, the other puts the meat on the bones. So with the e-learning course, you don't try to go deep into the detail. In fact, a key point per screen is just enough for a learner to take in. If they did the course without ever reading the document, they would typically be able to talk at a reasonable level about the subject.

Another great thing about this approach is that you can seamlessly link to specific pages within the document. So let's say we've just given the reader the five best places to go fishing in Spain. We could follow this with "To find out all the best fishing areas in Europe, click the book icon." This would then open the document and jump to the relevant chapter. If they did this throughout, they will have completed the e-learning course AND read the main parts - if not all - of

the document. It's amazing how much easier dry material is to read when you've been given a primer on the subject and you can tackle it in chunks.

One more thing before finishing: if you're not convinced with this approach, and you still think cramming a screen with text is the best way to get lots of information across, take a look at how advertising works. How often do you see an advert that tells you everything there is to know about a company? They manage to convey a lot using a few words. And the good ones spur you into action, make you want to know more.

e-Learning should follow similar principles. Focus hard on the key messages, communicate these well and allow learners to motivate themselves to do the rest.

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