



Developing quality e-learning sites: A designer approach

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Introduction

The e-learning interface design should be a core, integrated component of the overall design of on-line units. The interface design should be determined by how people learn and the tasks they need to perform. This should be driven by a pedagogical, not technological, approach which identifies learning outcomes (Guralnick, 2008). In this regard, design layout has an important role in the look and feel of e-learning sites and can affect the way students learn and interact on a particular unit.

Assessing fifteen e-learning sites in our school, we identified inconsistencies in the use of colours, icons, typography, navigation and file size. We are currently developing a strategy to overcome these limitations and standardise the units across the School of Education.

Objectives

- To describe, in a practical manner, technical considerations for web design such as colour scheme, banners and icons, typography, navigation and file size.
- To work together with academics to achieve outstanding e-learning sites that will engage students and enhance the on-line learning experience.

Design guidelines

Colour scheme

Colours create moods and it is very important to consider the way we combine them. This is especially the case when we take into account that people who are colour blind will not be able to read a website that uses, for example, red and green colours. The same colour scheme should be used in your units for consistency.

Bright backgrounds with colours that “clash” should be avoided, as they make it hard to read, tire the eyes and can turn many readers off. They can even cause dizziness, sore eyes, headache and loss of concentration/motivation.

Course banner and icons

From a design point of view, it is important for units to have their own banner. A banner will attract the student into the unit he/she is navigating. The banner can be placed on the homepage and also throughout the rest of the pages. Icons represent the items with which they are linked. They need to be of the same size and design/look in order to create a professional layout. Using a standard set of icons which matches your course banner throughout your entire e-learning site will enhance the appearance and navigability of your site.

Typography

It is very important to use web-safe fonts when we create e-learning sites. Web-safe fonts are fonts common to all versions of Windows, Mac, Linux, etc. This guarantees a proper display across platforms.

For consistency, the same font type, size and colour should be used in your entire site. Avoid underlining words unless you want to create a link from them. Use bold fonts discreetly; otherwise you are going to lose the attention you want to attract. Italics should be used for foreign or Latin words like *in situ*, *ad libitum* and so on.

Navigation

Navigation is a crucial factor to take into account when we design e-learning sites. The opportunity for fluid movement within your site encourages visitors to explore it in its entirety, whereas poorly designed navigation leaves them stuck and spinning around in circles.

The unit homepage should have at least the following links: Unit Outline (Left corner desirable), Learning Guide, Learning Modules, Collaboration, IT Tutorials/Resources, Assignment Submission and a sitemap.

File type and size

Moderate file size enables efficient downloads. Large files greater than 20 MB take longer to download in slow connections and can be frustrating. It is important to include descriptions of the file type and size so students are aware.

Work in progress

Our first step was writing an article about basic standards for web design which we distributed to academics. The second step was to produce a slidecast with the purpose of giving a visual illustration of these standards (Reyna, 2009). Following this, a meeting was set up individually to help them to build their sites for second semester, 2009. The design guidelines were strictly applied in every unit. During this project, academics reported that building e-learning sites was quicker and easier when working with an e-learning technical officer, rather than working alone, as was also reported by Lewis (2008).

Preliminary conversations with students showed that e-learning sites are easy to navigate and they reported less time to complete tasks. At the end of the semester we will gather information from students via surveys, using Google Docs, on how good design practices can enhance the learning experience.

References

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