ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

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How much time did you spend thinking about the design of your eLearning course?

The content and layout of the course involve users. Are you thinking about your students and their interaction with the course or are you focused only on the appearance of the course?

Decisions about designing the user interface are not a secondary consideration (as many teachers tend to think). The design of a course has a profound effect on how your students learn from it.
In fact, a poorly designed interface not only frustrates users, but can also influence the way they learn. Here are some tips you should consider when reviewing the user interface design.

1. Create a short tutorial for students on their first access

Have a quick overview of how your online courses work with your students: this will help them to get their bearings, but could also prevent you from having to answer to many emails with help and support requests.
You should also consider a short introductory tutorial to show to the learner each time he/she starts a course module with new features, such as the forum or the first quiz. Surely not everyone will need it, but if someone needs it, he/she can easily find what they are looking for.

2. Avoid making the interface "surprising"

Most users hesitate to click on buttons and links if they do not know what will happen by pressing them. So clarity and predictability is one of the crucial aspects of good user interface design.
This is not an obvious consideration since this error often occurs. Have you ever seen a website in which something unexpected happens when scrolling through the page, like a side shift or slowing down the speed? Here, it's called "scroll hijacking": be careful not to fall into this error.

3. Make the next step obvious

Users should never ask themselves "what should I do next?". It is more difficult to perform a vague task with poorly defined steps rather than one with small logical and sequential tasks. This also applies to your user interface.
When a student arrives at the end of a lesson, clear visual indicators should be shown to proceed. Consider adding a short congratulatory message to completing the training modules to let them know that they have done their homework and to remind them to come back later.

4. Is the interface intuitive in use?

One of the design principles of the user interface is called "affordance": the design itself should indicate how it can be used. For example, a button should look like a button that you can click on. Explanations and tutorials can be supportive in some cases, but should never be necessary.

5. Break the monotony and improve readability

The monotony in a project can induce boredom in the student. Change the lengths of sentences and paragraphs, include headings, use quotes and images.
These visual signals facilitate the reading of contents and stimulate memory. Most users who end up on a page follow their eyes with an "F pattern": they read the title, take a quick look at the page (dwelling on headers, bold text or other points of emphasis)

then return to the top and start to read more in depth. This reading process helps us to get an idea of what the lesson will deal with before it starts: this helps organize and store information.

6. Learn from other e-Learning interfaces

Borrowing design cues from other e-learning interfaces that work well could be an idea, but be careful to accomplish something in a certain way just because it's in vogue. Ask yourself first which design feature is meant to realize this interface? Does the solution that was taken into consideration apply to your situation? Above all, make sure it works for your users and does not confuse them.

Test your hypotheses

It is easy to fall into the trap believing that the course will work well even without examining it carefully from a student's point of view (any type of student: from the expert to the novice).
Thinking outside one's perspective is difficult but that's why it's so important to test the course for the user experience. If you are designing just for one type of user, you can meet the needs of 90% of your audience.

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