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Storytelling and eLearning: creating stories to facilitate learning

Find out how using storytelling can help you improve online teaching and how to use different narrative structures depending on your training objectives.

Telling stories is the way we have developed to remember. From oral tradition to audiobooks, stories have helped us pass down knowledge and customs. In the digital age, eLearning has established itself as a fundamental pillar in training and education.

Today, the main challenge for Instruction Designers and educators is not only to convey information, but to do so in a way that stimulates learners' interest and engagement. This is where the art of narrative and storytelling comes back into play.

The strength of storytelling in dissemination lies in its ability to **create an emotional connection with the study material**. Stories transform abstract concepts into concrete scenarios that students can see themselves in. In this context, Instruction Designers and Subject Matter Experts play a crucial role. These are not just the course designers and experts on the subject to be disseminated, but true architects of learning experiences, who use every narrative element to ensure educational objectives.

The role of Instruction Designers and Subject Matter Experts in eLearning

Instruction Designers and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) are responsible for creating educational content. The **Instruction Designer** is the designer of the course, the person responsible for defining the structure of the course, the sequence of lessons and the mix of teaching tools such as audiovisual files, on-demand lessons and forums. Its purpose is to decide the shape of the course to maximize student learning.

In his work, he can collaborate with the **Subject Matter Expert**, the expert on the subject, who has the task of selecting and preparing the teaching contents. For more complex subjects, the SME's job is to evaluate what to consider and what to leave out and to decide the sequence in which to present the essential concepts. Collaboration between ID and SME is essential to ensure that courses not only transmit knowledge, but do so in a way that stimulates student interest and engagement.

It is essential for Instruction Designers to design courses that are not only informative, but also intuitive and accessible. This requires a deep understanding of learning theories and educational technologies, as well as the ability to translate educational needs into structured learning experiences.

Aspects such as the logical sequence of content and its interactivity, assessments and feedback are important to ensure that each element of the course contributes to the overall learning objective.

The task of the Subject Matter Experts is to bring their profound specialist knowledge to the process. Their collaboration with Instruction Designers is crucial to ensuring that instructional materials are accurate, relevant and up-to-date. Additionally, SMEs can offer unique perspectives on how to present concepts in ways that are more understandable and interesting to students.

Through the strategic use of storytelling and narrative, IDs and SMEs can **transform information into stories that capture attention**, stimulate the imagination and facilitate learning. This narrative approach not only makes the material more memorable, but also helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing students to see how the concepts they learn apply in the real world.

Narrative structures in eLearning

The choice of **narrative structure** in an eLearning course is a crucial element that influences the success of the training experience. A well-chosen and packaged narrative structure not only captures students' attention, but also facilitates learning and memorization of content. There are various narrative structures that can be adapted to the needs of the various topics. Designers also have leeway in how to adapt storytelling to learning content.

An effective narrative structure in eLearning should be chosen based on the type of content and the student audience. For example, a **linear narrative**, which follows a chronological path, may be ideal for topics that require sequential understanding, such as history or scientific processes. In an introductory course on the history of medicine or technological advances, the concepts exposed will follow a simple progression, made up of successive sequences.

On the other hand, a **branching structure** suitable for simulations or decision-making scenarios, where students can explore different consequences of their choices. When dealing with complex concepts, it may be limiting to follow only their main aspects. If the different parts influence each other, it will be necessary to first explore each of these, and then the structure as a whole.

Another important consideration is the experience level and characteristics of the audience. A simple narrative structure will be more suitable for beginners or young students. This is because a linear exposition leaves room for concentration on the individual elements, presented with a slower rhythm and clearer connections. For a more expert or professional audience, more complex structures can be used that encourage autonomous exploration and critical reflection.

Another important aspect is to try to make the narrative elements familiar, so as to allow the public to recognize their own experiences. This may include the use of metaphors, anecdotes, or stories that reflect real work or everyday life situations. These elements help make the material more familiar and engaging, thus increasing the effectiveness of learning.

The six typical structures of Kurt Vonnegut's novel in eLearning

Kurt Vonnegut, one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, identified **six fundamental narrative** structures that can also be effectively applied in eLearning.

Applying these narrative structures in eLearning not only makes courses more interesting and engaging, but also helps structure the learning material to affect students emotionally. As a result, the learning experience will be deeper and more meaningful for users.

These structures, originally designed for the novel, offer a unique framework for creating engaging and educationally effective stories in online courses.

- From misery to happiness (the ascent)
- From happiness to misery (the fall)
- Icarus (rise and fall)
- The Count of Monte Cristo (fall and rise)
- Cinderella (rise, fall and final rise)
- Oedipus (fall, rise and final fall)

From Misery to Happiness: This structure follows a path that goes from a difficult initial situation to a happy ending. In the context of eLearning, it can be used to show **overcoming challenges** or learning new skills, motivating students through a path of personal and professional growth.

From Happiness to Misery: Opposite to the first, this structure narrates the decline from a positive situation to a negative one. It can be used to **illustrate the consequences of wrong decisions** or incorrect practices, emphasizing the importance of right and responsible choices.

Icarus: Stories of Rise and Fall. The educational content is intended to warn of the **risks of success**. This theme is well suited to manager training for growing businesses, to ensure the ability to maintain focus on balanced development.

The Count of Monte Cristo: the theme of fall and rise also has the didactic purpose of warning against incorrect decisions, but in this case it is possible to anticipate the signs of the fall at the moment of the rise.

Cinderella: A story of rise, fall and rise, similar to the fairy tale Cinderella. This structure is perfect for courses that **address resilience**, overcoming obstacles and success despite adversity and that emphasize the ability to anticipate subsequent challenges.

Oedipus: fall, rise and final fall. An eLearning course can emphasize the need to ensure that good practices are consolidated and reviewed to ensure their effectiveness. In crisis management, it is not uncommon for an initial risk, if addressed poorly, to lead to greater damage.

How to create engaging stories

Creating engaging stories in eLearning is not just a matter of choosing the right narrative structure, but also requires the ability to weave together elements that resonate with students' experience and interests. Here are some practical tips for developing effective stories that improve the learning experience.

Before you begin writing your teaching story, it is critical to **understand your students**. What is their background, what are their interests and learning needs?

The characters in your story should be realistic and familiar. Students should be able to identify with the characters or see situations similar to those they might encounter in real life. This helps create an emotional connection with the study material.

Every good story has a conflict or challenge that the protagonist must overcome. In the context of eLearning, these conflicts can be related to the **learning objectives of the course**. For example, a story can illustrate how to overcome common obstacles in teamwork or time management.

Images, videos and graphics can greatly enrich an educational story. Visual storytelling helps keep students engaged and can be especially effective for explaining complex or abstract concepts.

Including **interactive elements**, such as choices that influence the course of the story or scenario-based simulations, can increase immersion and engagement.

Creating engaging stories in eLearning is an art that requires creativity, empathy, and a deep understanding of learning objectives. When done well, storytelling can transform a course from a simple lesson into a rich and memorable learning adventure.