

# What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate

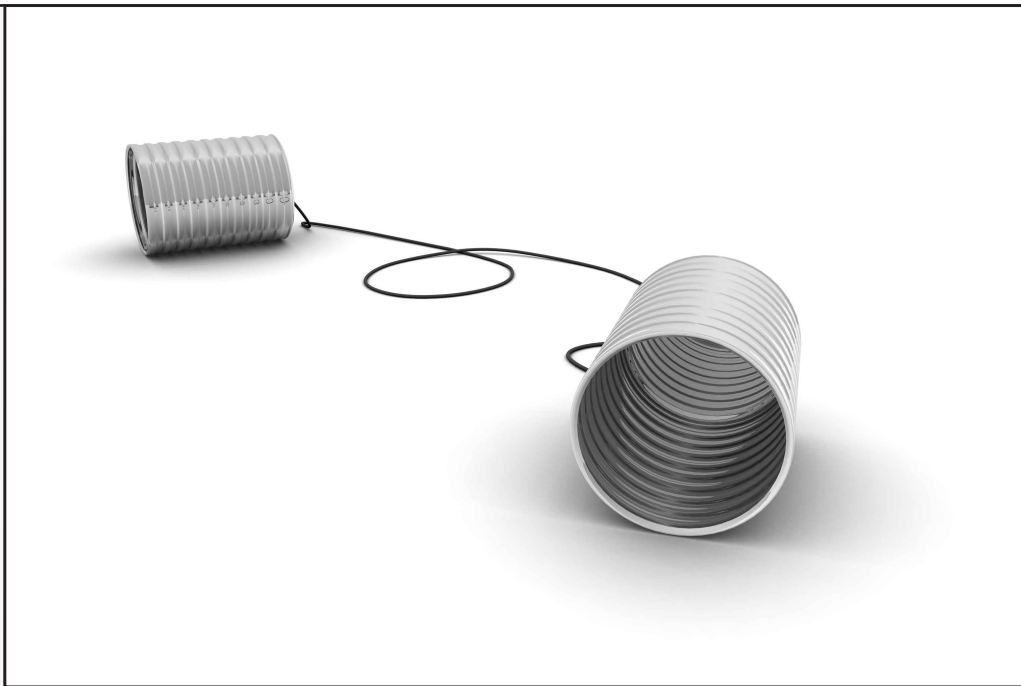
by Brian Propst

How to use media effectively for eLearning communication

In the movie “Cool Hand Luke” the warden had his own personal way of communicating to the inmates. When communication failed he would simply state: “What we have here is a failure to communicate.” He would then beat the offender unconscious and put him into solitary confinement. Fortunately, remediation for eLearning is not this severe; nevertheless, the most common failure of eLearning is the failure to communicate.

All instruction is based on the premise of an instructional message being communicated to a learner, through some sort of channel, such as a teacher or media piece (book, CBT, video). In eLearning, the instructional message is normally communicated solely by media elements. If the media elements are incorrect or inappropriate for the instructional message, the communication process fails.

**The Language of Media**  
Media communication has its own unique language and like most languages requires interpretation to understand. French, German, Italian, for instance, use the letters



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of an alphabet that we understand. The word ‘caballo’ is Spanish for horse; we recognize all the characters of the word ‘caballo’ but its pronunciation and meaning have to be interpreted into our language. While the English language is spoken in Sydney, Australia; New York, USA; and Northumberland, UK., each has its own vernacular and expressions. In addition, the same words can have different meanings depending on where they are used. The same is true in media communication.

The elements of media are recognizable and familiar to us all, but it is the misunderstanding of the media characteristics and production values that result in miscommunication. Without such an understanding of these aspects of media, communication will fail.

## Media Elements

Media elements comprise the obvious aspect of media, and are usually the only aspect that most people consider. Text in a book, or in a magazine is a media element. Photographs, drawings, film, video, animation and sound are other examples of media element types. Media elements are the alphabet of the media communication process and, on their own, say very little. Media elements, in turn, require media characteristics.

## Media Characteristics

Media characteristics are the words of the media communication language that define how the receiver or learner uses the media. Media characteristics give the language of media communication its meaning. Media characteristics are defined by five attributes; senses, pace, environment, dissemination patterns, and audience behavior patterns.

- Senses are used to ‘consume’ the media type. Books are read, music is heard, and films are viewed.

- Pace is to the rhythm or rate at which the media should be assimilated. A book is read in

multiple sessions and at the reader's leisure. In a film the speed and length of the film determines the pace.

- Environment is the physical context, both actual and intentional, where the media will be accessed. A book may be read while taking a shower but it is not its intended environment.

- Dissemination Pattern is the amount of time it takes the media to convey its information. For example, a vivid description of a beautiful landscape in a book might take several pages, but a painting of the same scene would be instantaneous. This also refers to the normal route taken to get to the audience.

- Audience Behavior Pattern determines how the audience feels that the media should be consumed. Audience behavior patterns are the predispositions of the audience in regard to the natural consumption or use of the media. The audience will have a different behavior pattern for the media consumption of a film when viewed in a theater, than when the same movie is viewed in the home on television.

**Production Values**  
If media elements are the alphabet and media characteristics are the words, then production values can be thought of as the vernacular and expressions of

the media communication language. Production values add clarification to the media language. As an example; when we speak we use words to communicate but the tone and loudness of our voice can add emphasis to the meaning. We have heard it said many times that it's not necessarily what you say but how you say it. This is also

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true of production values. Production values are the expression of the media language. Production values are normally expressed in terms of: editing, color, lighting, shape, scale, relative position, movement, point of view, angle, connotation, performance, and sound.

The type and level of the production values is determined by the type of media element being used. For example, the production value of sound does not enter into consideration when referring to the media element of text, but the production value of editing is very important. The following is a brief and generic explanation of each of the production values.

- Editing determines what stays and what is taken away. The "edit" process decides what is important and what is not.

- Color the use or misuse of color can change a media message completely. Color schemes cannot be arbitrarily chosen. Color affects us on an emotional level rather than a conscious level.

- Lighting is a visual production value in a film, video, photo, painting or drawing. The highlighted areas and shadows can convey additional meaning to an image.

- Shape connotes different meanings depending on the cultural background of

the viewer. In the USA, rectangular shapes evoke a sense of regulation and order, while circular shapes can evoke the sense of happiness. Shape affects us on a subliminal level.

- Scale is a relational property. Larger objects appear closer, clearer, and of greater importance. The

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production value of scale becomes lost when the scale between objects is too small and when there are more than 10 scaled objects on the screen.

- Relative Position arranges media elements on the screen. It is the relationship between the elements and how they affect and change the meaning of the other elements. Relative position can add emotional energy to a piece and draw attention to specific areas

- Point of View is to the source of the information. This can be seen as the communicator of the message, not necessarily the initiator of the message, but the one who presents the information. This is a very important aspect from a motivation and engagement standpoint. Without a 'point of view' the media will appear drab and dreary.

- Angle refers mainly to visual imagery and the point from which the image is presented. When the learner sees the subject from an elevated angle the material does, not seem as overwhelming. A birds eye view, on the other hand, has the extreme effect of making the subject below so removed that it is no longer important.

- Connotation is associated culturally. We associate meaning with the media element based upon our cultural society. Connotative

meanings change over time and cultural boundaries. A 'sunny' personality is a positive trait in our culture, but in Egypt the connotation of 'sunny' is quite different.

- Performance is mainly the domain of film, television, and radio; it involves the characters ability to add emphasis to the media message. In an eLearning piece, performance determines where the 'characters' or 'guides' add personality to the piece by pointing or looking to the area of importance.

- Sound requires an understanding of such things as source connected sound, background sounds, narration, source disconnected sound, and all aspects of the aesthetics of sound. There is a great sound quality difference between dialog and narration; a conversation should sound like a conversation not like two narrators talking.

Summary  
Creating content for eLearning is

not a simple process; the instructional message must be communicated to the learner by the media chosen. Media has its own language but uses familiar elements. Each of the media elements is given meaning through their characteristics and production values. Each element will impact the effectiveness of the other media elements associated with it. It is not an easy mix, but without an understanding of how media communicates, failure is assured.

When media is seen for its elements only and its characteristics and production values are ignored, the end eLearning product is just activity without substance or to put it into the words of 'Cool Hand Luke,' its just 'shaken the bush, Boss, shaken the bush'.

## Production Elements in Action

In a recent eLearning engagement, SSE employed the production elements of balance, relative position and point-of-view.

Balance:

- The circles indicate a balance between opposing corners.
- Where the vectors of balance intersect is the virtual guide or "coach".
- The slight offset of the balancing elements in opposing corners create an energy that draws the eye around the screen.

Relative position:

- The virtual guide or "coach" in this training is a video element which includes motion and sound. The eye will initially be drawn to the center of the screen because of the moving element.
- The balancing elements, mentioned above, will keep the energy flowing even when the motion of the virtual guide concludes.

Point of View:

- In addition the 'point of view' throughout this training is through a virtual guide / coach who adds a human quality creating one of the engagement factors of the training.

Figure 1. TRAINING INTERFACE

