

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of eLearning

by Brian Propst

As you probably guessed from the title of this article, I was part of the spaghetti western generation, but I feel that the above is an appropriate title for the types of eLearning that most people encounter. From an investment standpoint, everyone wants their eLearning to fall into the 'good' category, but what separates the 'good' from the 'bad' and the 'ugly'? Why is it that some eLearning pieces should be classified as 'works of art' while others can only serve as a 'bad example'? The foundation for creating 'good' eLearning begins with effective communication.

The Communication Process

There is no such thing as a comprehensive communication model. If you would look in any communication textbook you would be confronted with many alternatives. Most are a series of boxes connected by arrows that show how the communication process is supposed to work. Although there are reasons for each model, they share common elements.



The three major elements are:

- § Message
- § Channel
- § Receiver

The two minor elements are:

- § Interference
- § Feedback

In all communication models a message is communicated to a receiver through a channel. If the message received resembles the message sent, then effective communication has taken place.

Understanding the Learning Environment

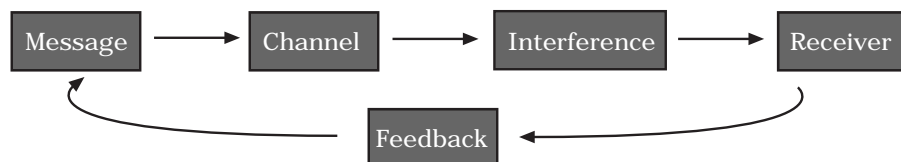
Most training has been conducted the same way since the dawning of time: a 'master' imparts information to a 'novice'. The only thing that has changed is the method of delivery. In the 1950's, a new training approach moved the emphasis of training from 'content-centered' to 'learner-centered'

education. 'Content-centered' learning is mainly concerned with the presentation of information; whereas 'learner-centered' training environments focus upon communicating the information to the learner. The 'learner-centered' approach does more than simply present information. It is designed to make sure that learners understand as well as receive the information communicated to them.

Communication from the Classroom to the PC

Today's classroom instructors and teachers are communicators. The difference between a 'good' instructor and a 'poor' instructor is in his / her ability to communicate, not in the knowledge of the subject being taught. If a person cannot communicate information to another, he is ineffective as an instructor. In a classroom the instructor (channel) takes the desired instruction (message) and communicates this instruction to the student (receiver). This process is dynamic because the instructor (channel) can modify the method by which the instructional message

Figure 1. Simplified Communication



continued on page 2

is delivered, based upon the capabilities of the learner.

The different means of delivery are called instructional methods. For example, an instructor may observe that several of his students learn better by 'doing' and others by discussion. The instructor will use 'hands-on' projects and discussions so that the students have several methods of learning. These instructional methods are support elements and are usually referred to as secondary communication elements. An instructor (channel) will use many different types of instructional methods (support) throughout his teaching to assure that the instruction (message) is delivered clearly to the student (receiver).

The Instructional Message

The instructional message is created by an instructional designer. The role of the instructional designer is to organize, and 'chunk' the desired instructional information for the learner. The message is the purpose for the communication in the first place, and the message is created with the learner in mind. Before any communication can be successful, the message must be well organized for the learner. This means that before learning can take place the first step is to make sure the instructional message is clear.

The Learner's Capabilities and Limitation

As stated previously, the instructor (channel) will modify and adjust the message (instruction) to assure that the student (receiver) understands the instructional message. A teacher is trained to look for feedback from the student and judge if the communication process is effective or not. For an instructor to be effective in

communicating the message, he must know the learner's capabilities and limitations. The instructor will choose an instructional method that will best suit the abilities of the learner based on feedback received. Therefore, the second step in effective communication is to know your learner.

Changing Channels

Now let's transfer the roles of the receiver (learner) and channel (teacher) from a classroom context to an eLearning environment. In the classroom the instructor is the channel for the instructional message, the means used to convey this message are called instructional methods. In eLearning, both the teacher and his instructional methods are replaced by media elements. While the learner aspect of the communication will remain the same, the instructional methods employed to convey the instructional message must be modified.

In an eLearning environment, the main difference is the channel and the instructional methods chosen. The 'dynamic teacher' of the classroom is replaced with media elements. The media elements, with their characteristics, production values and method of delivery, must now convey the instructional message without the benefit of direct feedback. The problem that occurs with many eLearning pieces is the inability to translate the instructional message into the correct media components. When media is used in place of the 'instructor', it must fulfill two roles: the role of the channel and the role of instructional methods. Therefore, the third step in effective eLearning is to know how to use media to communicate.

Media as Channel and

A Primer on Communication Elements

There are many communication models. Nevertheless, there seems to be a number of elements common to the vast majority.

Message:

This is the information or purpose of the communication. In a typical conversation the words spoken contain the message.

Channel:

This is the method chosen to communicate the message. In a conversation we talk, which means that the channel chosen is auditory. Also in a typical conversation there are secondary means of communication such as body language that will either affirm or negate the words spoken.

Receiver:

This is the audience for which the message was intended. A receiver needs to understand the message and be aware that the message is directed towards him.

Interference:

Interference is anything that can block or alter the communication message. Interference can occur both internally and externally. In its external form, interference can be excessive crowd noise in a restaurant during a dinner conversation; you may only hear part of what the person is saying. Internal interference is hearing only what you want to hear, sometimes referred to as selective hearing.

Feedback:

This is the reaction to the communicated message. In a conversation when you ask someone for a dinner date and they wrinkle their nose with disgust and say "NO," you have instant feedback. Feedback can take other forms as well such as an increase in sales after your sales force attends a motivational meeting. In some cases feedback does not occur or is extremely hard to define, for this reason it is classified as a minor element. It is good to have but not absolutely essential for the communication process.

Instructional Method

Once a clear instructional message is defined and the organization of information is 'chunked' based on the learning audience, then the design process of delivery begins. The choice of media elements must be considered from the very beginning of the eLearning design process, not as an after thought. Media is used (consumed) differently based upon the media elements characteristics: text is read, words are heard, film is viewed, and so on; but this only touches on the extremely trivial characteristics of media elements. Text in a book is consumed completely differently than text on a computer screen.

Converting the channel and instructional methods to media elements and then breaking down the instructional message into smaller chunks, based on the media elements' characteristics and limitations, can be thought of as translating a language. In this case, we are translating spoken instruction into media elements.

Media Translation

Everyone wants their eLearning to fall into the 'good' category, but what separates the 'good' from the 'bad' and the 'ugly'?

In eLearning, the media must translate the instructional message into a message acceptable and understandable by the learner. This is no simple task. The type of images and their placement with other elements on a computer screen will create a message itself. Text in a book may convey the intended media message, but text in a book has its own set of unique characteristics that do not translate the same way on a computer screen.

Most of us, for instance, have read a book that was made into a movie. Remember how the movie had to leave some things out of the story or completely destroy important concepts. The reason is that in a book, the thoughts of the characters can be placed in the text. Also, more time can be taken to develop the inner workings of a character. Books are consumed at leisure and in multiple sessions. On the screen, time is limited, but the vista of the screen can have a greater emotional impact on a scene. This is an example of how the communication message is changed when one static media piece (book) is substituted for another static media piece (film). In the eLearning environment, static media elements are being used to

Brian Propst



Brian Propst is an SSE senior consultant with eight years experience in training coordination, instructional design, courseware development and marketing presentations for clients and prospects. He specializes in authoring programs, adult workforce instructional design, visual development skills, audio construction and manipulation.

replace the dynamics of a teacher.

Summary

Good eLearning can be summed up in three steps.

1. Follow sound instructional design, make sure the instructional message is clear and the information well organized.
2. Know your learners, what are their strengths and weaknesses. Know their background so that you can build on their previous knowledge.
3. Effectively use media elements to convey the instructional message. The media used must also be appropriate for the learner and the instructional message being communicated.

The quality of 'good' eLearning is one in which the intended instructional message is understood by the learner. 'Bad' eLearning is one where the instructional message is present but gets lost in the media clutter. When you run across an eLearning piece that simply lacks any discernable instructional message, that eLearning is just plain 'ugly.'

