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Captivating Your Online Learner with Engaging Course Visuals: 7 Easy Principles

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In an online environment, keeping your audience's attention and focus on the critical concepts can be a challenge. Visuals are one of the most powerful ways to engage online learners, especially those from the upcoming generations. We will discuss how the visual design quality of course materials impacts student learning and describe seven simple design techniques that educators can use to create clean, clear, and uncluttered visuals.

Why does good design matter?

Design affects our emotions and perceptions. Attractive visual design can evoke positive emotions in learners and facilitate learning (Plass et al., 2014). Designing attractive, simple, and uncluttered course materials contributes to emotional design, thereby enhancing positive feelings of learners and increasing motivation. Positive emotions have been shown to contribute to more flexible and adaptive thinking and encourage creativity, problem solving, recall, and innovation (Isen, 2002). People also perceive well-designed objects as easier to use (Norman, 2005). Utilizing a few simple design techniques to create clean, clear, and uncluttered course materials can help enhance learning.

Good design also impacts cognitive processing, increasing both comprehension and information retention. Research suggests that visual design affects cognitive processing in four main ways: selection, organization, integration, and processing efficiency (McCrudden & Rapp, 2015). Good design allows students to identify and focus on the most relevant information and efficiently organize that key information in memory, increasing comprehension and information retention.

Finally, well-designed course visuals communicate the credibility of, and care taken by, the presenter. Research has found that judgments of credibility are largely influenced by design elements like layout, font, and color (Robins & Holmes, 2007). Given that materials that look good tend to be judged as both better and more credible, design improvements can increase presenter credibility and communicate that the presenter cares about both the audience and the topic.

The seven principles of good design

How can we start transforming our online environments into visually engaging learning experiences? Here are seven principles of good design that can be used to enhance your course materials and positively impact student learning.

Less is more – Online environments that are cluttered and busy confuse and distract the learner, taking their limited attentional resources away from the primary learning objectives. Too

much information detracts from the learning experience by increasing cognitive load and processing time. Decrease the amount of text in your designs and limit the number of design elements (shapes, images, colors, text, etc.) to only what is necessary. A course presentation, for instance, should ideally have fewer than 15 words per slide and favor images over text.

Limit color – Color is a very powerful design tool, and the use of color can greatly enhance or again distract from important information. When selecting a color scheme for your designs, stick with two to four colors at most. Choose two contrasting neutral colors (e.g., black and white, or white and navy) and one accent color that is used sparingly (this can be a brighter contrasting color like orange, green, or blue). Most importantly, ensure you have enough contrast between the value of your color choices so that content is easy to read.

Choose fonts carefully – Consider font as your tone of voice. Some fonts convey a serious academic tone, while others are more playful and silly. When choosing a font for academic designs, avoid fonts that are decorative (Comic Sans, Papyrus, Curlz, etc.) and overused (Arial, Calibri, Times New Roman). Using a sans serif designer font, such as Lato, Century Gothic, Ebrima, Microsoft Sans, or Trebuchet, will add to the credibility of your design. San serif fonts are the easiest to read in online environments.

Use white space and consider composition – A sophisticated design starts with composition. Carefully consider how many items you include in a design and where the items are placed. Vary your composition to create interest and consider using the Rule of Thirds when placing design elements. Leaving white space around design items can help focus a viewer's attention and provide interest.

Emphasize with caution – If we highlight everything, we've highlighted nothing. Selectively choose and emphasize only the most important information, and ensure that the emphasis method you use is different enough from the rest of the design that it easily stands out. You can emphasize content in many ways, but a few that are easy to use are size, color, and style (underline, italics, bold).

Create relationships – We can create relationships between content in three primary ways: repetition, alignment, and proximity. Repeat design elements like color, font, composition, and size to provide a mental cue that the items are related. Items that are aligned and placed near each other are also perceived as being related. Use these methods to give your viewer visual cues that help communicate your information.

Use images – The use of images is one of the easiest ways to capture interest online. Using relevant images in your designs can greatly impact student memory, retention, and recall (look up the Picture Superiority Effect for more information). When choosing images, make sure they are large, high-quality images and not clip art. Icons can also be useful for conveying information. Several websites that have free high-quality images are: Pexels, Pixabay, and Flickr Creative Commons.

Conclusion

Many courses utilize slides to convey content whether it be in a voice-over lecture or provided as reference materials. Let's explore how these seven principles can be applied to your typical presentation slide.

The slide shown contains too much information, has too many forms of emphasis, and needs some added images.  Slide#1

In this first slide revision, the Less is More principle was applied along with a better composition using the Rule of Thirds and alignment of the content items  Slide#2

In this second slide revision, the font was changed and emphasis was added on the important part of the word.  Slide#3

Finally, here are all seven principles applied to this slide. A relevant high-quality image was added to aid with concept memorization.  Slide#4

Applying even one or two of these seven principles can improve students' visual engagement in their online courses and their ability to interpret your content. We highly recommend taking the time to make these changes to your course materials to improve online student learning experiences.

References

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