

# THE eLEARNING DEVELOPERS' JOURNAL™

*Strategies and Techniques for Designers,  
Developers, and Managers of eLearning*

THIS WEEK — DESIGN STRATEGIES

## The Nine Too-Often-Neglected Principles of e-Learning Design

BY TY JOHNSON

**Y**es, nine. I realize ten would have been a rounder, more traditional number, but that didn't worry Gagné with his Events of Instruction, now did it? (See Sidebar 1 on page 2 for a summary of Gagné's Events.) And perhaps there's even a cosmic connection there, since a good third of his Events of Instruction seem to have fallen into the realm of neglect as well (with the notable exception, of course, of the revered Event #2, which is devoutly observed in every e-Learning course via the ceremonial listing of the never-to-be-read course objectives by no later than screen 3). But let's save that soapbox for another article.

The truth is that every time I tried to think of a tenth principle to round out my list, it seemed either too painfully obvious or not quite neglected enough to be grouped with the other stepchildren, so nine it remains. And I wish I could say that my motives for sharing them were more altruistic, but in reality, since I will likely be reviewing e-Learning courses for many years to come, I'm primarily hoping to make my own life a little more bearable! So without further ado, here are the nine principles.

### Principle 1: Interactive or hyperactive?

We all know that, in a self-paced, asynchronous course, learning occurs as a result of the interactions embedded within the training. But somewhere in the evolutionary timeline of online learning, someone mixed up "meaningful interactivity" with "frequent hyperactivity" and the number of links per page became one of the standard units of measure for instructional quality. (See Figure 1 on page 2.)

*While we e-Learning designers can cite a wide range of guidelines for our work, the truth is that many of these values are, as Shakespeare said, "more honored in the breach than in the observance."*

*This week, an award-winning designer takes a left-handed look at what we say we do, what we really do, and at some practices we might want to adopt.*

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**The eLearning Developers' Journal™** is designed to serve as a catalyst for innovation and as a vehicle for the dissemination of new and practical strategies and techniques for e-Learning designers, developers and managers. The **Journal** is not intended to be the definitive authority. Rather, it is intended to be a medium through which e-Learning practitioners can share their knowledge, expertise and experience with others for the general betterment of all.

As in any profession, there are many different perspectives about the best strategies, techniques and tools one can employ to accomplish a specific objective. This **Journal** will share different perspectives and does not position any one as "the right way," but rather we position each article as "one of the right ways" for accomplishing a goal. We assume that readers will evaluate the merits of each article and use the ideas they contain in a manner appropriate for their specific situation.

The articles contained in the **Journal** are all written by people who are actively engaged in this profession — not by paid journalists or writers. Submissions are always welcome at any time, as are suggestions for articles and future topics. To learn more about how to submit articles and/or ideas, please visit: [www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com).



## DESIGN / strategies

Beware — you may even be an unwitting hyperactivist yourself! For instance, do any of these sound familiar?

*"This page could use a little interaction. Let's stick in a hyperlink that brings up some pop-up text!"*

*"That module summary is a bit static. I know — let's add a bunch of different URLs that they can link to!"*

*"We need to get the user a little more involved. Let's break that page up into four little pages so they're forced to click Next a few times!"*

If these statements bear an uncomfortable resemblance to your own thought processes, there may nonetheless still be hope for you. But I would recommend you keep reading.

### Principle 2: Trans-media operations: Day surgery or intensive reconstruction?

So you already have an online reference guide in place containing everything your employees will ever need to know on Topic X?! Then with a simple nip here (i.e., listing of the learning objectives for each unit) and a small tuck there (i.e., the addition of a multiple-choice quiz), you've successfully changed your boring reference manual into a *bona fide* e-Learning intervention! (See Figure 2 on page 3.) So why all the fuss from custom developers like myself about taking several weeks to design and program an effective course? We are all after your money, no doubt.

But if I wasn't just after your money

### SIDEBAR 1 Gagné's 9 Events of Instruction

(Adapted from Gagné, R., Briggs, L. & Wager, W. (1992). *Principles of Instructional Design* (4th Ed.). Fort Worth, TX: HBJ College Publishers.)

1. Gain attention
2. Inform learner of objectives
3. Stimulate recall of prior learning
4. Present stimulus material
5. Provide learner guidance
6. Elicit performance
7. Provide feedback
8. Assess performance
9. Enhance retention and transfer



**Kareta's enterprises**

**Interviewing Skills: Hiring Process**

Page 2 of 3

The portion of the hiring process that we want to focus on in this module is interviewing. Between the initial screening and the final offer, there may be several different types of interviews that you engage in. Roll over each type to learn more about it.

**1. Screening    2. Decision-Making    3. Sequential    4. Panel    5. Final Offer**

**3. Sequential**  
Some companies conduct a series of interviews (which may be short or over a meal) with their top candidates to determine their fit within the organization. These may often be attended or conducted by peers and/or representatives of other departments with whom the applicant would interact.

**Click Next to continue.**

**Figure 1** Example of "hyperactivity" in a course. Rolling over each photo brings up a new text paragraph. While this may be an effective information design technique, it should not be confused as instructional interaction, since it does not activate any type of cognitive process within the learner.

and if I really was interested in helping you meet your business objectives, I might possibly make the argument that retention and transfer of your content would be more readily achieved via an experiential learning course than via a reference manual with instructional appendages. I might even have the effrontery to say that reference materials and courses have different roles — that the purpose of the former is to provide critical *knowledge* at the point of need, while the purpose of the latter is to provide the *experiences* that teach learners how to *apply* that knowledge to their real-life tasks.

So can these two separate media peacefully coexist? Yes — and in a symbiotic relationship, no less! If you find it difficult to cram all of your content into your e-Learning course without creating an inordinate amount of pages or pop-up text boxes, then don't! Create instead a course that consists largely of exercises — scenarios, simulations, games, what have you — that require the learners to analyze and apply the content. And if they don't yet know the content? Then guide them to find it — in context and at the point of need! That's right — provide them with links to the appropriate points in your reference material right from the course itself! (Those don't count as the types of links that we condemned in Principle 1, by the way, just in case you were wondering.)

That's unorthodox, you say? Well, just wait till you get to Principle #5. But first, my tirade on subject-matter experts.

### Principle 3: Why SMEs must never be allowed to take over the world

I actually have many friends who are SMEs. But these are primarily the ones who have attained inner peace with respect to their destined role and no longer try to run amok designing courses and writing assessments.

But can SMEs never aspire to become instructional designers themselves, you ask? After all, isn't that the heart of every rapid development tool's marketing message?

There are, admittedly, a few documented instances of SMEs who successfully transformed themselves into instructional designers ... but only after undergoing a dramatic spiritual conversion in which their long-held traditions of knowledge-based instruction gave way to the enlightened path of performance-based

learning. Researchers verified the transformation in each case by comparing several of the subjects' post-conversion questions with those commonly overheard in their pre-enlightenment phase. See Table 1 below for the results of the comparison.

But alas, the large majority of the world's SMEs continue to define content in terms of all the topics that learners might ever need to know, with the result being courses that focus on the inhalation and regurgitation of work-related facts and concepts. It is therefore still up to the instructional designer to lead the minds of these well-meaning but misguided souls to ponder the higher question of what changes must take place

in the learners' actions, attitudes, and capabilities in order to achieve measurable performance improvements, and to then translate this information into potent, relevant learning experiences.

### Principle 4: The glamorous world of hi-fi design

And just how do you go about making an e-Learning experience that is both potent and relevant? By creating activities that approximate the real-world tasks as closely as possible in an online environment (within the parameters of the allotted budget and timeline), of course. (See Figure 3 on Page 4.) In other words, the learning activities that are most effective at achieving transfer

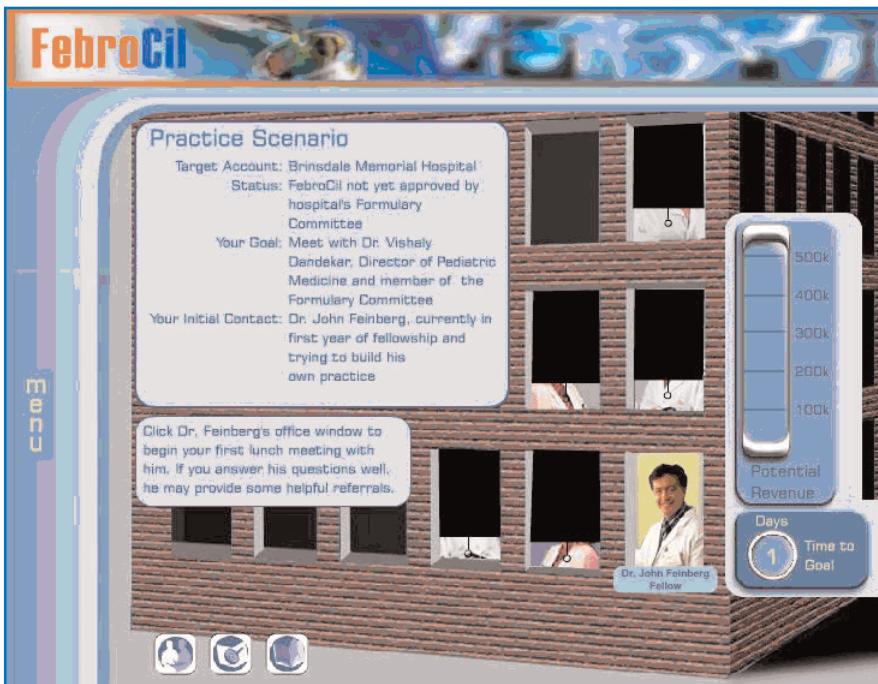
**TABLE 1** SME questions versus design questions

Pre-conversion question	Post-conversion question
What topics need to be covered in this training?	What do learners need to do differently as a result of receiving this training? What must they know in order to perform in that way?
Should we make the post test true/false or multiple choice? And how many questions should there be?	What are some common situations in which learners would be expected to display the target behaviors on the job? How can we best approximate those situations in the course assessment?
Did we leave out anything that they might ever need to know on the job?	What types of decisions must an effective performer be able to make "on the spot" vs. what information is permissible for them to look up when they need it?

The screenshot shows a slide titled "Practice Scenario". At the top, there is a banner with the word "FebroCil" and some decorative graphics. Below the banner, there is a photo of a doctor wearing a white coat and a stethoscope. To the left of the photo, the word "menu" is visible. On the right side of the slide, there is a list of medical conditions with radio buttons next to them. A callout box above the list says: "From the list shown, select all of the following conditions that you can safely and accurately give as an answer to Dr. Feinberg's question:". The listed conditions are: Asthma, Otitis media, Bacteremia, Pneumonia, Bacterial meningitis, Sinusitis, Laryngomalacia, and Sickle-cell anemia. At the bottom right of the slide, there is a "Submit" button.

**Figure 2** In this exercise, pharmaceutical sales reps are faced with several scenarios in which they must respond to some tough physician questions about their product. At any time during the exercise, they are able to pull up the product "fact book" (see highlighted icon at lower left) to research the answers they need.

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**Figure 3** Example of hi-fi design: This game mimics the real-life adventures and pitfalls of the pharmaceutical sales rep. The goal: To get face time with the influential physician. How? Get gradually referred to the top by first meeting with and impressing the lower level MD's. Performance in a given scenario can lead to an upward referral, a lateral referral, or no referral at all! Expertise is measured both in terms of potential revenue generated and the amount of time it takes to reach the goal.

The screenshot shows a diagnostic quiz. At the top, there's a banner with a group of people. Below it, a text box asks: 'Wheezing can often be associated with lung cancer. In addition, Ms. Smith's symptoms are common to lung cancer. Besides her symptoms and lung sounds, what other factors might the doctor be considering about Ms. Smith?' Below this is a list of characteristics with checkboxes:

- She is a mild smoker.
- She is worried about breast cancer.
- She is African-American.
- She is a woman.
- She is single.
- She is 65 years old.

To the right of the list, a blue arrow points to the fourth item ('She is a woman.') with the text 'CORRECT.' Below the list, a detailed explanation states: 'Since the rate of lung cancer continues to rise among both white and African-American women, gender is an important factor to consider. In fact, women actually suffer from a higher incidence of lung cancer than breast cancer in the United States. (Refer to page 333 in your text for more information.)' At the bottom left is a 'Submit' button, and at the bottom right is a 'Reset' button. A note at the bottom says: 'Click each underlined item to learn why it is or is not correct.'

**Figure 4** Learning via contextual feedback: In this exercise, learners are asked to select which questions to pose to a patient in order to effectively diagnose her condition. After submitting their selections, they have the opportunity to click each option for details on why it is or is not correct.

are those with the highest level of fidelity — hence, the value of “hi-fi” design.

I nearly cut this principle from the list, as it teeters precariously on the brink of the painfully obvious, but the frequency with which it is overlooked in practice convinced me to leave it in.

Consider a product knowledge course designed to ensure that salespeople know all the ins and outs of a new product line. The most common method I have seen for providing practice on this type of content is a list of standard multiple-choice or true/false questions regarding the features and benefits of each product. Or occasionally (Hold on to your seats!) a drag-and-drop matching exercise in which learners match a feature to its corresponding product! These activities are undoubtedly the diabolical work of the more sinister class of SMEs discussed in the previous principle, as these individuals thrive on knowledge regurgitation: “I name a product — you rattle off its features and benefits.”

Now I could actually live with this type of lo-fi exercise were it simply a knowledge check leading up to a culminating performance activity, but all too often it is the culminating activity. Don’t let the appellation fool you. The true objective of a product “knowledge” course for salespeople is actually *performance* — improved sales performance, to be exact. Then why wouldn’t the culminating activity take place in a sales setting? With fictitious but realistic customers who must be asked relevant probing questions in order to uncover their needs, which should in turn trigger in the salesperson’s mind a specific set of benefits that address those needs, which can in turn be associated with their corresponding product features? And then why not have the customer pose a challenge or concern which requires the salesperson to not only understand the relevant features and benefits but also to explain them in such a way that the customer is likely to appreciate them, too?

Get the picture? Those are precisely the types of real-life situations in which the salespeople will have to apply their new knowledge in order to make the sale. I would venture to argue that they will rarely have a customer approach them and ask, “And by the way, could you recite to me all the features of the XBJ2000, along with the corresponding benefits of each?” So why content ourselves with asking them to do nothing more than that in the training?

## Principle 5: My least misspelled word

In eighth grade, my hopes for a trip to the National Spelling Bee were forever dashed when the head judge at the state competition announced what would become my final word and eventual downfall: *ingénue*. (That's pronounced "an-jah-noo," for you non-francophones.) Now, more years later than I care to admit, I find myself regularly misspelling words like *Wednesday*, but you can bet I'll never again misspell *ingénue* (assuming I ever find cause to use it).

My point? Well, again, at the risk of overstating the obvious: We rarely forget our mistakes.

So, do we give our learners plenty of opportunities to mess up in our courses? If not, perhaps we should.

Oh, I already know what you're saying: "We can't do that in our organization — people get really upset when they get a question wrong!" "I'll get negative reviews on my Level 1 evaluations!"

"What if the CEO takes the course??!!"

Look, I'm not asking you to trip them

up in the final assessment and record their humiliation eternally in the bowels of your LMS — I'm simply suggesting you give them the chance to learn by doing, allow them to make mistakes in an environment where their colleagues can't see them, and provide them with some timely feedback on what the answer should have been and why. (See Figure 4 on page 4.)

And PLEASE don't overlook that last component! In a learn-by-doing approach, the feedback becomes perhaps the primary means of instruction — or at least the vehicle for the most effective and memorable portion of the instruction. Somehow, receiving the explanation of a concept in a "pre-practice tutorial" does not have the same impact as receiving that same explanation in the context of immediate feedback on one's individual performance. In fact, one of my favorite feedback techniques is to offer learners, after they have submitted their own answers to an item, the opportunity to then select each of the possible answers — both the correct options as well as the

distractors — and receive specific commentary as to why that option is or is not correct in that particular context. If instructional designers take the time to craft the assessment items well enough, all of the key facts and concepts in the course can be taught or reinforced contextually via the guided research (see Principle 2) and feedback components of these exercises.

## Principle 6: Oh, but we will make that #&% horse drink!

And this particular horse has already been beaten nigh to death, but it still continues to resuscitate among my clientele; therefore, I must take this opportunity to bludgeon it myself.

"Allow learners to control the pace, breadth, and sequence of their own learning."

There, I said it. And I'm not sure how to state that one more clearly. I'm also not sure if there is any e-Learning design principle that has been repeated more frequently than this one over the years.... SO WHY DO I HAVE CLIENTS STILL

## e-Learning for e-Learning Professionals...

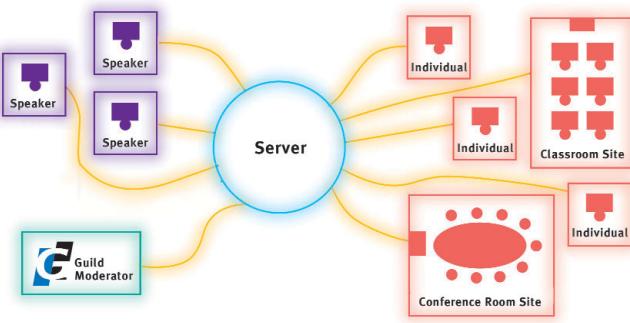
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The eLearning Guild has created *The Guild Online Forum Series*, a new series of online events that will be held throughout 2005. You can register to participate as an individual or as a group in a one-day "virtual conference" every month that includes four highly interactive seventy-five minute sessions designed to explore a specific topic.

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MAY 26, 2005

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**Target Audience:** Experienced e-Learning Developers, Programmers, Instructional Designers and others using Flash to develop e-Learning.

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# DESIGN / strategies

INSISTING THAT WE FORCE LEARNERS THROUGH EVERY PAGE OF EVERY MODULE IN A PRE-DETERMINED ORDER?

With one client, I patiently and politely shared the old cliché of “Well, even if you lead them to the water” (meaning every screen of the course) “you can’t make them drink” (meaning force them to read and cognitively process the information on that screen). Her response? “Oh, but our company is pretty darn good at making them drink!”

We won’t even discuss *that* client’s Level 1 evaluation results (much less my fears for her future offspring).

If you want to hold learners accountable for mastering training material, do so by creating and administering a valid assessment. If they are able to perform a skill at the desired level of competency, do you really care if they got to that point by reading every page of Module 6 and taking the practice exercise? Or is it not just as acceptable that they learned that skill by some other means?

But if you, like so many others, choose to disregard this principle, don’t be surprised if your name starts showing up in less-than-flattering inscriptions on the bathroom walls of your training center. For, after all, the same rebellious spirit that incites me to occasionally omit the bulleted list of objectives from the beginning of a module can also cause an oppressed learner to (Dare I say it?) click the Next button without reading all the text on a page! (And if you just had the thought, “Well then, we’ll just put it in

audio and de-activate the Next button until the end of the narration!” then all I can say is — there are medications for people like you.)

## Principle 7: The “budget-half-full” perspective

The next group I would like to target ... er, I mean ... address are the naysayers. And yes, that means all of you who have read to this point and are saying, “Sure, these are great principles to follow in the ideal world, but I certainly don’t have the time or budget on my projects to design experiential learning activities, simulate real-life situations, or create performance-based assessments.” Well, I would recommend you change your focus from what you *can’t* do with your budget to what you *can* do with it. And chances are that, even if you don’t have the luxury of designing the *ideal* learning activities for your course, you probably do have the breathing room to design *better* learning activities than what you generally see out there, provided that you’re somewhat inventive and resourceful.

For instance, let’s say that you’re tasked with providing online training on specific customer service issues that are pertinent to your organization. In an ideal world, you say, you’d like to have video vignettes of common customer service scenarios and allow learners to decide, at the end of each, what action they would perform. That decision would determine which vignette they see next, and so on, resulting in a wonderfully rich

but prohibitively expensive multi-branching simulation. So you decide to replace the video with a combination of still photos and audio, but the complexity of the proposed interactivity is still too much. Well, before you resort to a drag-and-drop activity in which learners assign a series of possible statements into either the “Effective” or “Less Effective” column, consider some alternatives that lower the cost and time of development while still maintaining a respectable amount of fidelity.

## Possibilities

- Show a series of mutually independent audiovisual clips depicting a character’s performance in various common situations. For each clip, ask the learner to critique the character’s performance by selecting from a list those particular actions that the character *should* have taken but did not... or those that s/he should *not* have taken but did. This allows you to address several points with a single clip and, consequently, reduce the total number of vignettes needed.
- Show a longer scenario, divided into multiple segments, and allow the learner to choose the most appropriate next step for each segment. Provide feedback for each of the learner’s incorrect choices, but instead of branching differently based on that choice, explain why the correct answer is the most appropriate and transition to the next segment by saying something like, “Let’s assume that [insert name of protagonist character] has made the correct decision and see what effect this has on the customer in this situation.” This allows you to address the learner’s incorrect choices, but maintains the simplicity of having only one path through the scenario. (See Figure 5, left.)

In other words, don’t throw in the towel as soon as you discover that your one true learning activity may not be affordable from a time or cost perspective. Chances are that, with a little ingenuity, you can still come up with something that allows you to maintain some degree of instructional dignity. Perhaps a quick brainstorming session with some of your colleagues would provide the grist you need for your creative mill.

The screenshot shows a user interface for an e-learning simulation. At the top, it says "ESL POWER : Appropriate Ways to Disagree". Below that are links for "overview", "principles", and "practice". A text box explains the goal: "During a meeting, your boss brings up certain points that you disagree with. View each of the scenarios listed below to hear what your boss has to say. Then, from the possible responses that appear, choose the one that you feel is the best way to express your disagreement." On the left, there's a "View" section with "Scenario 1" and "Scenario 2". Scenario 1 has three options: "I'm afraid that's just not an acceptable solution.", "I have a couple of concerns about that approach.", and "I would prefer that we not do it that way." The third option is selected. A "SUBMIT" button is below these options. To the right of the "View" section is a video player showing a man in a suit. Below the video is a transcript: "I've been through this same scenario too many times before. My recommendation is that we let the designers handle the design. So, your team will receive the application specs after they've been approved by the business group." At the bottom of the video player is a "Text off" button. On the far right, there are navigation buttons for "INTRO", "SUCCEED METER", and "FEEDBACK". At the very bottom, it says "Empowering the Global Diverse Workforce".

**Figure 5** Example of a “mock” simulation: Learners view a series of clips from a conversation with their boss. At each stopping point, they are asked to select their reply. Rather than branch differently for each reply, the exercise allows learners to view the boss’s reaction, but then prompts them to try again to get them back on track before they move ahead, thereby maintaining a single path.

## Principle 8: Why Tom Hanks never eats macaroons

Remember that part in *Castaway* where Tom Hanks' character hears the coconuts falling from the tree and first freaks out but then gets totally excited when he realizes he suddenly has edible fruit and potable liquid? And then did you notice how he never looks quite as overjoyed in any of the subsequent coconut-eating or -drinking scenes? I'm guessing that the excitement wore off after about ten days or so of nonstop coconut consumption.

Therein lies our next learning principle: Even the best instructional approaches and activities can get old if overused. The old adage about variety being the spice of life holds true — maybe even *especially true* — in the training world.

A lot of my work as a custom developer over the years has involved designing instructional templates that can be reused across multiple content areas. Clients often latch onto this idea and get excited about what this templatization means for them in terms of economies of scale over time. And it can, in fact, be a significant source of cost efficiency, but not if the courses resulting from it turn your learners into zombies after the fifteenth iteration of the same activity type! Remember that the promise of ROI from e-Learning tends to only hold true for *effective, engaging e-Learning!*

Oddly enough, this seems to be a point in the ROI pitch that some volume courseware producers neglect to mention. But I'm sure it couldn't have anything to do with the variety or quality issues that we've been discussing, as I know for a fact that they always list their objectives at the beginning of each module and change at least the textual content, color of the background graphics, and sometimes even number of pages from one course to the next — so it's inconceivable that a learner could lose interest. Those dwindling utilization statistics showing up in your LMS reports are no doubt a result of flaws in your internal marketing techniques.

Oops, did I digress again?

Well, as I was saying ... yes, templatization is really neat-o, but as with any nifty idea, use it judiciously. It's a terrific strategy for creating large volumes of courseware in a shorter period of time, but at least realize that the more courseware you're producing, the larger and more varied your library of templates

should be. Believe it or not, your learners probably *will* notice if you choose from the same three practice activities for every module of a 12-hour course.

The same could be said of many of the conventions that we're so quick to espouse — including those super-cool animation techniques that Flash now makes so readily available. It is indeed pretty awesome when you see that first feedback box mushroom out of the Submit button, bounce off the top and side of the screen, and then float litlingly down to its resting spot! But by the time I'm watching this same effect on my fifth question, I've come to the conclusion that perhaps receiving feedback isn't really that important after all.

Now please, don't go to the other extreme and decide that you'll never include a single special effect in any of your courses. To do so would be to blatantly disregard the wisdom of the final and, in my opinion, most bodacious of all the principles.

## Principle 9: The adult learner's dirty little secret

For all the deep, serious discussions that we adults like to have about our instructional theories, our best practices, our performance support methodologies, and so on, we harbor a dirty little secret. When all is said and done, if we have to block out a series of hours to participate in a training course, we want to be *entertained*!

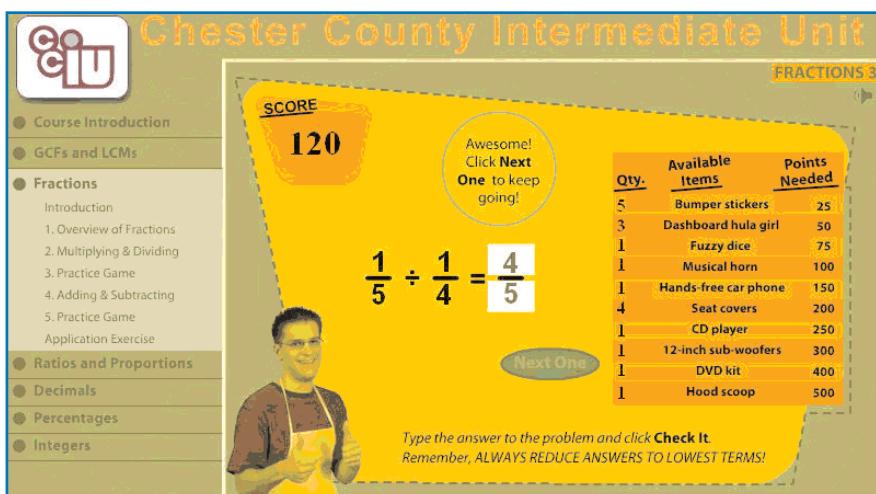
Okay, maybe there are a few adults that aren't interested in being enter-

tained and are purely concerned with knowledge and skills acquisition, but, trust me, those aren't people you want to hang out with. The rest of us, though we're loath to admit it, crave the humor, the games, the immersive activities, the competition, the eye candy, the elements of surprise — all those things that classroom instructors have used to their advantage for years to get the high evaluation scores.

Of all the e-courses I've seen go through pilot testing over the years, the ones that garner the best overall reviews from the user population are invariably those that provide the deepest levels of engagement. The entertainment doesn't have to come from the little add-ons, mind you. Some of the most engaging courses are the ones with exercises that keep the learners actively thinking — that challenge them to reach just beyond the level of what they already know but give them the resources needed to figure it out. But the gratuitous add-ons also don't hurt, provided you use them wisely and in moderation.

Consider the following as practical ways of increasing the entertainment value of your courses:

- Make use of storytelling. This can range from framing the whole course within the context of a story to sporadically inserting a brief anecdote which drives home a concept. (See Figure 6 below.)
- Get a writer who knows how to add some zest and wit to the text and narration of the course. Your content is



**Figure 6** Example of a common mathematical drill-and-practice activity frame with a themed gaming context. The protagonist takes on a summer job at the local deli to earn enough money to get a car for his senior year. In this game, you can help him win some cool parts for his new ride by earning and exchanging points.

# DESIGN / strategies

probably boring enough as it is, so don't exacerbate the issue by combining it with mediocre writing.

- If you're going to use a mentor character, at least choose a cool, interesting one. Learners will prefer a hip, wise-cracking mentor to one who is stiff, patronizing, or monotonous (except, of course, for those learners who are stiff, patronizing, or monotonous themselves).
  - Consistently design practice exercises and assessments that require learners to combine course knowledge in new ways and within new contexts. If they can answer every question within two seconds of reading it, you've likely fallen into the regurgitation trap.
  - Ignore the people who tell you that humor is always too risky. Most learners appreciate it, provided you've run it past at least a few colleagues who will be truthful in telling you if you've exceeded the acceptable corn limit. It can be as simple as slyly embedding
- an occasional witty distractor in your multiple-choice questions. (Oh yeah, and also ignore those measurement purists who go on about the drastic reliability repercussions of adopting such a practice. They fall into that earlier category of people I said you don't want to hang out with.)
- Couch the course in a creative theme, provided it's not one of the overused ones (you know the ones — detective theme, Mission Impossible, The Matrix, anything requiring you to gather miscellaneous objects in your virtual knapsack in order to win the coveted and printable course completion certificate at the end of your quest, etc.).
  - Treat the "information presentation" portions of your course in the same way you would treat the instructions document for a computer game. Make it accessible for people when they need it, but don't let it get in the way of their real purpose — in this case, participating in the learning activities.

## SIDE BAR 2 10 Questions that will lead to cathartic instructional introspection

**Principle 1:** What cognitive processes (if any!) do your interactions elicit from the learners?

**Principle 2:** What (if anything!) can learners get from your course that they could not get from reading a training manual and taking a multiple-choice quiz afterwards?

**Principle 3:** What types of questions did you pose in the analysis phase of the course, and to whom did you pose them?

**Principle 4:** How closely (if at all!) do the culminating activities of your course mirror what learners are required to do on the job?

**Principle 5:** How much (if any!) of your course content is presented in the form of contextual feedback on the learners' performance?

**Principle 6:** How much ability (if any!) do learners have to choose the sequence and amount of content they wish to access?

**Principle 7:** How hard did you really try (if at all!) to devise experiential learning activities that could fit within your course's budget?

**Principle 8:** Is there enough variety among your course activities to garner and maintain learner engagement?

**Principle 9:** Aside from the fact that their job may depend on it, is there anything in the course itself that motivates learners to retain, apply (or for that matter, even pay attention to) the content being presented?

**The \$64,000 Question:** Would learners who just completed one of your courses rather be gouged in the eyeball with a hot poker than have to sit through a second one?

In short, follow the Golden Rule of e-Learning design: Don't ask others to take a course that you wouldn't be honestly excited about taking yourself!

## Conclusion (sort of)

Although I was unable to come up with a 10th principle, I was able to devise 10 questions that may help designers verify that they are making good choices in their content selection and in their use of interactivity. (See Sidebar 2 below.) These 10 items are not necessarily parallel with the nine neglected principles, but it's an imperfect world and I know you can handle this little inconsistency.

Allow me to conclude by quoting one of my earliest design managers, who told me with a twinkle (or was it a threatening glare?) in her eye as I set out to write my first storyboard: "Remember, my young apprentice, the mind can only absorb what the seat can endure!"

Truer words were never uttered in the learning realm. May the principles discussed herein help to ensure that your own courses are consistently classified as more than just "endurable!" 

## Author Contact

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**Additional information on the topics covered in this article is also listed in the Guild Resource Directory.**

# About the Guild



## The eLearning Guild™ is a global Community of Practice

Through this member-driven community of designers, developers, and managers of e-Learning, the Guild provides high-quality learning opportunities, networking services, resources, and publications.

Guild members represent a diverse group of instructional designers, content developers, web developers, project managers, contractors, consultants, managers and directors of training and learning services – all of whom share a common interest in e-Learning design, development, and management. Members work for organizations in the corporate, government, academic, and K-12 sectors. They also are employees of e-Learning product and service providers, consultants, students, and self-employed professionals.

The more than 16,000 members of this growing, worldwide community look to the Guild for timely, relevant, and objective information about e-Learning to increase their knowledge, improve their professional skills, and expand their personal networks.

### Resource Directory

The Guild hosts the e-Learning industry's most comprehensive resource management system that includes more than 4,500 (and growing) e-Learning related resources in a searchable database. Guild Members can post resources and can update them at any time.

### Surveys & Studies

The eLearning Guild conducts continuous polls and more than a dozen surveys and studies each year – including an annual salary survey. Guild Members have unlimited access to all data and analyses.

### The eLearning Developers' Journal

The Journal provides in-depth articles about how e-Learning professionals can make e-Learning more successful in their organizations. It's a weekly online publication in PDF format and Guild Members have unlimited access to the searchable archive of every issue published.

### Job Board

The Guild Job Board should be your first stop for solving employment related issues. Whether you are an employer looking to fill a key position or an e-Learning professional looking for a new job, you'll find success here.

### Info Exchange

The Info Exchange enables members to ask questions of, and get feedback from, other members around the world in a discussion board format.

### Member Discounts

Guild Members receive a 20% discount on all optional services offered by The eLearning Guild that are not included in your membership. These services include all face-to-face and online events produced by the Guild, special publications, and other services as they are developed.

### The Online Forum Series

E-Learning for e-Learning professionals! *The Guild Online Forum Series* enables you, or your team, to explore the most pressing issues facing e-Learning professionals today with some of our industry's smartest people – right from your desktop or conference room.

### Engaging Symposia

The Guild's unique and focused symposia drill into the most critical issues for e-Learning designers, developers, and managers. These are

intensive learning events with limited enrollment. Participate in person or online, as an individual or as part of a team.

### Annual Conference

The *eLearning Producer Conference*, held in the fall each year, offers comprehensive and in-depth content for all e-Learning professionals in a collegial environment conducive to learning and sharing.

### Event Proceedings

If you attend a Guild event, you have immediate access to all event proceedings. If you do not attend, as a Guild Member you still have access to the proceedings 90 days after an event ends.

### Guild e-Clips

A Guild Members-only publication sent by email. It's short, easy to read, and includes "clips" designed to keep members connected to the latest information about Guild publications, surveys & studies, and learning events.

### eLearning Insider

The *eLearning Insider* is sent by email every other week and includes current e-Learning industry news, excerpts from Journal articles, highlights from Guild surveys, e-Musings, and information on Guild matters.

### Professional Development Through Active Engagement

In order to maintain a vital community and provide relevant information, The eLearning Guild seeks the active involvement of all Guild Members and Guild Associates. Consider these ways to engage:

**Speak at Guild Events:** Members and Associates are encouraged to submit presentation proposals for any and all Guild events.

**Write for the Journal:** The *eLearning Developers' Journal* articles are written by industry leaders and practitioners just like you who are working in this field every day.

**Join the Program Advisory Committee:** This committee works to craft the program content of all events produced by the Guild.

**Join the Research Advisory Committee:** This committee works to identify the topics for Guild surveys and studies, and also develops the survey instruments.

The eLearning Guild organizes a variety of industry events focused on participant learning:

#### Online events...



Thursdays



July 27-29, 2005



October 5-7, 2005



April 27-29, 2005

#### Face-to-face events...



March 14-17, 2005



June 20-24, 2005

November 15-18, 2005