



There is no excuse for bad instructional design

By Karen Moloney

As technology makes things smaller, faster and cheaper by the second, organisations are becoming more demanding of their L&D functions.

It has always been the case that our clients want top quality for little money in a short space of time, but this expectation has become over-inflated in recent years. As a result we are seeing learning solutions being developed cheaply and quickly using a variety of solutions from offshore development resources to rapid authoring tools.

These can work well when you have good solid Instructional Design behind a solution. Sadly, this is becoming rarer as technology advances and pressure to deliver cheaper solutions in shorter time frames increases.

“Instructional Design (also called Instructional Systems Design (ISD)) is the practice of maximising the effectiveness, efficiency and appeal of instruction and other learning experiences,” according to Wikipedia.

The process broadly consists of determining the current state and needs of the learner, defining the end goal of instruction and creating some “intervention to assist in the transition.”*

The three areas highlighted in this definition are where bad Instructional Design breeds:

- The current state and needs of the learner
- Defining the end goal of instruction
- Creating an “intervention” to assist in the transition.

Let’s look at each of these in more detail to find out what goes wrong.

The current state and needs of the learner

A Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) is often considered to be a big job and something no-one really wants to do unless they have to.

When suggesting a LNA to clients, responses usually include:

- It will take too long.
- We did one last year.
- People won’t complete it.
- We don’t want to bother people with another survey.
- We know what they need.

The truth is:

- The LNA can be created, completed and analysed within two working days if you have a resource available to do it.
- If you carried out a LNA last year, it’s now out of date.
- Anyone who is likely to complete a LNA will do it on receipt of the invitation to participate, not one week later. So you can ask for responses within 24 hours.
- People like to be asked about things that affect them directly, such as how they want to learn.
- Never assume that you know what someone needs without asking them first.

It is due diligence to assess requirements of a learning program before allocating funding towards its development in order to ensure maximum return on investment (ROI).

The LNA Survey

Even in cases where a LNA has been carried out, there are generally a few key elements missing or not analysed in depth, which can mean that the first part of the design process is fatally flawed.

Here are some suggestions for areas to cover in addition to questions around specific skills or business knowledge to find out what your learners really need:

Build some open ended questions into your LNA

If you ask yes or no questions, you will only get yes or no answers. Open ended questions like ‘how do you feel about carrying out training via e-learning?’ or ‘where do you think the process breaks down?’ can tell you a lot about your target audience, the problem and how to design learning to fix it.

IT experience and comfort levels

This is an essential line of questioning for e-learning and IT training. Just because we all use a computer doesn’t mean we’re comfortable with it or enjoy it. Is pre-training required before they can start the main learning?

Previous learning experiences

Find out the good and the bad from previous learning experiences. This can give you inspiration for your design and tell you a lot about how your target audience likes to learn, which will promote engagement.

If this is an e-learning project, find out about other e-learning experiences. If they were negative, you’ll be starting on the back foot in terms of getting buy-in for your solution.

Learning styles

Learning styles are often talked about in the design of learning, but how many solutions include a range of activities that truly address the learning styles of their target audience?

For example, rolling out e-learning with no audio to a group of learners who are predominately auditory will be less effective than one with audio accompaniment. While this may be a limitation of IT infrastructure, it will have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the learning and will need more consideration.

Time to learn

If people are expected to complete self-paced learning of any kind it's important to find out what time they have to do so.

Ask them what their role involves, if they're out on the road or have a very demanding role day-to-day. If so, it may be wiser to deliver learning via podcast or printable material that can be accessed easily on demand.

Survey alternatives

If, for whatever reason, you are unable to use a questionnaire as a means of identifying learning needs, here are some other options:

- Telephone a random sample of your target audience and ask questions. These can take less than five minutes each and they:
- Are a great PR exercise for L&D;
- Make people feel like someone cares about what they think;
- Often elicit more meaningful and in-depth responses than you would have received via the online survey.
- Set up a focus group with a selection of your target audience to ask questions and get their ideas on what they'd like to see in training.
- Use records to gather information: OHS records, for example, will show information about accidents in the workplace that can point to who needs training, what they need to be trained on and where the problems are.

Defining the end goal of instruction

If you don't know where you're going, how will you know when you get there? Instructional goals have been described in various ways over the years, including:

- Learning objective and learner outcomes
- Learning objective and enabling objectives
- General instructional objective and specific learner outcomes
- Training aim and objectives

And the list goes on. While defining objectives and outcomes is considered fundamental in our business, why is it that we still see the word 'understand' used in their definition?

However you prefer to label them, two questions need to be asked when defining instructional goals for learning:

- What is the overall purpose of the training?
- What measurable behaviours will be assessed to show that the purpose has been achieved?

'Measurable' is the key word. Illustrative verbs should be used to define learner outcomes which in turn will be used as assessment criteria.

Below are a few examples of good and bad verbs commonly used when writing learner outcomes.

Good verbs	Bad verbs
Identify	Understand
Describe	Know
List	Comprehend
Perform	Be aware of
Complete	Consider
Recognise	Realise

When writing outcomes, ask how you can prove that the learner is able to do this.

Creating an 'intervention' to assist in the transition

The 'intervention' is the really exciting component for an Instructional Designer. It's the time when they can take everything they know and weave it into the learning solution. Or so you would think.

Some examples of bad Instructional Design I've seen recently include, but are certainly not limited to:

Boring learning

Unleash your creative side! What is the program treatment? What theme and approach will be applied?

Can you create a game or a race and use characters, or give out points and rewards? Even IT system simulation training can be fun if you put your creative hat on!

Lecture based solutions

These are just telling the learner what they need to know on 400 PowerPoint slides, not encouraging learning to take place. The person working hardest here is the facilitator, when it should be the learners.

Ask a question and invite a discussion, then give the answer. Better still, by making it a quiz or a time trial you'll energise your audience. In e-learning this is called a page-turning solution, but the same principles apply.

Inconsistencies in instruction

Whether you're designing e-learning or classroom-based courses with manuals

and handouts, define your style guide early and stick to it. Learners need to be introduced to navigation and instruction types at the start of learning so they're comfortable working through material.

In a large program this is particularly important, as learners may move through a number of different lessons or modules. Standardise common instructions so they are used consistently through materials. For example, don't use 'Click File' in one place and 'Click the File menu' in another.

Getting carried away with technology

Because there is such great functionality available when designing e-learning it can be tempting to design an all-singing, all-dancing solution. But what value will that add to the learning?

Every single interaction with your learner has to be meaningful, so make it engaging but leave your director's chair at home.

Using e-learning as 'the' solution

There is no doubt e-learning has revolutionised L&D offerings, but it's important to remember that this method of delivery is not a solution in its own right. It should be used, in most cases, as part of a blended learning solution. By all means, work it into your design, but consider where the human aspect of learning will play a vital role.

Training as a 'fix all'

Any transfer of knowledge requires support to ensure it is implemented back on the job, so who will make sure that happens?

Part of your learning program may require buy-in from managers and other resources to ensure that learners have the support they need back on the job to apply their new skills and elicit the required change in behaviour.

None of the advice offered here should add any significant time to the design phase of your learning project, but it can add significant value.

If you think everything here makes sense, I'm very happy to have proved my point that there's no excuse for bad Instructional Design. ■

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* Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instructional_design