Chapter VI
Plotting a Learning Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes an informal visual notation system that can be used by instructional designers in conceptualizing a design for an aesthetic learning experience. It begins by making a case for the importance of aesthetics as a major consideration in designing instruction, distinguishing aesthetic experience from more narrow conceptions of art and aesthetics. Drawing parallels between learning experiences and other narratives, examples of several narrative diagrams used in planning and analyzing fictional narratives are examined. Borrowing strategies from these narrative diagrams, the chapter then proposes the use of engagement curves to help designers more fully consider the aesthetic experience of learners in the design phase of instruction. Several examples of the use of narrative diagrams to analyze existing instructional designs are provided, as well as a demonstration of how an instructional design educator might use a narrative diagram in planning a course on ID models.

BEYOND TECHNICAL INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Instructional design (ID) is always a complex task. Underlying any ID project are multiple goals and contributing factors that must be considered in making the myriad decisions that lead to a final design. Facing this complexity, instructional designers may feel pressed to conceive of their task in a way that narrows their concerns and allows more control and clear definition. For example, they may place their emphasis on modeling the performance of experts to help clarify instructional goals, or on developing a sequence of instructional content designed to build toward better understanding, or on the effective implementation of instructional strategies meant to stimulate the cognitive conditions and processes in which learning can be expected to occur. Each of these focuses provides a framework to help ensure that learning outcomes are appropriate and achievable, and constrains the ID process to a series of problems with clear possibilities for solutions.

Yet, even though these technical qualities of an ID project are essential to care for, in narrowly conceiving instruction to possess only these quali-

ties or assuming that all the other qualities are handled when these critical technical issues are well addressed, instructional designers may not adequately consider the complete nature of learning experiences. Learning experiences are always much more than the cognitive processing of well planned subject matter and structured learning activities. They also encompass how the learner feels about, values, and, ultimately, establishes a level of engagement with the instructional environment. They include the affective qualities that determine how engagement develops in a learning situation, which, while not ignored by ID, are frequently considered secondarily to or separately from the privileged cognitive qualities (for further exploration of the limitations of this dichotomy, see Parrish, 2006b). Beyond being a cognitive activity, learning experience (and therefore ID) is also political, ethical, emotional, and, perhaps most important in consideration of engagement, aesthetic in nature (O'Regan, 2003; Parrish, 2005; Schwier, Campbell & Kenny, 2004; Wilson, 2005). Beyond problem solving, instructional design is also the process of composing an experience that will stimulate the engagement that leads to learning.

In fact, learner engagement is likely the most critical factor in any learning experience. Whether learning is viewed as individual or system change, it will occur only when a learner desires the change or is shown the necessity of embracing it. Engagement describes a relationship to an instructional situation in which the learner willingly makes a contribution that is active and constitutive. Beyond task persistence, it involves investment of effort and emotion, willingness to risk, and concern about both outcomes and means. While IDs work to tame instruction into a manageable, replicable process that begins by predetermining outcomes to be measured through properly aligned assessments, engagement describes that wild aspect of the process in which the learner is as much or more in control of the activities and outcomes as the ID. Natural learning in everyday situations

occurs as people willingly invest themselves in tasks, either alone or with others, with immediately meaningful goals. In formal learning situations like those offered in schools and much of professional training, that meaning, which is both a necessary precondition for and result of learner engagement, is often more difficult for learners to see. Yet the need for engagement remains high if deep and lasting learning is desired. Only when learners invest attention, effort, and emotional commitment is there a chance that they will learn deeply in the situations crafted by instructors and instructional designers.

Aesthetic Instructional Design

The aesthetic, or artistic, qualities of instructional design have received increasing discussion in recent years (Parrish, 2005; Visscher-Voerman & Gustafson, 2004; Wilson, 2005; Hokanson, Hooper, & Miller, Chapter I). This broadening beyond the technical qualities of ID is likely to lead to many innovative approaches to the task of creating engaging instruction. However, aesthetics is a slippery construct, carrying with it many misleading, over-generalized ideas about art and artists, and some conceptions of it have less to offer IDs. This section first examines some of the less promising ideas surrounding art and aesthetics before introducing the concept of *aesthetic experience*, which is not only more successful in explaining the wide variety of artistic expression that exists, but has more to say about learning.

One of these limited conceptions is that aesthetics describes those qualities of an object or event that are attractive, pleasurable, or aimed at creating feelings of delight—qualities to which artists are deemed especially attuned. While they are not without purpose, limiting our conception of aesthetics to these qualities makes it merely a motivator layered onto (or into) more substantive qualities. For instructional designers, these more substantive qualities are of course the instructional strategies that have a scientific basis, and perhaps

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