e-learning Design and Development

Applying First Principles of Instruction: Does Your Instruction Rate 5 Stars?

M. David Merrill

What is effective instruction? How can you be sure that the instructional products that you select really teach?

Are you considering the acquisition or development of interactive, multimedia, web-based e-learning to meet your training needs? Beware! Too many e-learning vendors are under-prepared in instructional design. It is not necessary to be certified to hang out a shingle and offer your services as an e-learning developer. Neither a clever name, an impressive title, experience in a subject matter, experience in computer graphics, nor experience in computer programming substitute for expertise in the development of consistent instructional strategies that teach.

However, you can protect yourself. You can learn to look beneath sales hype to the underlying effectiveness of a given e-learning product. You can acquire the skill necessary to look beneath the production quality of the product to the underlying instructional strategies and determine if the product will really teach.

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When I travel I enjoy staying in a 5-star hotel.[1] The hosts in such establishments have learned what is required to help a guest be comfortable. They know the little things that make travel a pleasure instead of drudgery. I can sleep in a one-star hotel, but often I find myself unrested and miserable the next day. It isn't the cost of a 5-star hotel that makes it better. I've often paid a lot of money for less than one-star service. It isn't the size of the marquee or the waterfall in the lobby that makes it a 5-star facility. It is a 5-star establishment because the staff knows how to provide all the little details that make rest and relaxation pleasurable.

Like a Las Vegas hotel, there is a lot of instruction that has a 5-star surface appearance but not even one-star effectiveness underneath. Just like I can get by in a one-star hotel, students show a remarkable ability to endure one-star instruction. Sleeping in a one-star hotel often leaves you unrested, learning from one-star instruction often makes it difficult or impossible for students to acquire the skills desired to make them more productive.

What is five-star instruction?

How can you be sure that an instructional product will really teach?

Can you have 5-star instruction without a platinum-card price?

Industry is spending billions of dollars for education and training. Why? Because, they expect this training to increase quality performance, quality products, and enable more efficient and effective performance on the part of their students or employees?

If the instructional products you select are to give you a good return on your training dollar, then it is critical that you have the skill to judge the instructional effectiveness of an instructional product. Merely asking your vendor is insufficient. Ratings based primarily on production value and appearance do little to inform you about the instructional quality of a product. You need the skill to look under the hood to observe those instructional attributes that characterize really effective instruction.

This presentation will overview those first principles of instruction that enable you to make these critical judgments.


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