

Chapter 3

The Power of Visuals and Hands-On Play with Online Learning

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I have been teaching online for a number of years now. And over the years, I have learned a lot about what works *and* what does not work in the online classroom. For instance, for some time now I have been a strong advocate of the “Montessori approach” to learning. This approach essentially calls for students to “get their hands dirty”—meaning among other things that students should engage in hands-on play. Hands-on play is one thing I have found over the years that works well in almost all education environments. As a result, I strive to include hands-on play in all the courses I teach online.

However, despite my years of experience teaching online, I strive not to get stuck in my old ways of doing things. This last year I learned a new lesson of what works when teaching online as a result of having my course audited by an instructional designer at eCollege (a process I recommend everyone go through). That is, I learned about the power of visuals when teaching online. In the following paragraphs, I am going to elaborate on each of these lessons learned—that is, the power of hands-on play and the power of visuals in the online classroom—in hopes of helping other faculty find ways to improve the courses they teach online.

Hands-on Play

I teach accounting. And as an accounting instructor, I have found that the standard approach to introducing beginning accounting concepts is intimidating at best. This approach involves introducing students to nebulous accounting equations while at the same time introducing them to a whole new language. Students often begin to “drown” trying to grasp not only the vague math concepts but also the new language of accounting. In fact, these vague math concepts and new language often turn many students off from even considering majoring in business within the first few weeks of the course.

Early on though I knew there had to be a better way of introducing accounting. I began reflecting on my own children’s pre-school years in a “Montessori-based” elementary school. The pre-schoolers would explore their classroom environment and learn through hands-on play. For example, to learn mathematics students were given an abacus. The abacus helped them visually see how, for example, $3 \times 3 = 9$ by moving the beads in rows 1 through 3 across the board to fill the area with 3 rows of 3 beads. I decided to incorporate this hands-on approach into my accounting course. Instead of throwing a nebulous math equation and a bunch of foreign words at my students, I decided to do something fun and engaging.

I developed an accounting game that introduces the beginning concepts of accounting in a way that is engaging and one in which players collaborate during game play. More specifically, “The Balancing ACcTm” board game introduces the language of business “accounting” through a visual hands-on experience. Players learn how companies transact business with their bankers, customers, and suppliers.

Why a game?
Well many of my students grew up playing games. For instance, today's college students grew up with "over 10,000 hours playing video games, over 200,000 emails and instant messages sent and received; over 10,000 hours talking on digital cell phones" (Prensky, 2001, page 1). From a learning standpoint, games can



be intrinsically motivating and can adapt to different styles of learners, as well as different learning styles (Nemerow, 1996). Games also create an interactive learning experience by transforming inactive learning material into learning episodes where the learners are active players and participants (Sugar & Takacs, 1999).

While creating an accounting game took a lot more time than just settling on a lecture that I've done over and over, the results over the years have been profound. I have found that in less than two hours my students grasp accounting and business concepts that in a traditional accounting course can take at least two weeks to learn.

If you are thinking of using games in your online course, I recommend reading "Games to Teach By" (Mungai, Jones, & Wong, 2005). I also encourage you to step out of your comfort zone when it comes to teaching. I have found that hands-on play has transformed my classroom over the years. But recently I learned that there is still much I can do with my online courses—specifically with regards to visuals.

Use of Visuals

As I mentioned earlier, I teach accounting. As you can imagine, accounting tends to be presented in a primarily text-based format. My online courses for years have followed a consistent format each week:

- Introduction
- Assignment
- Content (i.e., the elaboration of specific assignments)

Each of these sections of my courses have been predominantly text-based. After having my course audited by an instructional designer at eCollege I realized that my students' learning experience could be greatly enhanced if I incorporated visual images and used them consistently throughout each week in the course.

Based on this feedback, I began to incorporate images in each week of my online courses. The following is an example of how I changed my courses through the use of images.

Before

*Do you know the joke about the rope?
Aw, skip it...*

Read Chapter 8.

Go through my lectures for Chapter 8.

Work end-of-chapter exercises / problems: E: 2,5,12, 14, 23; P: 3, 4, 11

Remember that I have uploaded the solutions to these exercises / problems at the Course Home.

Quiz / Homework: Complete the Quiz / Homework by the due date indicated on the schedule for this week. You can go in and out of this quiz as many times as you'd like. Just remember to save your work before exiting.

After

After

*Do you know the joke about the rope?
Aw, skip it...*



Read Chapter 8.



Go through my lectures for Chapter 8.



**Work end-of-chapter exercises / problems: E: 2,5,12, 14, 23; P: 3, 4, 11
Remember that I have uploaded the solutions to these exercises /
problems at the Course Home.**



Group Exercises / Individual and Group Submissions

In the respective content areas, I've included these same images. The consistent and repetitive use of these images has really helped tie the material together and has helped make the Week's content flow smoother. I also have to say it has been a lot of fun coming up with images and they have made my course weeks more visually pleasing and have actually put some spark into the links. I haven't stopped though with static images. I have begun creating short video clips via Jing to introduce the Week's material and assignments.

Concluding Thoughts

As an accounting instructor, I have to admit I am just beginning my quest for adding visuals to my online courses. I'm excited though about the power they can play in not only motivating students in learning and retaining the course's content but even more so in helping me deliver the course material in a fun, effective way.

References

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Bio

Elizabeth Conner is a full time Senior Instructor in Accounting in the Business School at the University of Colorado Denver. She is the primary instructor for Intermediate Financial Accounting I and II. She is an active Certified Public Accountant (CPA) and provides tax and financial accounting services to a variety of clients. Over the past several years, she has assisted the Business School in the development of an online MBA program.