

Distance Learning Systems

Teaching Tips #9 — Usability and Readability for Online Educational Materials

In past Teaching Tips we have discussed methods for fostering interactivity in distance education. However, a positive, interactive experience can hinge on the literal composition of your materials just as much as the structure in which they are presented. This brings us to issues of *usability* and *readability*.

Usability

Usability is, quite simply, a measure of the ease with which a student can use your materials. This includes how easy it is to learn to navigate and interact, how easy it is to remember, and whether it is aesthetically pleasing or not. Different applications will endow each of these with various degrees of importance.

Readability

Readability is how easy it is to read or otherwise progress through your materials. This includes vocabulary, paragraph size, page length, physical layout and font choice, micro-content, and context.

Some Basic Advice

Although these areas are complex enough to keep many Doctoral candidates engrossed each year, it is possible to distill some basic guidelines which you should consider when creating your online materials:

- “Chunk” your materials. Break each unit down into a series of smaller, sequential pieces rather than one long page or document. Where feasible, provide reinforcement throughout the unit rather than just at the end. Blackboard provides a few ways of constructing material for sequential access that are better than the multiple single document model. We will investigate these options in a future Teaching Tip.
- Pay attention to vocabulary. As a subject matter expert it is very easy to fall into a way of speaking more suited for other professionals than your eager students.
- Choose suitable line and paragraph lengths. For onscreen reading, choose a font and column/table size combination that puts somewhere around 10-12 words per line, or 5 inches if you think that way. This is *not* a full margin-to-margin page!
- Provide direction. Especially with online materials, users tend to skim rather than read. Breaking material down with convenient stops for reinforcement and questions can help counter this. You may also want to provide more distinct goals for your students by tracking them into a set sequence and using repeated synopses.
- Use micro-content. Micro-content refers to elements which help keep your documents from turning into one massive block of text (like this document). This includes headlines and subheads, quotations and pull-quotes, teasers, appropriate page titles, and bulleted lists.
- Contextualize and enrich. One wonderful aspect of creating online materials is that you have the opportunity to provide a much richer experience for your students. This can range from the simple (and effective) provision of context through web links, optional materials, exercises and projects, to sophisticated additions such as audio, video, animation, and interactive applets.

Exploring Further

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