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### Modeling: Online Students Need Demonstrations, Too

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# Modeling: Online Students Need Demonstrations, Too

December 1, 2018 | By Matthew Barclay  
Educational Technology  
Instructional Design

How many times have you seen children pretending to be their sports heroes while playing basketball or soccer? How many teens or adults have you seen wearing a movie star's hairstyle or adopting the clothes of another favorite celebrity? How often have you observed people mimicking media personalities in voice, gestures, sayings, etc.? Have you ever found yourself doing something because someone else did it and you thought it was a great idea? Of course you have. Whether it was beneficial or damaging in the long run, you have most likely done something only because someone you esteemed did it.

From birth we look to others for our models of behavior; we seek cues from friends and family on what to do and say. Parents play a particularly significant role in the learning that happens in society because of the modeling they provide.

Other significant roles with regard to learning in society are those of instructor and even instructional designer. We model and point out models for our students to emulate.

In 2012, noted American psychologist Robert F. Mager wrote:

While it's true that we learn by practicing, by doing, and by being rewarded for our progress, it is also true that most of what we learn is learned by imitation. Most of what we learn comes from watching others do things that we then try to do—and then become able to do. When we see others do something, there is a tendency for us to imitate their actions. People see, people do (p. 76).

What does this mean for instructional design, especially for the design of online learning? To me it means that we must design and develop positive, motivational demonstrations for students to emulate in their skill development. It is too easy and too off-putting to simply direct online students to read the textbook or journal articles and then write papers. Instead, or, in addition to this, we should include illustrated processes, simulations, text-based stories, videos, or worked examples. The choices and timing of demonstrations are decisions that the instructional designer must make carefully. But modeling and demonstrating are an integral part of effective instruction and the absence of them may be an indication of poor design.

If we do not model or demonstrate, we likely leave the student to figure things out on their own. While this is not always bad, and is even sometimes called for, it is often better to provide demonstrations rather than leave students to pure discovery learning, especially novice learners (Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark, 2006; Mayer, 2004). After all, if our brains or natures are wired to learn from modeling, it behooves us to leverage this functionality that resides within us. We just need to learn and follow the principles that govern good demonstration. And for that, I suggest a couple of good models:

1. How to Turn Learners on...Without Turning Them Off by Robert F. Mager
2. First Principles of Instruction by David Merrill
3. There are other models for demonstration out there but these are good places to start for instructional design.

## For further reading:

Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J., and Clark, R. E. (2006). Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: an analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational Psychologist* 41 (2): 75-86.

Mager, R.F. (2012). *How to turn learners on...without turning them off* (3rd ed.). Carefree, AZ: Mager Associates, Inc.

Mayer, R. (2004). Should there be a three-strikes rule against pure discovery learning? The case for guided methods of instruction. *American Psychologist* 59 (1): 14-19.

Merrill, M. D. (2002). First principles of instruction. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 50(3), 43-59.

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