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Practice: An Essential Supporting Cast Member of Outcomes-Based Instruction

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Instructional Design

I love good movies. Most of us do. Movies represent a complex combination of many elements combined by filmmakers to deliver a viewing experience to the audience that can be very moving, endearing, and memorable. Or the movie can fall flat, or just be mediocre.

Among all the elements that go into moviemaking, the lead talent is key to the success of a show. But so is the supporting talent. Can you think of a movie you liked especially because of the performance of a supporting actor or actress? As much as I love the performance of Gregory Peck (Atticus Finch) in To Kill a Mockingbird, I also find very compelling the supporting performances by Mary Badham (Scout Finch), Robert Duvall (Boo Radley), and others.

I also think of the movie Hoosiers. The story is gripping and the star of the show, Gene Hackman, did a phenomenal job as coach Norman Dale. However, the movie would not be the gem that it is without the fantastic supporting roles played by Dennis Hopper (Shooter), Barbara Hershey (Myra Fleener), Maris Valainis (Jimmy Chitwood), and several others.

To me, in movies where the supporting cast is less than stellar, the viewing experience is not as interesting or meaningful as it could be. But when the supporting cast is really good, along with the “stars” of the show, the movie is usually excellent.

In our work of creating excellent instruction, similar principles come into play, those of “stars of the show” and a “supporting cast.” I am not talking about the people involved in creating the instruction, but some of the principles of instructional design. So what are our “stars” and “supporting cast?” At Franklin, our biggest star, or emphasis, is outcome-based instruction. We need to get that right for our audiences to have an excellent experience. There is a lot that has been said about that and much more that no doubt will be said.

But we also need to make sure to get the supporting cast right. There are many supporting elements, yet, there is one that is essential and elusive that designers anywhere must perfect. It is the principle of practice. Designers need to include engaging ways for learners to practice in a way the matches (supports) the intended learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes become shallow and much less meaningful with only a cursory chance to practice. And the whole experience looks silly when the practice that we design into the course either does not match the intended outcomes or when the practice only reflects a theoretical rather than a practical, real-world version of those intended outcomes. Of course, if we leave the supporting role of practice out altogether, the learning experience becomes much, much less than what it could and should be.

Practice is not just a nicety or a cliché (a la “practice makes perfect”), nor is it just a principle of instructional design.

Our brains require practice to really learn: “Neuroscience researchers have also found that to form lasting memories, practice typically needs to happen over extended periods. Think about how ridiculous it would be to cram in a long weight-lifting session the night before you need the strength…If you really want to be stronger…you would practice a bit every day over a certain period… The same is true for your brain” (Doyle and Zakrajsek, 2013, p. 6).

As designers and educators, we need to prepare meaningful practice for our learners—our audience—that flows with the carefully crafted outcomes we have devised. Doing so requires effort and time. It requires us to leave behind any notion of just covering the content, of being satisfied with having simply explained something and then expecting students to produce high-quality papers, soaring scores on exams, and masterful understanding and ability sufficient to carry them into their next job or promotion. It won’t happen. If it does, it will be in spite of our efforts, not because of them.

There is so much we could write about practice. So much has been written. It is essential that we cast it in strategic, supporting roles within our designs so as to ensure valuable, endearing, and memorable experiences for our audiences.

References

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