Webinar handout:

Complex to Simple: Story in Learning

This handout summarizes the key ideas in the webinar, kindly sponsored by Citrix GoToTraining. It is not a word-for-word recap...since we were delivering an interactive experience and responding to audience input and questions, no document would do that justice. I'd recommend you watch the recording.

Best of luck to you as you improve your online meetings

Roger

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Dealing with complexity and helping learners learn is a challenge for everybody. Worse, as Chip and Dan Heath put it in *Made to Stick*, one additional challenge for any of us is the "curse of knowledge." In other words, it's hard to see all the stuff we know through the eyes of someone who isn't as close to it.

Making the complex simple and story have one thing in common: they both are a function of structuring your content. In this webinar we looked at two sides of this one coin…a process for simplifying complexity (without ending up at "simplistic"), and two (of many potential) forms of structuring story for learning. We concluded with four rapid-fire ideas for then communicating those ideas visually.

One note: In this webinar one thing happened that we anticipated...what audience members train on ranged from HR systems to nuclear power plant safety. So we focused on process and patterns that you can apply regardless of what it is you need to simplify and communicate.

Create a taxonomy: A three-step process for simplifying complexity

There's a critical difference between simplicity and being simplistic. The former helps one understand complexity, the latter abandons complexity. The goal isn't to abandon all the details, rather to structure content in a manner consistent with how we learn. We need to understand the big picture before we can place (and remember) the details in context.

Gather/brainstorm/collect your content within the scope of the area of knowledge you need to cover
In addition to gathering everything into one place, it's important to understand what "goes in" and what doesn't. You can't cover everything, and extraneous details that don't fit will only confuse.

Analyze and interpret by looking for common elements

A good place to start is by asking, "Who, what, where, when, why, or how?" Your objective at this stage is to start to categorize the details by commonalities. This begins the process of organization that will enable you to come up with simpler ways of expressing ideas as categories or generalities (first).

Synthesize and summarize into a hierarchy of ideas
Note that we haven't thrown anything out here. We simply begin to create a taxonomy or schema that expresses or represents your content in a top-down way (general, big-picture statements down to more and more specific categories and details)

Determine what changes for whom: Choose a story form

Research universally confirms that story is a critical part of how we learn. What experts do not agree on, however, is exactly what the definition is. In the context of how most of us train, I think it's useful to relax from the classic "hero's journey" definition to count anything that expresses the why and how of change. The essential element is that we help the learner understand the delta between "point a" and "point b," ideally in a way that's actionable. Here are two patterns that are proven to work.

Problem, promise, path
Research shows that the brain naturally wants to resolve cognitive dissonance. Establishing a challenge or problem as the current situation and the outcome or promise or resolution as the destination creates a framework for teaching how to get there. My personal preference is always to make the "path" a set of steps.

Want a mini-example? See the previous section… The problem is complexity is hard to understand, the promise is that you can be simple without being simplistic, the path is to scope, analyze, and then synthesize.

Point, story, application
Often what you need is to create understanding and memorability for a given point or proposition. This form works well for on-the-fly responses, too (e.g., answering a question).
- Point: "The critical element in finding simplicity without being simplistic is how content is organized"
- Story: "Consider the arrangement in biological taxonomy. The challenge is that there are 5400 mammalian species, 28000 fish species, etc., but would you communicate that to a three year old? Nope. They start with identifying "dog" or "fish" before they get to canis lupis."
- Application: What this means to you is two things: It's critical where you start and how deep you go.

Four rapid-fire ideas for visualization
This webinar wasn't about imagery, per se, but it is useful in helping understanding. Besides practicing what we preach (using a diagram, for instance, to help visualize taxonomy), here are the four tips (some of which would be useful to watch the recording for ;).
- *Think visually to engage visually.* More often than not, there's a visual way to represent something (which isn't always a picture). The discipline, however, is one of thinking visually. It's not natural for everyone, but it can be learned.
- *Represent ideas spatially or relationally.* In the webinar we used an example of analyzing/synthesize a bunch of bullet points. Here we showed how to represent them using design to enhance understanding.
- *Use a sequence of pictures.* It's one thing to use a picture, but sometimes a sequence of pictures is the critical element in better story.
- *Turn an infographic into a sequence of slides.* Infographics are hot, in part because they're visual (and often tell stories). They don't, however, fit on PowerPoint slides well. Don't try...instead put them on a series of slides.

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Some of my favorite books on story

Crossley, Michele; *Introducing Narrative Psychology*; 2000
Denning, Stephen; *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*; 2005
Duarte, Nancy; *Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences*; 2010
Frank, Milo O.; *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less*; 1986
Haven, Kendall; *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*; 2007
Haven, Kendall & Ducey, MaryGay; *Crash Course in Storytelling*; 2007
Heath, Chip & Heath, Dan; *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*; 2007
McKee, Robert; *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*; 1997
Parkin, Margaret; *Tales for Change: Using Storytelling to Develop People and Organizations*; 2010
Pink, Daniel H.; *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*; 2009
Silverman, Lori; *Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results*; 2006
Simmons, Annette; *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*; 2006

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About Roger Courville and 1080 Group, LLC

Roger Courville is author of *The Virtual Presenter's Handbook, Successful Webinars with GoToWebinar,* and *The Virtual Presenter's 102 Tips for Online Meetings.* He's an expert in the human factors of web conferencing, and an internationally sought-after speaker on the use of webinars and virtual classrooms deliver organizational results.

A thirteen-year veteran of the web conferencing business, Roger has engaged more than 20,000 people in the last 12 months, and he's reached tens of thousands more with writing appearances for Workshifting.com, SpeakingAboutPresenting.com, Training Australia Magazine, Presentations Magazine, eLearningGuild, and more. His 2008 paper "Five Keys to Moving Training Online" won TrainingZone.co.uk's Reader's Choice Award for "Top Download of the Year."

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