



Learning Management Systems: Tips from the Masie Conference

By Mae Prestera
Instructional Designer



I recently attended the 2008 Masie Learning Systems Conference in Las Vegas (<http://learningsystems08.com/>), where I listened to a panel discussion with representatives from twelve Learning Management System (LMS) vendors. The panel topic was Do's and Don'ts When Considering an LMS. Here are seven tips that I picked up at the event:

1. Do have a valid business justification

Make sure you have a valid business justification for purchasing a new LMS. Your LMS shouldn't just be a "training vending machine." The business units don't care that it can deliver training. They only care how it can impact the bottom line. When justifying the need for a new LMS, consider how it can help deliver more effective, efficient learning. How can it help with talent retention, onboarding, and recruitment? Will it help you to scale up your training and deliver it to new markets more easily? Can it manage your skills tracking and report talent metrics? The more you can justify

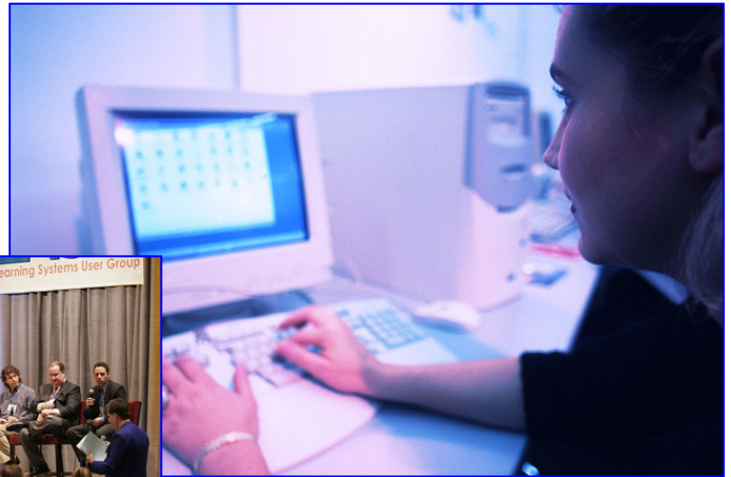
the impact to the bottom line, the more easily you will gain management buy in.

2. Don't replicate what you already have

When implementing a new LMS, don't try simply to replace what you currently have. Instead, look to the future. Do you expect to

use more video conferencing, web-based training or podcasts? If you're not sure, ask your designers, stakeholders, and the business units. In a poll taken at the conference, 40% of the participants said they plan to implement mobile learning over the next two years, and 20% plan to increase the use of video. You need to

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Developer's Toolbox: Localize Me! Building e-Learning Courses for Easy Translation

By Jeff McCary &
Belen Bilgic-Schneider
Multimedia Developers



For anyone who has faced the challenge, it's no secret that language translation of e-learning courses—or, localizing—can be a time-consuming task. The good news is that through proper planning and preparation, your team can produce easy-to-localize content. In this article, we'll focus on some best practices for developing localizable content in Flash.

Our approach to Flash development involves three strategies:

1. Rather than hard-coding screen text, set up your Flash file to integrate external text
2. Create Action Script (or AS) files to manage the default (English) text
3. Use an external XML document to allow anyone to translate the text

1. Externalize your text

Standard Flash files are the worst kind of treasure hunt for those translating text. With data scattered throughout many separate objects, often nested and used multiple times, it can be a nightmare for a translator to locate the text manually. Localization companies prefer to use filtering software that searches for text and translates it. To facilitate this, we remove the text from the Flash file and

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Keeping SMEs Focused and Engaged

By Stacie Comolli
Instructional Designer



I recently completed a project in which I helped a financial services client develop a coaching process. When developing a business process like this, it's critical to have subject matter experts (SMEs) who are actively engaged in the design. Keeping my SMEs focused and engaged proved to be my biggest challenge. Given the turmoil in the financial markets these days, re-orgs that seem to take place with alarming regularity, and their increasingly busy schedules, it's no wonder that my SMEs had other things on their minds.

Here are some things I did to keep my SMEs focused during the design process:

1. Prepare, prepare, prepare!

I reviewed available materials in advance of my SME meetings to gain a basic understanding of the content. Then, I created a list of questions to use on my calls. This preparation helped me ensure that I got all of my questions answered, made the most effective use of my SME's time, and kept the conversation focused. It also helped me build credibility and trust with my SMEs, since they walked away from the call feeling as if the value of their time had been respected.

2. Prime SMEs before meetings

I sent my SMEs my list of questions in advance of our initial calls. In later calls, I sent them summaries of the information I had gathered from them to date with gaps noted for further exploration. Towards the end, I would send them drafts of the actual materials for them to review. Whenever possible, I sent them something to review in advance of our calls. This enabled the SMEs to think about what I needed from them, which increased the chances that they would come prepared to the meetings. If nothing else, it primed them for our meetings.

3. Check understanding

After every call, I sent meeting notes that included a list of action items and deadlines. I asked my SMEs to verify that I summarized our conversations correctly and encouraged them to add additional information, if necessary.



4. Set clear expectations

At the beginning of each call, I was explicit about the goals I wanted to achieve during that meeting. At the end of each call, we discussed next steps and identified specific action items. When I sent my meeting notes, they always included a summary of those next steps and action items. This helped remind my SMEs of files they agreed to send me and follow-up actions they agreed to take.

For more information about managing SMEs, email Stacie at stacie@effectperformance.com. Ask for a copy of her *Managing the Unmanageable SME* article.



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Ethan

Molly

Two new instructional designers-in-training!

Congratulations to Brad and Michelle (eP Instructional Designer) Kirschner on the birth of their son, Ethan Henry Kirschner. Ethan was born on April 6th at 6:22 pm, weighing in at 7 lbs., 1 oz. (height: 19¾ inches). Congratulations also to Ethan's big sister, Emily!

Congratulations to Dave and Val Manning (owners of Performance Development Group) on the birth of their daughter, Molly Veronica Manning. Molly was born on May 7th at 1:09 pm, weighing in at a healthy 8 lbs., 5 oz. Congrats also to Molly's big sister, Vanessa, and big brother, Ryan!

Interactive Flowcharts—in a Flash!

By Alicia Pfaff
Instructional Designer



Our Challenge:

Our team was developing a two-hour e-learning course to teach new users how to use our client's proprietary claims processing system. Early on, to lay the foundation for the rest of the course, we needed to help learners understand the entire administrative process required to process medical claims in our client's system as well as who was responsible for each task. We needed to do this without relying on audio narration and without overwhelming learners with too much information at once, what researchers call cognitive overload.

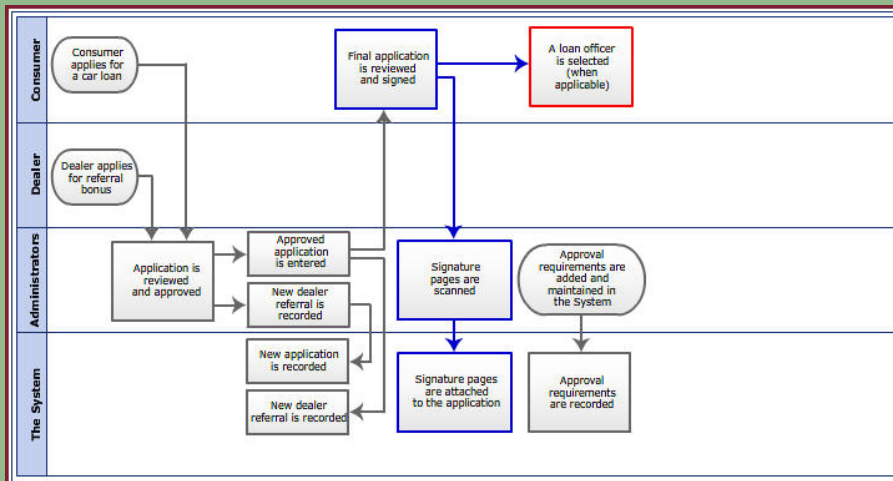
Our Solution:

I chose to go with an interactive swim lane diagram (flowchart), one that my teammate Belen Bilgic-Schneider would produce as a clickable Flash build. By using Flash, we could animate and build up the various parts of the process in their

logical sequence. This would reduce the cognitive load of the learning task by introducing parts of the process one at a time in small enough chunks that learners could process them.

By making it clickable, we could enable the learner to control the pace of the build, so they could process the information at their own pace. The swim lanes enabled learners to see who performed which tasks in the process. We used color to distinguish what parts of the process had already been viewed (gray), what parts were new (blue), and where the learner clicked to reveal additional parts of the process (red).

Our client was extremely excited that we were able to summarize such a complex process on one screen. To see this Flash flow chart (the content was altered to protect client confidentiality), go to: http://www.effectperformance.com/assets/demo/ep_flowchart/.



LMS Tips

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ensure that the LMS and technology infrastructure can support the learning you want to deliver today and tomorrow.

3. Do get everyone involved

You need support and input not only from your stakeholders, but also from your instructional designers, end-users, business units, the IT department, and others. The more that people are involved from the beginning and get a chance to "kick the tires," the more likely it is that they will be engaged throughout the entire implementation. It is also more likely that the LMS will address the needs of the entire organization.

4. Don't have organizational ADD

Don't be distracted by the latest and greatest technology and all the bells and whistles. Ultimately, you want your LMS to deliver effective training and improve employee performance. You can easily find online RFP templates that contain laundry lists of available features and functionality, but you don't want to ask for everything when you only need some things. Whittle your list down to the top 5 or 10 features that you can't live without. This will help ensure that the LMS delivers the majority of what you need.

5. Do consider the scalability

This goes hand-in-hand with looking to the future. Today you may only have 1,000 users that need access to an LMS. But what about tomorrow? Do you expect to enter new markets or countries? Will your courses be translated into many different languages? Consider whether you expect to develop on-line *customer* training on how to use your product. You need to make sure the LMS has the capability and

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Announcement



Gus Prestera will be presenting at the next meeting of ASTD's e-Learning SIG.



Mark Your Calendar!
May 15th, 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm
Location: Penn State Great Valley
<http://gv.psu.edu/directions/>

Rapid e-Learning, the use of special software (e.g., Breeze and Articulate) to convert PowerPoint slides into e-learning courseware, is becoming increasingly popular. Although the software makes converting slides into courses easy, it does not guarantee that your

course will be effective. In this session, techniques for designing effective rapid e-learning courses will be demonstrated. These techniques will cover slide design, audio narration, navigation, and the use of interactive exercises, among other things.

LMS Tips

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bandwidth to handle significant growth, possibly in a very short time frame. If not, you will need to consider other options such as third-party vendors to provide temporary support.

6. Don't spend all your money on the LMS

In addition to the LMS cost, you may need to hire consultants and other vendors to help with the implementation. Will your budget cover all of these costs and leave money in the end? You want to deliver rich, relevant, engaging training when the system goes live. However, if you have no money to develop the training in the end, your implementation will come in with a whimper rather than a bang.

7. Do consider your exit strategy

What happens if you decide to switch to a new LMS in 3-5 years? How easy will it be to transfer your data and user history to the new system? Make sure you talk to the LMS vendors about your exit strategy. If you think it's strange to think about an exit strategy while buying an LMS, consider this: In a poll taken at the conference, 65% of the participants were possibly or definitely acquiring a new LMS over the next two years, and 60% were unhappy with their current LMS. If you don't consider your exit strategy, you may be in for a difficult transition.

To learn more about Mae's adventures in Vegas, or for help selecting or implementing your next LMS, email Mae (mae@effectperformance.com).

Developer's Toolkit

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centralize its creation and maintenance. This way, the localization company doesn't even need to open the Flash file in order to translate screen text. Since the audio files are external, they don't need to open our files at all. This helps to protect our proprietary code.

To externalize the text, each piece of text (called a "string") within the source Flash file (.fla) is treated like a variable and assigned a unique identifier, a variable name. Using dynamic text objects, rather than static ones, we can use those variable names to indicate which text we want to appear in which text object. We are using the variable name as a handle to control the placement of the screen text, but the screen text will reside outside of the Flash file.

There are two ways text can be accessed by these dynamic text objects. For text that remains the same throughout the runtime of the published Flash file (.swf)—such as a course title—we use the "var" property. When we know that a text object is likely to change—such as the text inside of an audio transcript window—we assign its "text" property to the string variable at the appropriate time.

2. Create an AS file for default text

Ideally, your variables should be declared and initialized in a separate .as file, rather than inside your .fla file. Not only does this create that revered "central location" for all

text, but it also protects your proprietary source code and allows you to create a baseline for development where all strings have an initial, or default, value set.

How does it work? When Flash compiles, or creates, the .swf, it draws the data from the AS file, integrating it into the .swf file, so the learner sees the screen text in the course. From that point forward, the .swf does not need the .as file in order to function, and so you are free to omit the .as file from your final deliverable. This keeps your Action Script code secure.

3. Customize text with an XML file

Now that we have our variables defined and default text initialized with our .as file, we can use an external .xml file to override the default values. The data contained in the .xml file are loaded at run time (i.e., each time the .swf is run by the user), so any text changes made in this document replace the default values.

This .xml file may include all strings used in the Flash file, or it may be limited just to variables that are different from the default. If some variables are missing, or if the .xml is excluded altogether, then the Flash file uses the default values. However, if the localization company runs the .xml document file through their filtering software, they can easily batch-translate the content there. Then, the Flash file will use the translated text instead of the default (English) text.

To learn more about this approach or for help in streamlining your localization process, email Belen (belen@effectperformance.com) or Jeff (jeff@effectperformance.com).



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