



Live and Learn

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Reflections on the Penn State Instructional Design Competition

By Hal Medrano – effectPerformance Instructional Designer

Editor's Note: This past April, four teams of graduate students from Penn State's Instructional Systems (INSYS) program competed against one another to see which team could craft the best design solution for a real-life client and a real-life training need. The Instructional Design Competition was part of a class project for Dr. Barbara Grabowski and Fengfeng Ke's INSYS 525: *Instructional Design Theories, Models, and Strategies* and was sponsored by Corning, Incorporated. The following account was written by Hal Medrano, who was a member of the winning team and who has subsequently joined the effectPerformance Team. We asked Hal to describe his experiences and reflections. If you are considering participating in future events like this one, as a competitor, judge, or sponsor, this article should give you an idea of what to expect.



Instructors, judges, and contestants in this year's Penn State Instructional Design Competition - Photo by Khusro Kidwai

We were informed of the competition on the first day of class, though the details would have to wait until we met with the client representative in week three. The competition would provide an opportunity to apply our knowledge of instructional design theories, models, and strategies to an actual instructional design project for a major corporate client. Educational research and theory are critical in instructional design, but as all of us know, they mean little to practicing trainers and instructional designers unless they are applied to the real world.

The Project: In the third week of class, Bonney Hettinger, Corning's Manager of Global Learning Services and Technologies, visited our class to present us with

Corning's request for proposal (RFP). This was to be our only face-to-face meeting with the client until we presented our proposals on the last day of the term. From here on, all client communications would be by phone and e-mail. I cannot disclose the details of the project—due to the non-disclosure agreement I signed—but in broad terms, the project involved designing a leadership course that will be localized to 20 countries and delivered primarily online. This new course is to replace an existing leadership course that has suffered from low usage rates. We were given wide latitude to redesign the course as we saw fit... and Corning had every intention of using the winning design!

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By Gus Pretera, PhD, CPT

Is *competition* the American Way... of training?

This week's feature article by Hal Medrano reminds us that—contrary to popular view—competition and collaboration can work hand-in-hand to serve instructional goals. Competition brought out the best in the students and actually enhanced their collaborative efforts by bringing focus and clarity to the team's mission (create a winning design).

As a former student who generally loathed group assignments and the time wasted in the *storming-norming-performing* phases of teamwork, I have always taken a cynical viewpoint to collaborative learning, especially in workplace training contexts. However, I also remember my days as a Marketing major at St. Joe's and how hard my team and I worked to develop an advertising communication campaign for Habbersett Scrapple. We even presented it to Habbersett senior management. The winning team won not only money but also an opportunity to present their proposal to the board of directors. We were undergrads! I also remember how empowering it felt to develop an exporting strategy for Bartle & James... and how embarrassing it was when my throat dried up and I had to take a swig of a wine cooler to keep going.

What's my point? The authenticity of creating an actual deliverable for a real client with real needs and knowing that the deliverable will be judged and potentially used in real-life is not only motivating as heck, but also makes the trials and tribulations of teamwork worthwhile, even when we "lost." I encourage you to consider how you might make better use of authentic competition as part of your instructional design repertoire.

The Process: Dr. Grabowski provided us with the schedule of deliverables and divided us into four teams—reflecting the reality that in the real world, one often doesn't get to choose one's teammates. I was teamed up with Hyeon Woo Lee—a male Korean doctoral candidate who had become a good friend of mine over the previous year—and two women I did not know: Hien Nguyen, a Vietnamese doctoral student and Hsin I Yung, an M.Ed. student from Taiwan. Two men, two women, international perspectives, diverse skills—we looked like a good team!

Our first order of business was to go through the slew of documents Corning provided us and to make sure we understood the objectives, learner characteristics, and project scope. The four teams had absolutely no communication with each other about their strategies and designs. Each team filtered its questions through one member—Hien was our representative. The team representatives worked together to make sure we did not inundate Bonney with duplicate questions. We were, after all, appreciative of the opportunity Corning had given us and wanted to be respectful of our client's time.

One smart thing our team did was to schedule a weekly meeting, regardless of whether or not any deliverables were due. Initially, these meetings served as brainstorming sessions. After we began fleshing out our strategy, the weekly meetings turned into design reviews. Throughout the process, we maintained our regular course schedule. Each week, our class reviewed a new design theory and we spent a fair bit of time considering how that theory might be applicable to our Corning design. The week we studied John Keller's ARCS Model of Motivation we pretty much tore our design apart and started

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Tales From the Trenches:

Why Sometimes Less Really is More

By Gus Pretera, Ph.D.

Marie Birdsall is an effectPerformance Instructional Designer working on a large courseware project for a financial services client. She was tasked with designing a product knowledge course. Over 5 months, Marie worked with almost a dozen SMEs and contributors from different product areas, pulled together documentation from a wide variety of sources, and storyboarded more than 6 hours worth of high-quality courseware content. While 6 hours may seem like a lot of web-based training, the original course was well over 20 hours, so her streamlining efforts were considerable.

During the design process, we had come to realize that the course Marie was designing might not help the client achieve their business objectives. Though we raised our concerns early, the business unit owners needed to see the completed storyboards before they could appreciate our concerns.

Over a weeklong period, Marie and I met with the various contributors as well as with the business unit owners to review the completed storyboards. That was when the light went on and everyone realized that something radically different needed to be done. The solution that Marie and I proposed was multi-pronged:

□ Convert many of the storyboards into product workbooks that learners could complete online or manually, using existing intranet resources. Employing a

Web Quest design strategy, we could make the workbooks interactive and engaging, while also keeping them current as product features change over time (look for a “Web Quest” design tip in future issues). The workbooks, unlike LMS-driven courseware, would be easy for the learner to access repeatedly over time, would be easy and inexpensive to update, and would be relatively easy for the

“After investing so many months of work into her storyboards, many designers would have been resistant to change. Marie remained positive throughout the process.”

supervisors to monitor.

□ The posttests Marie developed would still be used to test understanding. They would be delivered via the client’s test engine and should

be easy to update over time.

□ The crown jewel of the storyboards, a set of robust case-based exercises, would be salvaged, enhanced, and used as a stand-alone (1 hour) web-based learning event.

This three-pronged solution saved the client tens of thousands of dollars in courseware development costs now and over time, made the learning experience more relevant and more hands-on for the learners, made the upkeep of the materials easier and less expensive over time., and was generally more effective in terms of meeting the business goals of the organization.

Kudos to Marie! After investing so many months of work into her storyboards, many designers would have been resistant to change. Marie remained positive throughout the process. And kudos to the client! They were willing to admit when they had pursued an ineffective solution and were willing to hear alternatives. As a result, everybody will win on this project, including the learners.

Presenting at the July 12th
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The Winning Combination! From left to right, Hal Medrano, Hien Nguyen, Bonney Hettinger, Hsin I Yung, and Hyeon Woo Lee - Photo by *Khusro Kidwai*

announcement of the winners. The judges presented an award to each team, with the largest award going to the team with the design that was most likely to be used by Corning. As it turned out, our team won! But by that point, we already felt we had gained so much just from participating in the competition. We had developed an instructional design strategy for a major corporate client that was creative, theoretically defensible, and fully practical. My friend Hyeon Woo put it best, “during this project, I regarded myself as a consultant rather than as a student.” As the adage goes, the joy was in the voyage, not the destination.

from scratch! But in this way, the competition strongly anchored the class content, and gave us a laboratory in which to bring the theories to life in a creative and practical way.

The Proposal: Our primary deliverable was the design document, a proposal laying out our understanding of the client’s needs, the approach we would use to address it, and an analysis of the work and resources required to implement it. The design documents were delivered two days before our formal presentations to Corning. This was to allow the judges time to review the documents before hearing from the four teams. It also allowed us to spend the last couple of days focusing on our presentations. Our team burned the midnight oil the night before our presentation, finishing the Powerpoint slides, and rehearsing our parts. We felt confident that our design met the client’s needs.

Each team had 90 minutes to present their proposals. Ours was the first. At 8:30 a.m. we walked into the room and met the judges. The judging panel consisted of Corning’s Bonney Hettinger, Marilynn Drax (Global

Learning Consultant), and Faye Phillips (Instructional Designer) as well as Dr. Gus Presteria (President, effectPerformance, Inc.). The judges listened attentively to our proposal, showed obvious enthusiasm for our ideas, and during the Q & A session were occasionally critical but overall extremely supportive of our efforts. We left the room feeling that, win or lose, we had comported ourselves professionally and presented a creative and fully defensible strategy to the client.


The Results: At 5:30 p.m., after all teams had presented their proposals and the judges had discussed the results, we met at Dr. Grabowski’s house for appetizers and for the

On the last day of the semester, I told Dr. Grabowski that the design competition had made the class the hardest three credits I had ever earned...and the most valuable!

Parting Shot

If you are interested in becoming a sponsor for a future instructional design competition, please contact Dr. Gus Presteria at gpresteria@effectperformance.com or Dr. Barbara Grabowski at bgrabowski@psu.edu. The deliverable from the class would be a design document that proposes instructional strategies and approaches to solve an instructional problem that you would define in an RFP that is then submitted to the class. The next competition is scheduled for Summer, 2006.

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