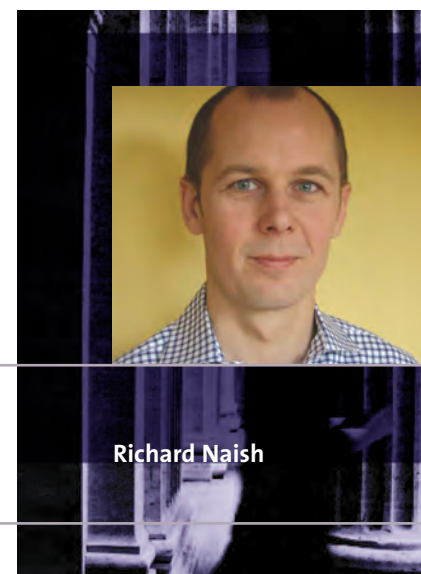


# Reality check

The more your learning package mimics the workplace the better, but make sure it's really authentic



Richard Naish

As we all know the real world is a complex system of interactions and distractions, but e-learning content usually tries to simplify these to make it easier for people learn. But how does one strike the right balance between simplifying the material so it is suitable learning content and building in real-world authenticity that makes it believable?

In a recent pilot we ran for some new e-learning content one learner commented that having to read scanned hand written documents in the scenarios was very time-consuming, and asked that we type them in. The materials are training people for a new job role for which one of the tasks is to quickly review handwritten documents and pick out crucial details that others may overlook.

So using similar documents in the learning material added authenticity, but as the learner pointed out, handwriting recognition was not one of the stated learning objectives.

## Authenticity or eye candy?

Multimedia can boost authenticity if it's done well, or it can be eye candy that distracts attention from the key messages. An e-learning programme for call centre employees contained scenarios which had no videos or even pictures of the customer, to reflect the real life situation. Instead there was just the audio track of the customer with options on how to respond to each part of the dialogue, followed by differentiated feedback. There was also typical call centre muffled background noise added to the audio; phones ringing, other people speaking on the phone and traffic noise.

So would the learner find this noise distracting or did this authenticity make it better learning?

In this case, it came across as authentic without being distracting.

Authentic material contextualises the learning by bringing in real world elements that the learner can identify as being realistic. This raises the learners' perception of the material's validity, which opens up their minds to the new material, increasing attention levels. As any teacher knows, increased attention levels lead to better learning. And then there is a beneficial double whammy for workplace learning, since the similarity makes it easier for the learner to transfer the skills, knowledge and attitudes into the workplace.

This is supported by a psychological experiment involving underwater memory testing.

## Context-dependent memory

In 1975 Godden and Baddeley did an experiment on context-dependent memory. They asked four groups of people to memorise some words. One group was given the words while wearing scuba equipment underwater and was then also tested underwater. Another group was given the words on dry land and tested on dry land. Two further groups learnt the words in one environment and were tested in the other.

Those tested in the same place as they learnt performed better, indicating that material is more easily recalled in the context in which it was learnt. So if the aim is to retain the learning material and use it in the workplace, it is better to provide it in a context that authentically represents the workplace.


But training cannot completely model all the

complexities of the real world. The 18th century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called for the 'willing suspension of disbelief' when reading poetry. It is the same with any viewer of a movie; to enjoy the film you must willingly suspend your disbelief. To help learners do this, material must introduce a scenario, explain why the learners are being asked to suspend disbelief and encourage them to do so. Any learner who does not accept this will not regard the material as valid and so close their mind it and not learn from it.

The authenticity of the content will only be as good as the e-learning developer's view of authenticity. When learning material is written without a good mixture of design creativity and regular iterative access to the subject matter expert (but also ideally the target learners), then the designer has to make the best estimate of what they believe is authentic.

Effectively they are attempting to provide authenticity through the prism of their own understanding, which can often produce a result that is not what the learners would regard as authentic.

## Getting the right balance

Creating authentic learning material is about getting the right balance between a realistic presentation of the learner's environment while resisting the temptation to be too impressionistic. It is also important to encourage willing suspension of disbelief. And, as always, one needs a good development process to deliver the authenticity. The results are increased attention and a better transfer into the workplace. 

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