Personality and UX in e-learning
by Richard Naish, Lead learning designer

We all know what it feels like to be on a well-designed website; it is all laid out for you, it is obvious where to go, everything loads quickly, if you make a data entry mistake it is very forgiving (fields not too tightly defined) and you end up lingering longer than you would on a site with poor UX (user experience).

For e-learning, UX is a combination of both the LMS/portal and the learning activities that sit behind it. However these two elements are often designed by different groups of people, who in the past rarely talked to each other. The LMS/portal was designed by people who were trained in software systems and features; 'systems people'. The learning activities were designed by people with experience in training, graphics, video and creating meaningful learner interactions; 'interactions people'.

To be fair, this split is changing and e-learning companies like City & Guilds Kineo have led the way in customising Moodle to make the best overall UX for e-learning. This means that both the LMS, and the content that sits behind it, is subject to the same rigorous UX reviews.

But the trouble is that there are an awful lot of legacy LMS's in both the education and the corporate sectors, which were built in quite a different way. So the vast majority of learners are still on these systems. Let's look at the two groups of people and see if we can see how they can better communicate with each other.

Myers-Briggs
To compare their typical personality types, let's use the Myers-Briggs Team Inventory® model, which is popular in personal skills development. According to Peter Myers and Isabel Briggs, the MBTI sorts psychological differences into four opposite pairs resulting in 16 possible psychological types. None of these types is better or worse than each other.

The pairs are:
- **E**xtraversion vs. **I**ntroversion: are you energised by other people or by ideas, emotions and memories?
- **S**ensing vs. i**N**tuition: do you gather information from your 5 senses or do you use your gut or instincts?)
- **T**hinking vs. **F**eeling: do you judge make decisions logically or by considering other people?
- **J**udgment vs. **P**erception: do you like to plan your activities and make decisions early or do you like to keep things open as long as possible?

By combining one of each of these four pairs to make up a four-letter type, you get 16 personality types, e.g. ESTJ, INFP.

Systems people
Systems people need to consider scalability, interaction with other software systems, platforms, functionality and features. Research by Capretz (2002)* suggests if we had to put a Myers-Briggs profile on them it would be ISTJ (Introversion, Sensing, Thinking, Judgment).

These are the engineers of the world and the world would be a poorer place without them; no roads, bridges, telephone networks or computers. However their view of the world is so steeped in logic and practicality that their natural blind spot is that they forget that some people can sometimes drop logic and just react emotionally to their constructions.

Interactions people
Interactions people consider the subject material and then work out how to make this pure content interactive in a way that will ensure the skills or knowledge is remembered and applied in the real world by the user.

They may actually be the have the same Myers-Briggs profile of ISTJ, but also some of them may be more likely to make decisions by considering the effect on people, rather than using pure logic to guide them. This is because they are visualising how people will be reacting to the learning content they are writing. So instead of a T, they may be an F.

They also may be more likely to gather information using their intuition. They look for meaning and patterns in information so they can develop learning material that is easy for the learner to see the same patterns and be able to digest it more easily. So instead of an S, they may be a N.

So the interactions people may be NF's (INFP, INFJ) whereas the system people may be ST's (ISTJ).

Typical NF/ST conflicts
The typical NF/ST conflict is that NF often tries to explain what they are trying to achieve overall in terms of the whole (another pattern from their N) and the warm feelings they would like users to have when using the e-learning (coming from their F). But the ST can't understand what they want; they would like it broken down into logical practical steps that they need to take. 'Just tell me the features you want to change and I will programme them.'

Likewise, the NF can't understand why the ST can't see the pattern and what they are trying to achieve, and why they can't see the large negative emotional impact there would be on the users if, for example, users had to go through a three-stage login to access their content.

The way forward?
After all the deaths of cyclists in London, there have been innovative programmes where lorry drivers try cycling in a crowded city and cyclists try driving a lorry. Likewise I am sure systems people and interactions people would benefit from taking turns doing each other's role.

The user's impression of any learning content is the combination of their view of the LMS and the content that sits behind it. So both groups of people need to work together more to raise that impression.

*Capretz, L. (2003) Personality types in software engineering International Journal of Human-Computer Studies 58 207-214

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