How to write for ATTENTION

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Attracting and maintaining students' attention is a challenging task in any educational context. In this article, we will explore five principles that can be applied by instructional designers, to create learning material that will grab students' attention and increase their engagement with the content.

In today's fast-paced world, people prefer to consume bite-sized portions of information. As such, short-message platforms such as Snapchat, Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter have grown in popularity (MakeAWebsiteHub.com, 2018), displaying this propensity toward quick and easy communication. In fact, Facebook recommends that in order to create engaging videos for mobile platforms, one should limit them to a maximum duration of 15 seconds (Facebook, 2018).

This is equally relevant within the educational context – but sometimes, learning material needs to be a little longer than a 180-character message. In this article we will briefly explore some principles that can be applied when creating learning material. These principles can assist content creators in grabbing and maintaining students' attention, and increasing their engagement with the content.

1. Activate arousal

Activate students' arousal by presenting them with a 'teaser', or by including an interesting device – such as a statement that surprises or shocks them, makes them doubt what you're saying, piques their curiosity, and ultimately presents them with a problem to solve (Pappas, 2015; and Khadjooi et al., 2011). Generally, our brains are more focused when we encounter new and exciting information; as such, this will 'awaken' students' attention, making them more likely to absorb the message linked to the statement or question (Ragin, 2016). Although this device can be included at any point in the learning material, it is best to place it at the beginning, in order to capture the student's attention from the outset. An example is to present them with a statement that conflicts with or contradicts what they believe to be true. This technique will immediately grab their attention, and motivate them to learn more about the topic at hand (Pappas, 2015).

2. Use real-world examples

Students are usually more attentive to scenarios that can be encountered in everyday life. This is because the relevance of the information is more apparent, as is its application to everyday life (Nagra, 2014; and Pappas, 2015). Thus, using real-world examples, as opposed to hypothetical scenarios (or no examples at all), can significantly increase student engagement. For instance, you may choose to relate the content to a topic that is popular on social media, or to information that is currently trending. However, it is also important to be aware of different sociocultural backgrounds. In order to ensure relevance and comprehension, try to use examples that the majority of students can relate to.

3. Tell a story

Often, the information presented in learning material can be dull and uninteresting. This can be overcome successfully through the integration of storytelling, which increases interest and enhances student engagement (Pappas, 2014). This is because stories tend to elicit an emotional response – we care about the characters and what happens to them – and when people's emotions are stimulated, they pay more attention to the material (Ragin, 2016). A well-presented story can therefore help to teach a concept more effectively ([a], 2018; and Hull [b], 2018). However, it is also vital not to become overly focused on the story itself, such that it fails to convey the educational message. If the story becomes unnecessary additional content, it is more likely to hamper the message of the learning material (Pappas, 2014). 'Scenarios' are a common example of storytelling in educational content. When storytelling is used for the purpose of aiding attention, the scenario should be immediately relevant to what is being taught, and ideally be based on a real-world example (The Rapid E-Learning Blog, 2009).

4. Incorporate humour

Including humour in learning material is a powerful means of engaging students. It makes the content not only more enjoyable, but also more memorable. Additionally, it reduces anxiety and increases motivation (Nagra, 2014; and Pappas, 2015). However, humour must be used with caution, as it should be appropriate and relevant to the content being covered. As such, the learning material must remain educationally sound, and the humour should complement the educational message, rather than detract from it (Pappas, 2015). Examples of humour might include puns and wordplays.

5. Keep it short and simple

In order to grab and maintain students' attention, it is vital to keep the content as short and accessible as possible. This will allow students to easily identify the core message or learning objective that you are aiming to convey. Try to exclude any unnecessary, redundant or unrelated information: if it does not serve a direct educational purpose, it will increase cognitive load and detract from the educational message, thereby significantly reducing student engagement (Mayer and Jackson, 2005; Mayer et al., 2007; and Ragin, 2016). In addition to limiting unnecessary information, it is also helpful to keep sentences as short and simple as possible.

Concluding remarks

Attracting and maintaining students' attention is a challenging task in any educational context. This is especially true in today's fast-paced world, where information is readily available, and cognitive overload has become the norm. However, by implementing the principles discussed here, content creators or instructional designers will be able to develop content in a way that effectively captures students' attention, enhances their engagement, and ultimately results in higher retention rates.

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