

**Basic Graphic Design Skills for
Instructional Designers**

**Part I: Graphic Design and Usability Strategies
in Instructional Design**

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Basic Graphic Design Skills for Instructional Designers

Part I: Graphic Design and Usability Strategies in Instructional Design

Background

When it comes to web design, which is the category that most elearning falls under, first impressions count...a lot. Dr. Gitte Lindgaard's research paper, published in *Behaviour & Information Technology*, is appropriately named: Attention web designers: You have 50 milliseconds to make a good first impression!¹

A quote from an interview with Dr. Lindgaard was posted on [websiteoptimization.com](http://www.websiteoptimization.com),
"...the strong impact of the visual appeal of the site seemed to draw attention away from usability problems. This suggests that aesthetics, or visual appeal, factors may be detected first and that these could influence how users judge subsequent experience....Hence, even if a website is highly usable and provides very useful information presented in a logical arrangement, this may fail to impress a user whose first impression of the site was negative."—(Lindgaard 2006)²

To create online instruction that both attracts and focuses attention, instructional designers need some understanding of graphic design and usability. Basic Graphic Design for Instructional Designers is an online course that strengthens visual communication and usability skills for instructional design (ID) students in the Instructional Technologies (ITEC) masters program at San Francisco State University (SFSU). Graphic design skills are not just helpful in creating good first impressions. They also play a big role in directing the viewer's eye, creating visual hierarchy and grouping related elements. Good design is user-friendly and accessible.

¹Gitte Lindgaard, Gary Fernandes, Cathy Dudak, and J. Brown
Behaviour & Information Technology, Vol. 25, No. 2, March-April 2006, 115-126

²Websiteoptimization.com <http://www.websiteoptimization.com/speed/tweak/blink/>

It is easy to navigate, consistent, well organized and pleasant to look at. Cognitive skills like demonstrating comprehension of graphic design vocabulary and applying usability skills to ID can be taught through online instruction and examples.

This online course has three parts: Graphic Design and Usability Strategies in Instructional Design; Universal Design for Instruction (UDI); and Flexible Grid Design: An Exercise in Experiential Learning. Basic Graphic Design Skills for Instructional Designers is intended to compliment existing ITEC design electives that teach design using software, such as PhotoShop, DreamWeaver, and Illustrator. The instructional design in this paper will focus on the first section, Graphic Design and Usability Strategies in Instructional Design.

Performance Analysis

Last semester several students in the Instructional Technologies Masters Program (ITEC) at San Francisco State University (SFSU) mentioned (to me) that they would like to know more about how to use graphic design in their online presentations. Many of these students come from the teaching professions. They are learning complicated new software applications for the first time and need to use graphic design in their projects. The performance deficits noticed by the students themselves are the result of little or no prior exposure to graphic design. They are unfamiliar with graphic design vocabulary used by designers on the job. They have little experience practicing usability skills.

An instrument to assess student skills in graphic design, usability and accessibility can be found in Appendix A. It will be posted on the ITEC resource site and linked in iLearn. Graphic Design and Usability Strategies in Instructional Design will focus on bridging the performance gaps revealed by the findings. Instructional designers do not need to produce professional graphic design projects. However, they do need to understand how graphic design can affect usability and what a Graphical User Interface (GUI) is. As professional IDs, ITEC students will need to understand how to design online instruction with usability and accessibility in mind.

Training Needs Assessment

A survey designed for ITEC faculty to assess the learning needs of their students will be posted on the ITEC resource website and linked in iLearn. This survey will also inquire about the need for a course like this at SFSU. This will take into account the organizational needs. Another survey, for ITEC students, will be posted online to learn more about student interest in a course like this. Both of these instruments can be viewed in Appendix B.

I will meet with Dr. Beatty, the ITEC Department Head and Dr. Benton, the design professor in ITEC, and ask for input regarding training needs. I have spoken with Cele Hanzel, a SME and Graphical User Interface (GUI) Designer for Wells Fargo. Cele is also a design instructor at the San Francisco Art Institute. She has already made some suggestions regarding training needs and assessment. I will also draw from my own experience as a professional graphic designer and an ITEC student.

In his message on the SFSU website, President Corrigan said, "Maintaining a useful and user-friendly presence on the Web is but one face of SF State's mission to serve its community."³ This statement, and the SFSU ACCESS⁴ website, reflect a commitment to usability and accessibility at SFSU. The leadership of SFSU's Center for Teaching and Faculty (CTFD)⁵, offering faculty trainings on Universal Design for Learning, is also an example of SFSU's desire to become a more accessible campus. There are currently no courses offered in usability or accessibility at SFSU for ID students.

³ <http://www.sfsu.edu/preswelc.htm>

⁴ <http://www.sfsu.edu/access/>

⁵ Center for Teaching and Faculty (CTFD) website: <http://ctfd.sfsu.edu/udl.htm>

Training Needs:

1. ITEC students do not apply graphic design strategies to improve the learning environment.
 - a. They do not know graphic design vocabulary used on the job.
 - b. They do not recognize visual communication strengths and weaknesses in ID.
 - c. They do not understand how to apply graphic design strategies to reduce cognitive load in ID.

 2. ITEC students do not apply usability strategies to improve the learner experience.
 - a. They do not know usability vocabulary used on the job.
 - b. They do not recognize usability strengths and weaknesses in ID projects.
 - c. They do not know how to discuss usability skills in their practice.
-

Context Analysis

Performance Context:

When finished with this course, learners will communicate with co-workers using design vocabulary. When developing online instruction, they will be able to use graphic design strategies to improve flow and comprehension. Knowledge of design concepts, principles and elements will strengthen the learner's expertise and improve the learning environment. Learners will understand usability strategies and be able to apply them to their professional instructional design projects. Knowledge of usability terms and concepts will give the learner a deeper understanding of designing for the user experience. Learners will demonstrate understanding of usability strategies and apply them to their professional instructional design projects.

Instructional Context:

This course will be offered online through SFSU. Students will need access to a computer and the Internet. Most people will work at home. Others may use the SFSU computer labs. The instructor will use a Learning Management System (LMS), iLearn, to post assignments and

post to a forum. Students will use threaded discussion forums to receive feedback from the instructor and other students. Some assignments will be in the form of threaded discussions. The resource website will feature video demos, resource links to examples, practice quizzes and portrayals.⁶ The portrayal (Merrill, 2006) components will provide a hands-on learning experience to help the learner to relate to graphical instruction components when on the job.

Learning Context:

There will be a syllabus/manual to accompany the elearning course, which will be in English. This will be available online as an accessible Word file or an accessible pdf. Illustrative videography will be included. There will be a resource website with exploratory sections for active learners. Files will be uploaded and downloaded using iLearn. Assignments and forums will be accessed through iLearn. The manual will have illustrated definitions and also examples and non-examples. The required textbook will have visual examples and references.

Learner Analysis

Learners will be in the ITEC program, working on a masters degree or a certificate. Their ages will be roughly between 22 and 70. They will have computer skills and know the English language. Group characteristics will be a desire to work in elearning, an interest in technology, an interest in teaching, and a desire to learn to use graphic design more effectively in ID. Learners must be comfortable using the computer to complete a course. Learners will have varying degrees of prior knowledge. Prior knowledge will be assessed through a survey. Please see Appendix A. Although it is not a requirement for students to have graphic design experience, it will be helpful to know what their experiences are with graphic design and usability. Since the learners are graduate students in ITEC, they will be motivated to do well. This is an elective course they can choose, not a core course.

⁶ Merrill, David M. Components of Instruction Towards a Theoretical Tool for Instructional Design. 2006.

Instructional Goals:

1. High Level: Apply graphic design strategies to improve the learning environment.

Sub Goals:

- Discuss graphic design vocabulary with co-workers.
- Recognize visual communication strengths and weaknesses in ID projects.
- Apply graphic design strategies to reduce cognitive load in ID projects.

2. Apply usability strategies to improve the learner experience.

Sub Goals:

- Discuss usability vocabulary with co-workers.
- Recognize usability strengths and weaknesses in ID projects.
- Discuss usability skills in their practice.

Instructional Sequencing Strategy & Rationale

The learning begins in the cognitive domain for declarative knowledge in the category Gagné (1972) called Verbal Information. In the task analysis diagram, this is shown as a cluster analysis at the bottom of the hierarchical diagram for each high level goal. I chose a cluster analysis because there is no specific order for learning the vocabulary terms. Memorizing the vocabulary related to each high level goal is a pre-requisite skill and must be learned first.

Above the cluster analysis is a hierarchical analysis, used to break the high level goals down into a set of subordinate skills. This learning hierarchy (Gagné, 1968) analyzes a set of component skills that must be learned before the more complex skill can be learned (Gagné, 1985). For the learner to apply graphic design strategies to improve the learning environment and apply usability strategies to improve the learner experience, the related subordinate skills must be learned in order. This instructional sequencing is a concept-related strategy with

Instructional Sequencing Strategy & Rationale (continued)

a prerequisite, proposed by Posner and Strike (1976). The graphic design strategies section comes before the usability section because usability builds on basic design concepts.

To analyze the tasks I drew from my own experience as a professional graphic designer. I consulted *The Elements of User Experience, User-Centered Design for the Web*, by Jesse James Garrett, for in-depth information about the User Experience (UX). To help with the transfer of skills, a Pocket-Guide will be given to take on the job with illustrated vocabulary and quick tips. I also added an additional step to help with transfer of skills—joining a Community of Practice (COP). It has been my experience that professional COPs (whether in-person or online) are collaborative and enriching environments where new skills are nurtured and advanced skills are deepened. Professional relationships develop that are mutually beneficial.

Instructional Objectives

Organizational Objectives:

SFSU will demonstrate a user-friendly policy.

SFSU's ITEC program will improve visual communication.

Designer Objectives:

Learners will apply graphic design strategies to improve the learning environment.

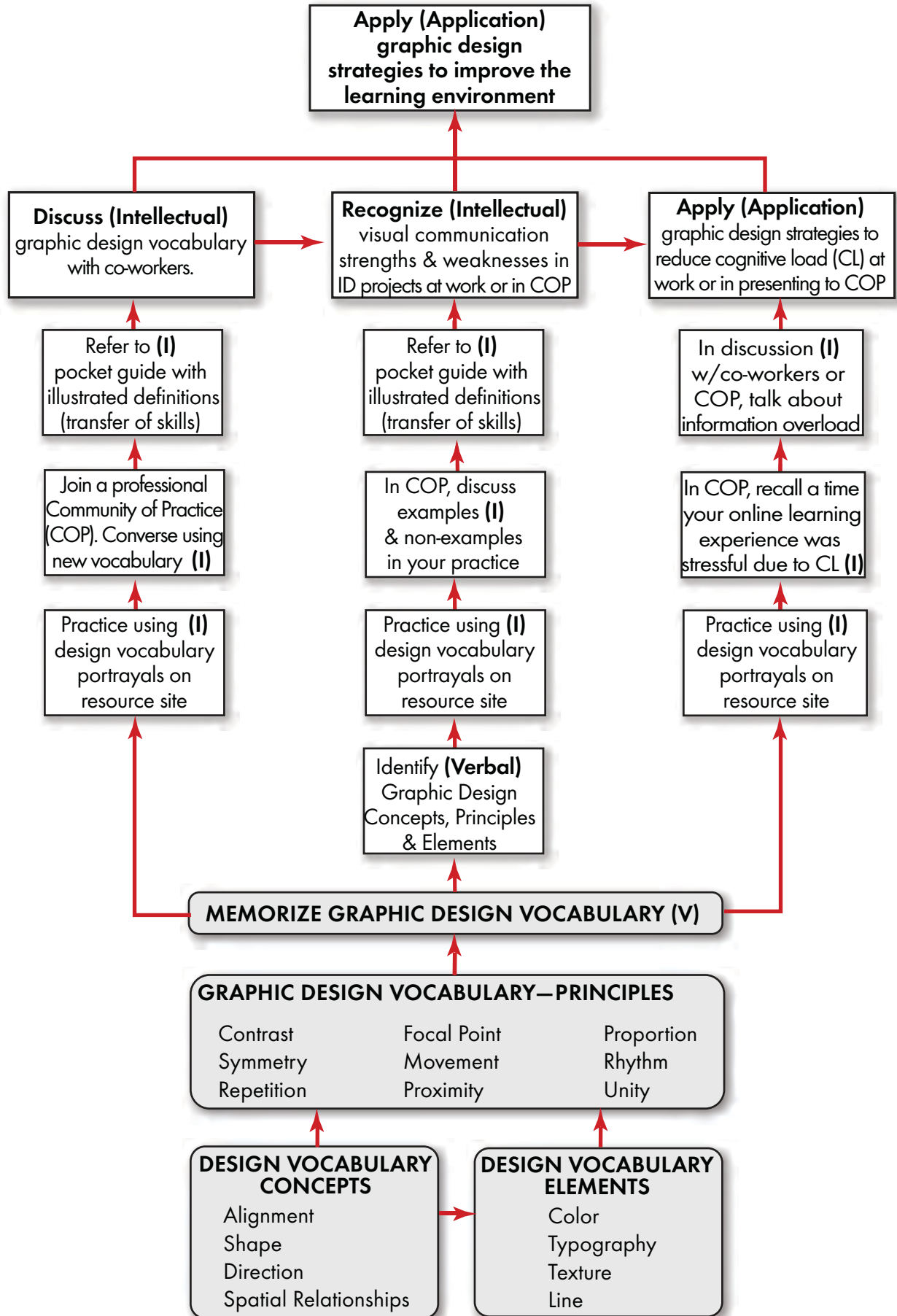
Learners will apply usability strategies to improve the learner experience.

Learner Objectives:

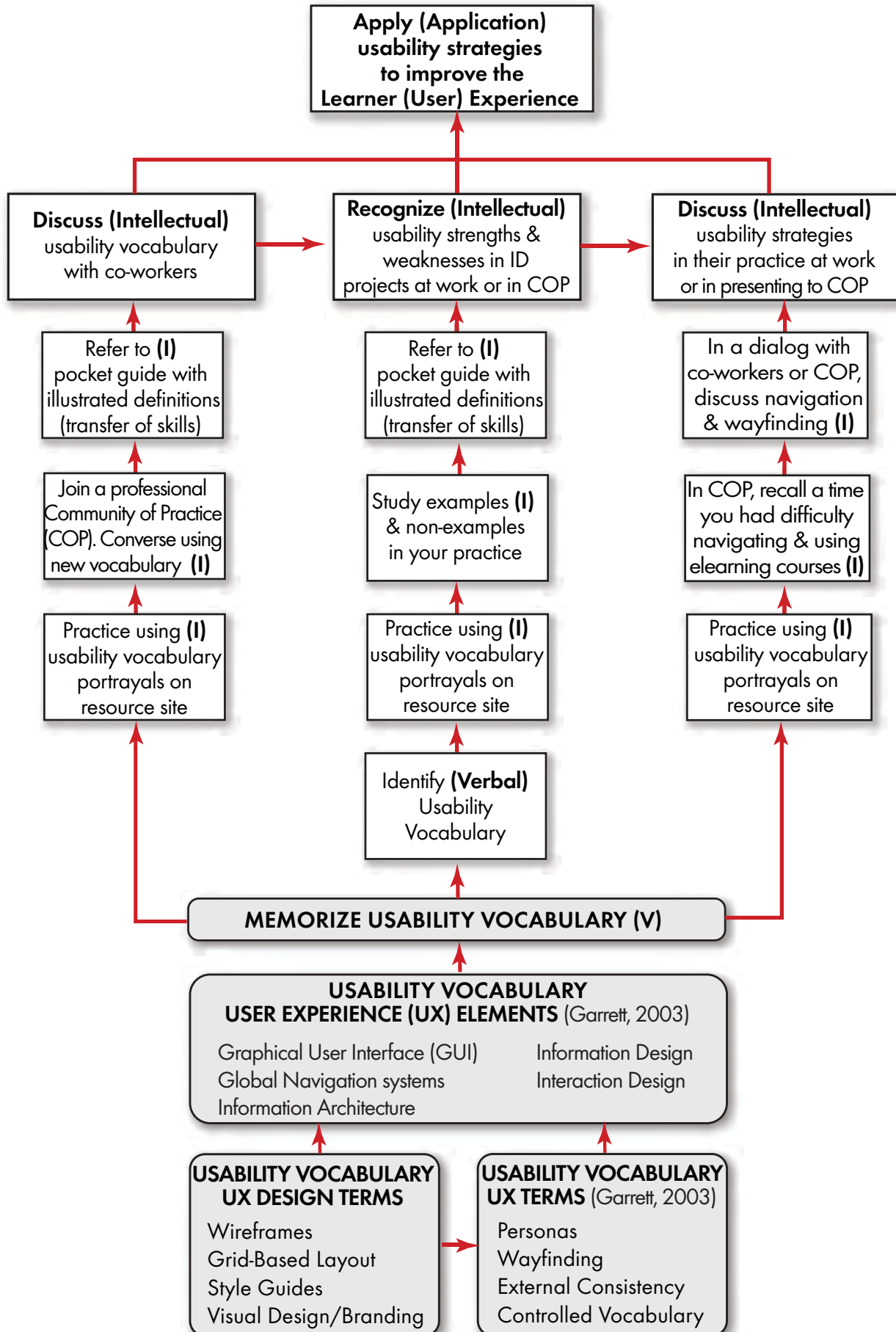
You will design online instruction that is easy to understand and maximizes retention.

You will design online instruction that is easy to use and satisfying to the learner.

The task analysis diagrams on the following pages will illustrate high level and sub goals.



NO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE NEEDED



NO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE NEEDED

Instructional Strategies & Activities (and Rationale)

The way the course is structured is influenced by Merrill's Component Display Theory (Merrill, 1983, 1994). This simply works through: presentation (tell), demonstration (show), recall (ask) and apply (do).⁷ Using this approach, the learning is reinforced in several ways.

Pre-instructional Activities:

There are two sections to this course: Graphic Design Strategies and Usability Strategies. Each will have an initial in-person class meeting. At that time there will be introductions and a tour through the LMS, syllabus/manual and resource website. A presentation and a demo will set the tone and show the skills to be learned. On the resource website, the instructor will go right to the detail of a well designed graphical instruction component and show it side-by-side with a poorly designed component. At this time, design concepts, principles and elements will be introduced (for first section). This is the "tell" and "show" part of the strategy.

Instructional Activities:

The "show" part will continue on the resource website. The instructional activities will show portrayals, or examples, that will highlight different illustrated vocabulary terms. The "ask" part begins with practice quizzes where the learner is asked to match up a term with an image. The learner will get a response and a definition. The portrayals (Merrill 2006) will provide the "application" part, since the learner will be clicking and applying skills. This section is not yet developed and requires additional technology and analysis. Other activities will involve prior knowledge recall. Remembering a time when navigation was frustrating or when information overload was overwhelming. This will create empathy for other learners

⁷Fall 007: Volume 40 Number 1

and also make the concepts easier to understand. Learners will discuss their personal experiences with colleagues and the instructor in threaded discussion forums that will be used to measure their knowledge of usability.

One other strategy will be for the instructor to send bulk motivational emails. They will be short, cheerful, encouraging and offer reminders and current tips on resources. This can work to build the relationship between instructor and students and was successful in a prior study, (2008, Huett, J.B., Huett, K.C., Kalinowski, K.E., Moller, L.)

Materials & Media

A downloadable version of the course/syllabus will be available online and a bound version will be sold in the SFSU bookstore. We will discuss the syllabus and talk about the manual, answering any questions at the in-person meetings, in emails or by phone calls. There will be illustrated examples in the course manual that break down graphical instruction components and show relationships between design concepts and learning theories. This will draw on prior knowledge about well-known educational theorists.

The LMS will be the framework that holds the course together. These will also be on the resource site and we can look at them together. The resource website, syllabus and course manual will be designed to help focus the learner on specific parts of graphic design and usability used in online instruction. The website will contain illustrated examples and relevant links. It will be the framework that holds the course together. It will also be a way to offer options to different learners with multiple intelligences, like those who learn kinesthetically or those with attention deficit issues. Multiple Intelligences Theory is discussed at length in the book *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (Gardner, 2002). The strategy is to offer different learners the choice of clicking through a visual resource site, visiting relevant links, and viewing online examples. The resource website and accessible, online syllabus/manual will benefit those with low vision or dyslexia. The following pages contain samples of instructional materials and media.

Practice Quiz Example

Which image shows an example of Wayfinding?

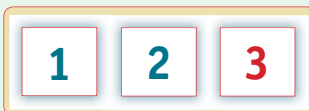
Personas

Wireframes

Information Architecture

Style Guides

Wayfinding



CORRECT

“Good wayfinding enables users to quickly get a mental picture of where they are, where they can go, and which choice will get them closer to their objectives.”

Jesse James Garrett

1



2



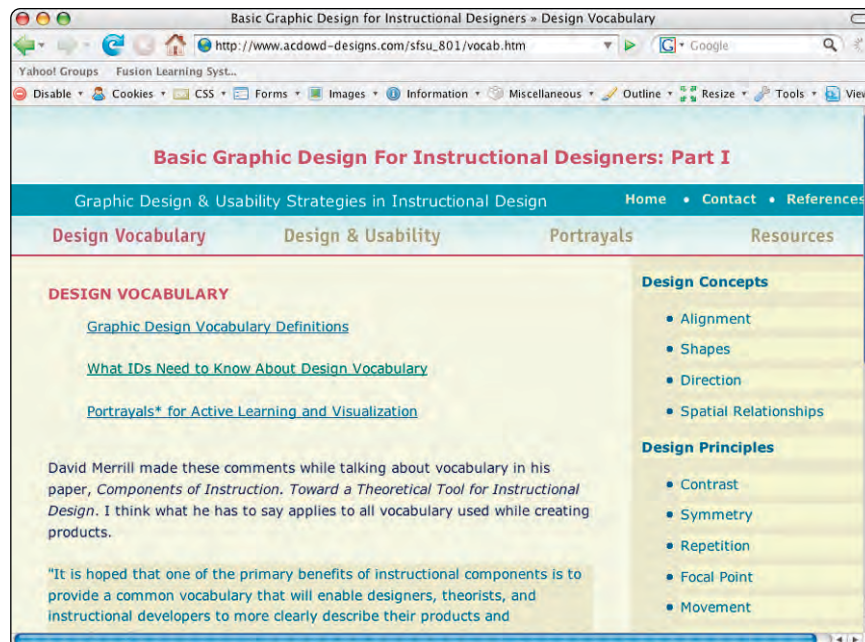
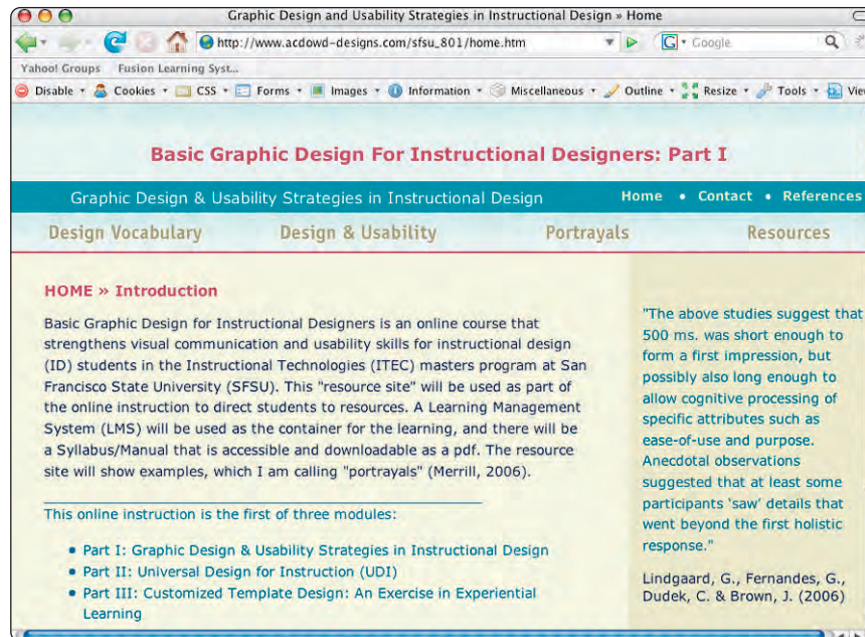
3



The function of the quizzes will be to give feedback during the training for those who learn this way. The material will go over the same things in the portrayals (Merrill, 2006) but in a different way. They need to be given more thought and designed in way that is accessible and clear. They will indicate to students whether they truly understand the learning when it presents visually.

Resource Website

www.acdowd-designs.com/sfsu_801/home.htm



About Portrayals



The training that will be included in the portrayals is not developed, but I am going to mention here some ideas that will be incorporated into these learning components. Each section of the course will have its own "Portrayal" (Merrill, 2006) section on the resource website. The section will begin with a video demo that illustrates and discusses the design/usability terms and their applications. The learners will be directed to watch this and then refer to their illustrated definitions in the manual. They will also be asked to follow the weekly links for examples and non-examples that go with the sections and practice using the quizzes. Lastly, they will be directed to go through the portrayal section and practice applying the knowledge they have learned from "tell", "show", "ask" and "do".⁷

The portrayals (Merrill, 2006) currently up on the resource and shown on the next page are quick examples that are similar to what will be done, but clearly, the final product will be more interactive and allow for application of knowledge.

⁷Ibid

Portrayals—Beginning Stage

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Graphic Design & Usability Strategies in Instructional Design Home • Contact • References

Design Vocabulary
Design & Usability
Portrayals
Resources

PORTRAYALS » Design Principles

- Contrast
- Symmetry
- Repetition
- **Focal Point**
- Movement
- Proximity
- Proportion
- Rhythm
- Unity



Focal Point

"By manipulating the spaces around and between text, the designer's first option is to create levels of importance through spatial distinction."

Timothy Samkara
Design Elements
A Graphic Style Manual

Roll over above image for more information on focal point. If there are too many parts fighting for attention, your message will not get through.

[back](#)


Basic Graphic Design For Instructional Designers: Part I

Graphic Design & Usability Strategies in Instructional Design Home • Contact • References

Design Vocabulary
Design & Usability
Portrayals
Resources

PORTRAYALS » Usability

Roll over the image below to see a portrayal of information design



Interest Connection Hook

When? Where? Why?

How? Details? What?

Contact Who? Credentials

"More than simply establishing a level of importance, creating hierarchy also means clarifying the function of informational components through their formal relationships: whether they are grouped together or separated; whether they appear in a consistent location; and how they are treated with regards to typeface, size spacing, and so on."

Timothy Samkara
Design Elements
A Graphic Style Manual

Formative Evaluation:

The purpose of this course is to help ITEC students develop a holistic approach towards visual communication as used in instructional design. Every assignment is designed with performance assessment in mind. Before the course is built a survey will be given to ITEC students to measure interest. Another survey will be given to ITEC instructors and the department head to assess the need for such a course. Both surveys will be posted on the ITEC resource site and linked in iLearn. These instruments are shown in Appendix B.

While designing the course I will consult with Cele Hanzel, a SME who is both a college design instructor and a GUI designer. I will ask Linda Hemenway, an instructor currently teaching several elearning courses in design at Santa Rosa Junior College, to comment on the content. I also want to get input from faculty within the ITEC program at SFSU. Having these SMEs view the draft version before any testing is essential.

One-on-one

The one-on-one evaluation would begin with the selection of three target learners. One would have above average skills, another would have average skills and the other would have skills below average. As far as attitude goes, it would be best to find one learner who is enthusiastic and positive, one who is neutral...willing to go along with it, and one who is negative...doesn't understand the need to learn this. Since this is an online course, the direct interaction between the designer and the learner will be through the initial meetings and the internet. There will be points where conference calls are requested as part of assessment. Things to look at closely are content accuracy, appropriateness, and clarity. It is essential to find out early if the sequencing is working, if the content is balanced and how realistic the assignments are regarding time and what is expected.

Most important is making sure the learner can follow the message. Is the content written clearly? Are the online portrayals (Merrill, 2006) clear and easy to use? Are the links and

information on the resource site relevant? Is the manual easy to follow? Are the demos helpful? Is there continuity between segments? Has enough time been given to reflect and soak up the new knowledge between new concepts? Are the resources familiar and helpful? Does the syllabus clarify instructional objectives and give clear directions? Does the sequencing between sections work for students? Are the illustrations in the manual helpful? Are the materials accessible?

Small Group Evaluation

The second stage of Evaluation will be to determine the effectiveness of the changes already made after feedback from the first evaluation comes in. Any problematic sections that were noted on the one-on-one evaluation will be looked at carefully and retested. Eight to ten learners will be selected, representing both low and high achieving learners, students with differing cultural and linguistic skills, students with different learning styles, and students with different levels of experience. The same method of assessing motivation and familiarity, by asking questions about the course, (used in the first evaluation) will be carried out. Students will be told that the materials are in the formative stage and be asked to help in evaluating them.

Learners will be asked to print out the syllabus, manual and any areas on the resource site they want to comment on regarding usability problems or any confusion. What is most important at this point is knowing that the directions are clear, the work is interesting and there is enough time to practice what is being learned. Also, knowing that the strategy of using multi-modal instructions is working. Do they like having a printed manual in addition to an online resource site? Is it confusing in any way? Does the syllabus give clear direction about assignments? Is there adequate instruction about how to participate in a threaded forum discussion? Are the learning objectives clear? Are the methods of assessment understood from the start? Does the learner feel that they are learning what they are supposed to learn?

These questions will all be asked in various ways. There will be an instrument designed to measure attitude and achievement at the end of each section, as in the one-on-one evaluation. The

learner will be given a copy of their first text responses to refer to before completing the second assessment. In addition there will be an interview after the first session to establish more rapport and assess attitude.

Field Trial

For the field trial what will be assessed are learning performance and course delivery. Is it feasible to deliver this learning through an elearning course? Thirty learners will be selected from a typical target group. What will be looked at closely in the field trial is if the learning context closely resembles the intended content. Were the changes made in the other evaluations helpful? Can the learners use their new skills in the workplace? Can these skills be applied in other courses? Are they using the new skills? Does this impact their organization? What do co-workers or instructors have to say about changes this employee has made to the workplace environment? Do any of them have any suggestions for improvement? Does the course content motivate the learner? Hold learner attention? Do the learners like having choices of print and web resources to use as needed? Since this will be instructor led it is important to be mindful that the instructions for the instructor are clear and complete. This also needs to be assessed in an interview with the instructor.

Ongoing Testing

There are two sections to this course, Design Vocabulary in Online Instruction and Usability in Online Instruction. For the first session of each section, the class will meet in person. Since there are no prior knowledge requirements, there won't be a pre-test to test. However, to assess motivation and get a sense for familiarity of subject matter, each student will be asked to list three reasons this course is of interest and three things they would like to learn about design vocabulary. Before the next section, students would be asked to list three things they want to learn about usability in online instruction. I would begin testing learners' responses to

the course directly after the first section, on design vocabulary. Then I would assess once more after the second session—Usability in Online Instruction. There would be interviews as well.

Summative Evaluation:

In the summative evaluation, transfer of skills is an important consideration. How are the skills used, how do they affect social relationships and communication, does acquiring these skills resolve the original need for them? How has learner performance improved? Do learners use design vocabulary at work more often? Are learners able to apply usability skills when developing online instruction? Do co-workers appreciate learners' new skills? Is communication in the workplace improved? Do clients hold SFSU in higher esteem for providing this type of training to students? Can students apply what they are learning in other ITEC courses? These are a few questions that will be asked in addition to the ones noted above.

Expert Evaluation

The learners should be told that they will be contacted in the future to discuss the instruction. After letting some time pass, transfer of skills will be evaluated by the ITEC Department Head and by training development specialists, management and other stakeholders at the organizations where students are employed. They will be looking to see if there are any ways transfer of skills is blocked. Some performance evaluations will be done. It is very helpful to be able to evaluate at the performance site.

I believe the needs and goals of this course are congruent with those of SFSU. The needs assessment states two main training needs:

1. ITEC students do not understand how to use graphic design strategies to improve the Learning environment
2. ITEC students do not understand how to use usability strategies to improve the Learner experience

The main goals are:

- Apply graphic design strategies to improve the learning environment.
- Apply usability strategies to improve the learner experience.

One of the strengths SFSU is that it is an institution that provides a holistic education. It is not a trade school or a community college. Instructing IDs in design vocabulary is valuable. This will improve performance through integration of skills. It will also improve communication on-the-job for IDs. SFSU has a policy of accessibility and its own Accessible Technology Initiative. Messages from the president and the Dean of the College of Education support this.

According to Jacob E. Perea, Dean, College of Education's message,

"A major goal of the College of Education is to improve access to all of our programs.

This goal represents a part of our mission to prepare competent, capable, and motivated educators who provide effective services to individuals and their families, especially for those residing in ethnically and racially diverse communities

President Corrigan has created a task force to ensure accessibility and good usability standards. It would be in alignment with SFSU policy to train IDs with these skills. It would reflect well on SFSU and attract corporate interest, investment and partnership to SFSU's ITEC program.

⁸ <http://coe.sfsu.edu/coe/index.php>

Appendice A

Sample Data Gathering Instruments

Sample Survey for Learner Analysis—prior knowledge:

1. How would you rate your graphic design skills?

Poor Beginner Fair Intermediate Advanced

2. How would you rate your knowledge of usability strategies?

Poor Beginner Fair Intermediate Advanced

3. Please check the terms that you use in your instructional design work.

Proximity

Graphical User Interface

Information Architecture

Spatial Relationships

4. Do you consider external consistency (branding) when designing your training materials?

Never Rarely Occasionally Almost Always Always

5. Do you consider different types of learners when designing your course's visual layout?

Never Rarely Occasionally Almost Always Always

6. Have you studied the usability of your instructional design to be sure learners can access assignments, follow navigation and understand directions?

Never Rarely Occasionally Almost Always Always

Appendice B

Sample Data Gathering Instruments

Sample Survey for Learner Analysis—Motivation and course interest:

1. How relevant is it to you, as an instructional designer, to be able to communicate with others on your design team using design vocabulary?

___ Very relevant ___ Moderately relevant ___ Not relevant

2. Please put a number 1–4 (1= least, 4= most) in the blank to indicate which skills most interest you.

___ Reducing cognitive load

___ Improving usability

___ Understanding graphic design vocabulary

___ Using color to enhance the learning environment

3. How confident are you that you will learn design tips to reduce cognitive load?

___ Very confident ___ Moderately confident ___ Not confident

4. How meaningful would it be to you if you were able to improve usability in your projects?

___ Very meaningful ___ Moderately meaningful ___ Not meaningful

5. How comfortable are you with a design class that is delivered almost entirely online?

___ Very comfortable ___ Moderately comfortable ___ Not comfortable

Appendice B (continued)

Sample Data Gathering Instruments

Sample Survey for SFSU ID Instructors and Graphic Design Instructors:

1. Please put a number 1–5 (1= least, 5= most) in the blank to indicate which skill you would rate as most valuable to ID students.

___ Design graphical instruction components more effectively.

___ Understand and use graphic design vocabulary.

___ Know how to maximize usability when designing ID.

___ Recognize effective GUI.

___ Use color to enhance the learning environment.

2. Do you think a basic graphic design for instructional designers course can be successful as a class that is almost entirely online?

___ Yes ___ No ___ Because _____

3. Based on your knowledge of ITEC students, what percentage would take this course?

___ 25% ___ 60% ___ 85%

4. Is there a need at SFSU for a course that improves understanding of basic graphic design and usability skills for instructional designers?

___ Yes ___ No Because _____

5. Would you have time to meet to suggest benchmarks for assessment?

___ Yes ___ No

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