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e-Learning Leadership Blog

How to Blossom as an Instructional Designer

Posted by Ethan Edwards on Thu, May 22, 2014

by *Ethan Edwards, chief instructional strategist* | *@ethanaedwards*

Spring has arrived in full force here in Southern Illinois. Whenever I drive into town I pass right through an enormous apple orchard (actually, I believe it's the largest family owned orchard in the US) and right now the apple trees are in full bloom. Most apple trees are not self-pollinating; that is, they need a different variety of apple to be in bloom nearby in order to make a decent crop. Depending on the variety, fruit will be sparse and less vigorous or may not form at all without cross pollination. So it's really important to plant multiple types of apple trees.

This is clearly apparent in this hillside orchard: this part of the orchard is predominantly planted with one variety, but the "pollinators," clearly visible by their contrasting bloom and pruning pattern, are scattered evenly throughout the planting. They aren't expected to produce fruit for picking necessarily and are pruned to produce maximum bloom rather than optimal fruit. They very well may be crabapples, as some of those varieties do a great job pollinating even though the fruit is not useful. But the important thing to note is that the producing apples can't do it all by themselves.

So what does this have to do with e-learning? Not a lot directly, but I think it can serve as a useful analogy for what needs to happen during design and development to get the best e-learning products. Too often I find that e-learning designers are working entirely on their own-designing, developing, and implementing their lessons with no one off whom to bounce ideas. Even in situations where multiple designers are working in the same organization, it is surprising how completely each person can be siloed, with only minimal contact with fellow-designers. It's sort of like being a poor apple trees without a pollinator.

Here at Allen Interactions we have the benefit of working in studios. Each studio comprises of full complement of the skills and resources required to complete an e-learning product: instructional designers, project managers, developers, content writers, media specialists, etc. We try to include all team members in critical discussions during the life of a project as much as possible, and we find the multiple perspectives to be invaluable in coming up with the best designs. A large part of making e-learning work is understanding human nature, so even people without formal instructional design training can contribute in significant ways to the design.

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Even though you might not have the benefit of a team or of a dedicated studio, it is important to do whatever you can to find a colleague to involve yourself with during the design portions of your project. There are several key points in the design process-very early in the brainstorming phases and at each significant review point-where you absolutely need to have the benefit of someone else's eyes. The more you invest in a solution, the more invisible its flaws become to you. And your colleague doesn't even have to be an instructional designer to be helpful (remember how indispensible the services of a lowly crabapple can be). The exercise of justifying your design ideas to someone else and really listening to that person's comments will do amazing things for the quality of the thinking behind your designs. Unnecessary content and burdensome sequences become very clear almost immediately. Another point of view can be exactly the catalyst to jump start your own insights in a different but more productive direction.

It's a simple concept, but one that will bear ample fruit if you are industrious in seeking partnerships with others, even if you still are in a department of one.

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