INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION ON HIGH STAKES ONLINE LEARNING DESIGN CASES

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What do medical professionals, local government officials, and preservice teachers have in common? These learners often have regulated initial and continuing education requirements that require special considerations. For some, the content of the learning experience must include specific regulatory and legal information. For others, the content may be particularly sensitive, requiring a delicacy with respect to content presentation not often encountered in other learning designs.

Learning designed for these audiences represent high stakes contexts that involve high risk if executed poorly and/or hold inherently high value for the learners. Misleading or misrepresented information can result in legal ramifications for and to these designers and their learners. Complicating the high stakes design constraint, these designers often find themselves designing their learning for online delivery.

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HIGH STAKES-ONLINE DESIGN CASES

This special section, sponsored by the Association for Educational Communications & Technology Division of Distance Learning, contains three design cases that tackle very different aspects of the *high stakes* theme. Collectively, these cases help us as designers consider the broader impacts of our products, including the potential for learners to face penalties or make incorrect decisions as a direct result of being exposed to outdated or misleading content. Individually, these cases tell the story of how three different groups of designers addressed the demands of their highly contextualized *high stakes* perspectives.

Preservice Teachers

First, we examine *high stakes* from the perspective of teacher educators who grapple with federal and state accreditation and regulatory requirements. In this case, the designers created an online course to support elementary education teacher candidates as they prepare for the state-mandated edTPA (teacher performance assessment), a performance-based, subject-specific assessment.

The edTPA requirement affects teacher candidates seeking licensure in 18 states, making this design potentially of interest to a wide variety of institutions and organizations. Teacher candidates in these states who do not successfully pass their edTPA evaluation must retake any tasks failed, which often results in a *high stakes* perception from the learners in this course who express high levels of anxiety and anticipation leading up to the final assessment.

The designers found success through using collaborative design strategies and taking a meta approach that drew upon the *Understanding by Design* instructional design model often used by K12 teachers to both inform their own design process as well as reinforce the model as a tool for their learners.

Local Government Officials

Second, we explore *high stakes* as it pertains to designing a library of self-paced e-learning modules regarding land use

regulations. This library serves the local government officials who comprise the membership of the North Carolina League of Municipalities (NCLM) and was conceived with the goal to mitigate costly lawsuits and fines that result from improperly applied and interpreted statutory requirements in the state.

Ultimately, the designers created a total of 16 modules within three categories to address a widely-acknowledged lack of available training. From ordinances to decision making and special topics, the designers grappled with constraints including technical requirements, interface branding, a multi-year timeline, and content consistency within their development team. The case designers tell the story of their design experience, paying particular attention to the systematic model they used and theory-driven design decisions relevant to multimedia developers in particular.

Medical Professionals

Third, designers help us consider the *high stakes* perspective in medical education. A task force formed in 2010 at the Laura W. Bush Institute for Women's Health at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) united faculty and designers at three different institutions to design and implement multimedia case-based learning modules on topics related to sex and gender-specific health (SGSH). These topics help medical professionals recognize sex and gender differences in etiology, pathology, presentation, and treatment response for more effective patient care.

Research on the effects of gender and sex on patient health highlight distinct differences that, if unaddressed, can result in general unhealthy practices or worse, malpractice. However, there are challenges with curating the content for such topics. Reaching agreement on what objectives to address and what content is most relevant can be difficult when working with large teams of medical professionals. The case designers explore how they managed to complete the project, drawing upon the constraints they faced with a distributed development team and research-based design

guidelines with often inconsistent content. The case-based approach provides a unique glimpse into these designs, which may help a variety of learning designers find inspiration and caution.

SUMMARY

As a former instructional designer and eLearning professional, I was fortunate to work at a state agency with a diverse portfolio of continuing education programming. From terrorism and domestic preparedness to highway traffic design, I was fortunate to work with subject matter experts (SMEs) from a wide variety of content areas. The courses we designed sometimes introduced or reviewed state regulations, such as those encountered in the courses for professionals seeking licensure to inspect On-Site Sewage Facilities (OSSF). In other cases, I worked with SMEs to design training on proper design and application of highway pavement markings. Did you know that if not applied at the correct temperature, those little reflective beads that help you see at night can become loose and cause roadway accidents?

These are the random bits of knowledge that we accumulate as instructional designers. However, we also accumulate a variety of techniques and strategies that help us address constraints like those encountered in *high stakes* contexts. Perhaps you seek inspiration on how to scaffold a task to help learners feel less anxious about the final assessment. Or maybe you are looking for tips on designing for engagement or a model to follow for a multi-module project. And then there is the possibility that you are challenged with a large design team with a breadth of expertise. Regardless of your perspective, you will find something of value in this special section dedicated to online learning environments.

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