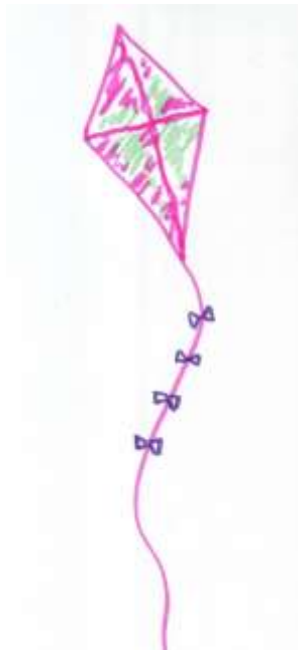


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Project 4: Stand-Alone Presentation Design Lessons Learned Memo: The Kite

The design lesson I have taken most to heart is *simplify*: “Do only what is necessary to convey what is essential.” (Reynolds, 2010, p.131). Heath and Heath note the importance of stripping an idea down to the core to find what’s essential. (Heath & Heath, 2008, p.28) In my experience, it takes a lot of self-discipline, focus, and determination to cut to the heart of any instructional effort. I’ve learned to keep asking myself “What do you *have* to communicate? What’s at the center of this learning journey? What’s really important? What do learners have to “get” for the instruction to be effective?”, and “What are you trying to say?” Once found, the core message can direct the “look” of the instruction. It acts like a lighthouse beacon, keeping you on course and off the rocks.

I’ve learned that when I stray from or forget the essence of the instruction, I start rambling in both design and content: and it’s funny, because I can feel that something’s wrong and I’m off-course. I’ve learned to take a break, clear my head, get some distance and wait for the message to become clear again. I’ve wrangled with design, and color, and fonts, and images, and placement of images and illustrations over and over until the design is as simple as I think it can be. I’ve caught myself sticking a decorative element in here and there and then saying- wait a minute- how does that help the instruction? If it doesn’t support the instruction, it doesn’t go on the slide.



Personal Relevance

When I started to think about how to convey the gospel of the simple message, I immediately thought of a kite. Kites simply do not fly if they are missing a necessary element or are burdened by non-essential pieces. A kite built right can be highly beautiful and graceful, while flying very, very well. I think there’s a small margin of error when it comes to paper kites: they either fly or they don’t. I find this a good metaphor for clear, effective yet elegant instruction. My goal in creating online learning experiences is for learners to have a great ride while they’re on their learning trip. It has to be clear and efficient, designed so that learners can find a personal connection and meaning,

beautiful and pleasant to see, and simple to negotiate. I want learners to come to the instruction asking: “What’s going to happen next? Where are we going to go? I’m ready!” The beautiful kite flying gracefully and purposefully is a beautiful reminder of what happens when you design instruction well.

I’m currently designing online instruction in historic preservation to be used by the general public. The faculty involved in the project view the instruction as the same instruction they present in graduate school classes. I, on the other hand, have worked with the public for years on projects, initiatives, planning, and commission work, and have a very good idea of what the general public needs to know. It’s been a tricky line to walk, and the only way I’ve been able to chart a course and stick with it has been by continuously asking myself “Does Joe Public really need to know X?” I have to remember that most people don’t know an entablature from a pediment, etc. But how do I make this a manageable, efficient, effective course, keep the professors happy, and get Joe Public to learn what he needs to know? In the case of architectural elements, I want to have learners use architectural elements to build a house: I haven’t figured out how to do it yet, but I think if they can select, drag and place together, for example, Doric columns, an entablature and a pediment, they will “get” the idea of the portico and colonnade without going into the history of Greek architecture. It’s simple, efficient, and effective.

Design Documentation

The goal of my design was to illustrate the beauty and efficiency inherent in simple design, using the kite as a metaphor. I thought about several ways I could design the project: I could build a kite, paint a kite using watercolors, make a collage of a kite on the sky using torn and dampened tissue paper, or create overlay of sky with a cut-outs for the kite which would be revealed from beneath (that was a cool idea, but involved the action of peeling away the sky in layers to reveal the kite, so I would have had to film the process!). In the end, I decided to use what I have on hand. (This is the same as working with the content provided.) I have art markers, watercolor paint, watercolor paper, scissors, glue, tape and staples.

I used watercolor to make a light and pretty sky: perfect for supporting a flying kite. The sky is like the overall framework for instruction: it sets the tone and mood, and can’t be complicated. I think it’s very important to give learners a secure place to learn, meaning the course must be reliable and friendly looking, and easy to negotiate. I colored paper with art markers to use for the kite and kite-tails. The kite is such a simple form I felt it could support a textured-looking surface rather than a solid color. The kite tails let you see where the kite string is (very important when flying a kite near other kites!): perfect for holding the letters S I M P L E. (Simple, effective design lets learners know where they are at all times.) I placed the kite on the sky with a spacer between the two to show

movement and dimension: just because something is simple, it doesn't mean it has to be one-dimensional. I drew the kite string onto the background and glued down the paper kite-tails. The result is unmistakable: it's a pink kite flying on a blue sky, and it looks happy. Good design lets learning fly!

I don't think Heath & Heath or Sagmeister would find my kite to be an outstanding means of conveying an idea. Sure, the kite/fly image is recognizable and tends to elicit similar responses from members of this culture: kites are about fun, springtime, blue skies, and children. But how does a collage of a kite on blue sky drive home the "keep it simple" message? If I were to use the kite as a symbol throughout a course on designing instruction, I think it would be effective. My kite isn't sticky by itself: it needs a context. Elizabeth Gilbert would ask me what I'm afraid of and dare me to be bold! And on that note, I'd like to bring up the value of working with creative people: in my experience, working with other creative people is like working in an idea factory: things just happen. Ideas come from everywhere, the energy is vibrant, and all things become possible.

When I was working on my Giant Panda project, I thought a hundred times how much I needed to collaborate on the project with a former colleague: together we always came up with the most wonderful, outrageous, and amazing things! For example: below is a picture of "Tour Ghosts" for an event we created named The Creepy Crawl. (My friends & I are on the far left.) We combined Halloween and Historic Preservation, and gave tours of local historic buildings (inside) -at night, in the pitch dark. (We gave the participants flashlights. People really like to be scared in old buildings, and it's amazing how much they learn when their senses are heightened.) The ghosts were personas from the past: each person created their own character and costume. It was wildly successful, and came to a screeching halt when a new administration came in that abhorred creativity in any form. While many cities throughout the country do historic preservation/Halloween tour type-activities, the Creepy Crawl was one of the first of its kind in the state, and truly unusual. (Mind you, the zombie-craze had not yet bloomed at the time we created the Creepy Crawl!)



I have learned that I have to work with other creative people in order to achieve really out-there results, and that some people *really* fear creativity. The creative process is fun, energizing and exciting, and when the juices are flowing, so to speak, anything can happen. (Maybe that's what scares people!)

References

Heath, C. &. (2007). *Made to stick*. New York: Random House.

Reynolds, G. (2010). *Presentation zen design*. Berkeley: New Riders.