

Avatars in E-Learning: Boring, Overenthusiastic or Authentic?

Avatar: Stereotypes

Once a smart learner, sat down eagerly

To take an E-Learning course

But the well-meaning "Avatar", preached so much

The learner's zeal turned into remorse

I am sure a lot of us are guilty of designing such an Avatar in order to motivate the learner and make the E-Learning course more "engaging"? A serious-looking mentor/guide who appears on every screen reading out text that is also written on the screen. But do such wooden-faced Avatars, who mouth text that could otherwise be easily read or heard by the learner really motivate and engage?

Well done! Wow! Oops! Way to Go!

Said the cute Avatar performing cartwheels and more

The learner in me disliked it, but found no way to hide it

So I endured it until the final assessment score!

Or as a complete volte-face, we go and create an Avatar that is cute-looking, displays cuter expressions, and performs some acrobatics off and on. These ones may not occupy screen space all the time, but come out of hibernation at defined intervals accompanied by some equally cute sound effects. How do our adult learners react to these? Are we sure that these Avatars really motivate them?

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Issues with Stereotypes

In both situations, the Avatars are caricatures or stereotypes. More often than not, they defeat the very purpose for which they were designed. They are either plain boring or over-the-top, and mostly rendered as the “Trainer” Or “Guide”.

Why don't we see courses in which the Avatar manifests in a form other than the trainer/coach, and displays behavior that is more authentic and relatable with real-life people – co-learners, co-workers, or workplace Subject Matter Experts?

Avatars – Relevance in E-Learning

An Avatar is a virtual digital image representing a person in an online environment - a graphical representation of a real person. The keyword here being, *real person*. Studies have shown that when effectively designed, and anchored in a social context, Avatars enrich the learning experience. They motivate learners, which in turn enhances learning and recall.

One of the disadvantages of self-paced learning is that learners often feel isolated and are not adequately motivated to complete the training. It is to address this issue that we often use Avatars in self-paced learning material – this anchors the learning material and adds the necessary element of motivation.

To ensure that the Avatar is a motivating force, as designers we must carefully consider three aspects when designing these: Their **Role, Behaviour and Manifestation**.

Avatars – Design Considerations

Role: What is the purpose of the Avatar?

When including an Avatar in a self-paced learning course, this is the first question to be answered. Will the learner take on an Avatar, or will the Avatar act as the subject matter expert or is he/she a co-learner or a co-worker? Once this question is answered, the character specifications of the Avatar may be defined – looks, body language, how it addresses the learner, how it interacts with the content, and how frequently it appears on the screen.

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Manifestation: Does the Avatar's appearance and body language match with the stated vision?

If the Avatar is an *expert*, the appearance, body language, postures and expressions should convey self-confidence. If the Avatar is a *co-learner*, then the appearance should be more friendly, at ease and supportive. Most Avatars could also do with a little more realistic expressions – display a range of emotions typically associated with learning – confusion, realization, doubtfulness, apprehension, discovery and so on.

Behaviour: Does the Avatar's behavior match with the stated vision?

If the Avatar is an *expert*, then the expertise should appear through his/her actions and not through self-proclamation. Some ways in which the expertise can be unfurled is by having the Avatar share numerous anecdotes/experiences and insights. An Avatar designed as an expert is supposed to facilitate learning – especially in the context of adult learning. Too much of content in the “tell” mode can put off adult learners who come with their own experiences. They should be provided opportunities to reflect on their own beliefs and to address misconceptions, if any. The *expert* can gently prompt the learners to reflect (not keep stating Correct/Incorrect) and ask them to voice their thoughts/opinions like adult learners normally do before providing expert opinion.

On the other hand, if the Avatar is a *co-learner*, he/she should appear reflective and contemplative. Content should unfurl as a dialog, discussion or conversation – allowing the Avatar (s) to voice doubts, provide opinions, state misconceptions, and so on. The co-worker or a co-learner could be sometimes correct, and sometimes wrong, and prod the learner and listen to their point of view before providing their own.

If you have used Avatars in any E-Learning course, or plan to use one, you may evaluate your Avatar design by using the Avatar Evaluation Tool in the ID Toolkit section.