Converting that Plain Text into an Engaging Online Lesson

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This paper is directed to instructional designers who have been assigned the task of creating an online course based on text material delivered by an SME (subject-matter expert). If you are an instructor that is designing an online course based on content that is text form, this document will be of great help to you. In any case, this paper will be helpful to anybody that is in the situation of creating an online course using content that is mostly text, or worse, it is only text.

If your course is designed for learners that have some degree of skill in your subject, placing text only could work if you distribute the information in sections so that the learner will not spend time reading a long page that has an endless scrolling bar, see Figure 1 below.
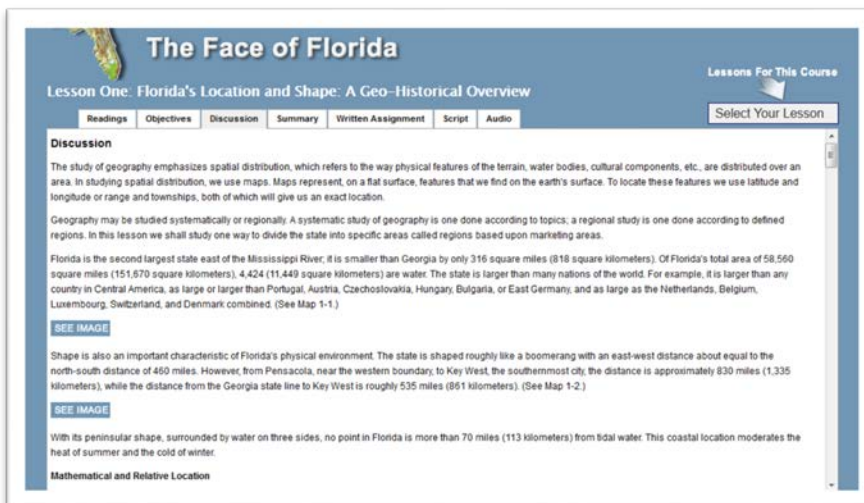

Figure 1. This is an example of a lesson with lots of content that is mostly text. Notice the very short scrolling bar (this means the page is long).

If you have students that are taking your class subject for the first time, placing text only will not work. The new learner has to absorb a new vocabulary, retain concepts and definitions, and understand processes and procedures that your subject may contain. If you only have text as content for your course, your next task is finding graphics to support that text. But wait! Don't just go to iStock and start a shopping spree! The graphics have to be related to the course material in a deep way. If you are talking about accounting, placing a picture of a smiling accountant will not provide any meaningful learning support to the student; it will just be a decorative graphic in this case. DO NOT use decorative graphics in your course materials. It is a distraction that will not conduce to learning. Instead, review all the content and find chunks of text that

you could eliminate by adding a meaningful graphic. For example, if your text contains an explanation on the carbon cycle, you can enhance this explanation by adding a graphic with the carbon cycle. This is going to eliminate a good part of the text used to explain the cycle. In some cases, if the graphic contains all the information needed, the whole chunk of text containing this explanation could be eliminated.

Another type of content that can be replaced with a graphic description of a process is a natural or man-made process. For example, if you want to show the process of treating water in a treatment plant, you can find a pictorial representation of a plant, add some arrows indicating the direction of the water flow, and maybe you can add some captions pointing at important parts in the plant treatment. This is going to simplify the water treatment process and it will add an engaging visual representation that will help understand the whole process.

Concepts and definitions usually will not need a graphic next to it. This is because that type of content takes up a small amount of space, a graphic will not be of any help in supporting the knowledge contained in the definition. Unless there is evidence that would be hard for the learner to make a mental picture of a graphic is not usually needed in these cases.

You have your graphics, now what?
It is very important that the graphics are very close to the text. DO NOT place the graphic one paragraph after the one that references the graphic. The text or caption to a graphic can be placed anywhere, but it is recommended that the text is placed to the left of the graphic. You can create a table (or if you hate tables, enclose it between nested div tags) with one row and two columns (HTML tables). See Figure 2.
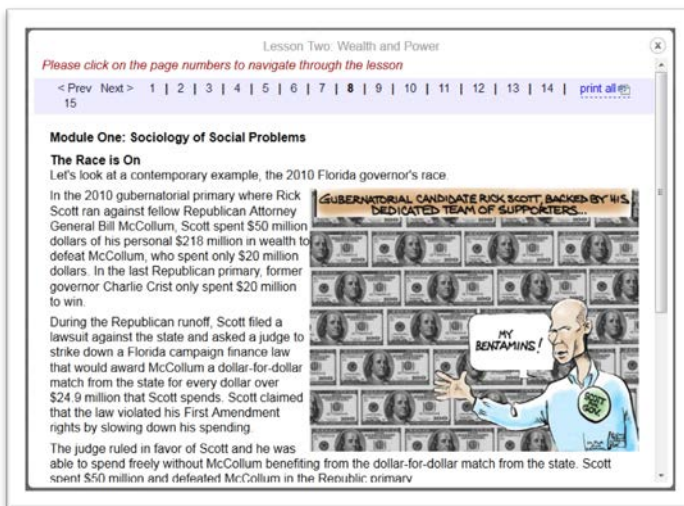

Figure 2. The graphic is to the right of the text. The graphic is not explicitly mentioned in the text, but there is an implicit relationship between the text and the graphic used.

Placing graphics in online courses may require some knowledge on web programming. There is also commercial software that makes this task easier (e.g. Dreamweaver). It is useful, as a first approximation, to start by creating mock-ups of the web pages in a text

processor so that the designer can have a better idea of how the page will look like with the graphics. This content can then be transferred to the course pages by a cutting and pasting process.

 It would be tempting to convert those documents into a web-readable form (like a PDF) and insert a series of links that direct the learner to those documents but it is a bad alternative. It may look like an easy choice because with a few steps, you have solved the problem of a very long web page. The learner clicks on the link and downloads a document that they can read and study. This mode also offers the learner the option of printing out the document for later review. The main problem with this approach is that you are moving the student away from your course page. What is the point of creating an online course that the students will not be visiting often? You want your students to engage with the course you designed and you want the student to interact with the material you have placed in the pages. It is never a good idea to make the learner move away from your online course. You want your students to enter your online course and stay there until they are ready for a break or they have accomplished the lesson goals.

 How do you convert all that text and pictures into an engaging online course? I will present some options here. Although they may not be the latest technology, they do provide a great look to your course pages. These options are clean, professional, and cheap. The common trend in all these examples is the saving of screen space from using these technologies. Graphics take up a lot of space and that increases the length of a course page. Learners can get discouraged if they open a course that has pages and pages of content they have to weed through.

1. Blanket with text and pictures
If you have short lessons that contain a couple of pictures, this is a great option. You will need to download the Colorbox blanket application. This is a Javascript application that you can download for free. You will need to make some easy modifications to the style sheets (nothing difficult) and insert your content accordingly. Figure 3 shows an example of this application.
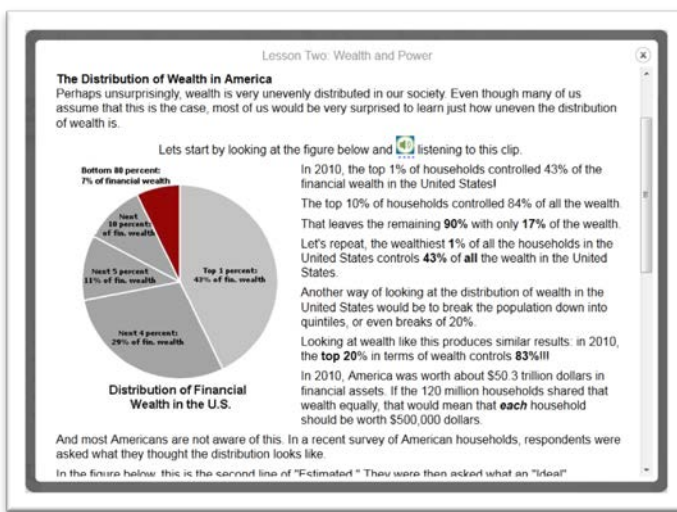

Figure 3. Example of text a graphic that can fit in one blanket.

The gray area around the blanket is the course page behind the blanket. When you click on a link to the lesson, the blanket is activated and a gray area covers the course page and a box opens up with the content. The box contains both text and graphics. This is a perfect solution because the learner will not leave the course page at all. Notice the navigation menu at the top. The student can move on to the next lesson by clicking on the lesson number. The blanket is closed when the learner clicks on the "X" graphic at the top right corner. DO NOT make the page too long or the use of the blanket will be pointless. The reason behind using this technology is the saving of screen space by creating a layer on top of the course page. If we were to insert all the lessons in the corresponding course page, it will be as long (or maybe longer, due to the nature of this sociology course) as the one shown in Figure 1.

2. Slideshow

This is another technological solution that helps save space and gives a great look to your course. This is another Javascript application that is embedded in the course pages. The learner moves along by clicking a forward and a backward button. There is also the option of clicking on page numbers so that the student knows in which part of the lesson is and how many lessons the course has. An example of the use of this technology is presented in Figure 4. You can embed pictures in the slides as you see fit. You could also combine the previous Colorbox tool to make blankets with images as explained in the next section.

Figure 4. Example on the use of a slide show.

A very nice feature of this slide show is that the first and last pages only have one arrow so that the student will not be confused because at the last slide. If the forward button is activated, the slide show will loop to the first slide again.

You can download this program at bxSlider for free. Again, by modifying the style sheet you can change the slide effects. There is also the need to make changes to the script program embedded in the page, but the user documentation is very easy to follow, and

a line of code might need changes, nothing that requires learning Javascript programming.

3. Blanket with no text

This is a great option for those courses where you have lessons that have content other than text and graphics (like activities, readings, and links to videos). The blanket adds another web page layer that might disrupt the functioning of those activities and videos (this is my experience only, there may be another workaround). In any case, we may need all this content to be in one page and not in consecutive pages like shown in Figure 2. The use of the blanket is now constrained to links instead of a navigation menu. The learner reads the content and finds a link to an image. When the link is activated, a blanket will open and the image and a caption will appear, see for example Figure 5.
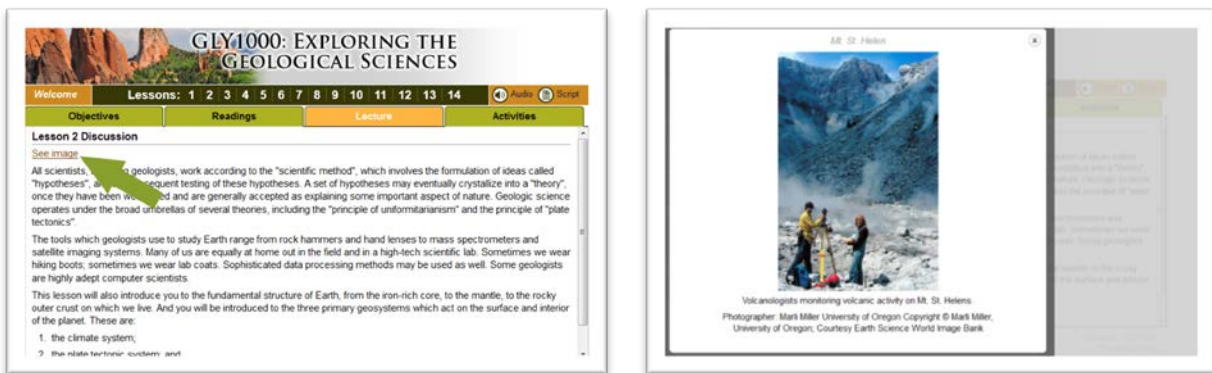
a) Before clicking the link   b) After clicking, the blanket is activated
Figure 5. Use of the blanket for graphics only.

Another good reason of using this blanket is seen in Figure 5. These pictures have a high resolution and placing them in the page will increase the page length. The Blanket provides the space to place such images. The blanket box can be increased in side in any direction to accommodate various image sizes.

Final Thoughts

Certainly, these are not the only solutions to placing text and graphics to course pages, but they do provide a nice and professional look to them. If you find other innovative tools that can be used in course pages, please share it and send me an email at jcastro@dce.ufl.edu.

But remember that the reasons behind the use of these technologies are principles that have been proven by empirical studies: the multimedia and the contiguity principles (as explained by Clark and Meyer). The use of graphics that are intimately related to the text content and the placement of text next to graphics help the learner create, in their minds, a mental picture of the concepts, procedures, processes, etc. that the instructor is trying to explain. This is especially true for novice learners.

References

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