Chapter 7
Increase Engagement and Learning:
Blend in the Visuals, Memes, and GIFs for Online Content

Philip Gene Pulley
Fieldcrest CUSD 6, USA

ABSTRACT

With the infusion of educational technology and internet access into classrooms, including 1:1 laptops, iPads, and Chromebooks, educators must realize the importance of visuals for their online course content. Today's students are growing up in an internet-forward culture. Social media is an important part of how students connect with their friends, peers, and the world. Their interactions use accompanying memes, emojis, and GIFs (graphics interchange format) that are used to describe and supplement events happening "IRL"—in real life. Just as we use technology to enhance the learning experience in the classroom, it is perhaps equally as important to speak students' language to improve both student engagement and learning while using those devices in the classroom. This chapter reviews research concerning visual use in course content, discusses visuals in the context of universal design for learning (UDL), provides tips on for using visual appeal to improve engagement and learning, briefly discusses the topic of copyright and fair use, and gives examples of visuals including GIFs.

INTRODUCTION

Of all of our inventions for mass communication, pictures still speak the most universally understood language.

–Walt Disney

    With expanded Internet access and the infusion of educational technology into classrooms, including 1:1 laptop, iPad, and Chromebook programs, it is essential that educators realize the importance of using visuals for their online course content. Why are visuals important in the educational environment? Today's students are growing up in an internet-forward and media saturated culture. Social media is an important part of how students connect with their friends, peers, and the world. Their online interactions often involve accompanying memes, emojis, and GIFs (graphics interchange format) that they use to describe and supplement events happening "IRL"—in real life. Just as we use technology to enhance the learning experience in the classroom, it is perhaps equally important to speak some of the students' language to improve student engagement and learning in the digital contexts. This is essential in an era were education has experienced a shift in purpose, away from delivering instruction to producing learning (Worley, 2011).

    The good news is that it is possible to tailor educational content to meet students where they are and in the visual manner that they are used to and frequently employ. This does not mean that teachers need to implement a radical shift to using memes, emojis, and GIFs as means of scholarly communication. Rather that we should use these visuals in representative and organizational ways to gain students' attention, to add visual appeal, and to help arrange online content. Just as a visually appealing website draws increased interest and time spent on a site, the same ideas can be applied to educational content that is online. The goal is the modification of instruction and content in order to generate greater engagement and improved learning outcomes. This chapter reviews some of the research findings concerning visual use in course content, discusses visuals in the context of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), provides tips and cautions for using visual appeal to improve engagement and learning, briefly discusses the topic of copyright and fair use, and gives some examples of visuals including GIFs.

Online Visuals and Research

Did you know that the design of your online course content and its visual appeal could affect how effective it is for your students? Research has shown that the design of online course materials can impact students' perceptions of the course and their course outcomes. Dixson, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacy, Weister, and Lauer (2016) found that online nonverbal immediacy behaviors or design aspects—including visual imagery, audio, and video—are related to higher levels of course engagement by students. Their study reinforces earlier research showing that attractive visual design (layout, colors, imagery, etc.) can evoke positive emotions in learners that help facilitate the learning process (Plass, Heidig, Hayward, Homer, & Um, 2014). Making your content visually appealing is a great step towards having students readily engage with your course materials.

    Whether those visuals are in-class presentations or online content such as screencasts, hyperdocs, GIFs, or videos in a learning management system (LMS) like Schoology, it is about more than just making your course 'look pretty' it is about the twin goals of engaging students and improving learning. How important are visuals in online education materials? Consider LMS use, Anderson, Robinson, and

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