

WE LEARN

eLearning is Dead

So Where Are Our Standards for
Developing Digital Learning?



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Why We Are Sharing This?

This eBook was originally created as a blog series for our blog [WeThink!](#). The series was written to share our point of view on the design of digital learning experiences.

Our team has worked on a wide range of projects for corporations, associations, training companies. And higher education institutions – and across these engagements we found that we were bringing these concepts to our clients continually.

At the core of who we are as WeLearn is our spirit of generosity. We are generous in sharing our insights. We are also generous in sharing where we draw our inspirations.

We hope that you enjoy this eBook. We hope that it inspires you to think differently. We hope it starts a dialog within your team.

We are in this together, and together we learn.

– The WeLearn Team





eLearning is Dead!

**... Now where are our Standards
for Developing Digital Learning?**

As Learning Designers, Can We All Agree That eLearning Is Dead?



We're not trying to be controversial, but **eLearning** conjured notions of bad PowerPoint-like courses (no offense PowerPoint, we still love you, but only when appropriate).



You know the ones we're talking about – the courses where your mouse hovers over the “next” button in anticipation of when you can advance to the next slide.



It's the courses with the excruciatingly slow voiceover, the click -until -you -get -it -right knowledge check, and the grand -finale quiz that serves as our shining beacon that this experience will eventually end.

eLearning is Dead? (continued)



So, we feverishly click “next” through slide after slide, just to end the experience.



Do we all have that experience firmly in our minds? Good – now can we drive a stake through the heart of the notion that this type of experience is learning (Ok that might be controversial).

Now that we have agreed, and we are all now digital learning designers/developers/builders, **where are our standards?**



Bring On Digital eLearning Standards

We are not talking about SCORM, or AICC, or eXAPI or standards for accessibility – those are table stakes – but where are our standards for digital learning solutions development?

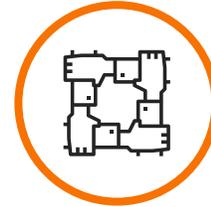


As a solution provider, and as designers of digital learning experiences, we have worked with corporations, associations, and higher education institutions, and one of the first questions we ask a partner is, “do you have standards you would like us to follow?”



Given the amount of money organizations spend to create learning, and given the importance of learning experience to both the uptake and impacts of learning, **why don't more organizations have standards for digital learning?** What impact is not having standards for the design of digital learning having on your learning brand?

Digital Design Standards (continued)



We love to look to our colleagues in other professions for inspiration and guidance, and we look to our colleagues in UI (user interface) and UX (user experience) design and we see inspiration for creating standards for the development – including design systems and pattern libraries.



We believe there is an opportunity for organizations to create standards for the digital learning design and development. These standards should apply to both internally developed products, and externally developed products.

Let's face it – we can always pick the course developed by the vendor partner.



**You Speak Klingon.
I speak Dothraki.**

How Will We Ever Design Together?

Now that eLearning is Dead...



Ok so now that we have declared eLearning dead, the time has come for learning organizations to invest in defining their standards for the digital learning product development.

For us, that begins with a design system. A well-crafted design system is more than a set of rules to follow in creating digital learning products-it is a common language that your learning designers, and even your external partners, will speak while creating digital learning experiences.

Now that eLearning is Dead... (continued)

One of our inspiration for this line of thinking is Airbnb.

They have a great story on how they created their design language system. One of the foundations of the Airbnb design language system is their unifying design principles, which are:



Unified

Each piece is part of a greater whole and should contribute positively to the system at scale. There should be no isolated features or outliers.



Iconic

We're focused when it comes to both design and functionality. Our work should speak boldly and clearly to this focus.



Universal

Airbnb is used around the world by a wide global community. Our products and visual language should be welcoming and accessible.



Conversational

Our use of motion breathes life into our products and allows us to communicate with users in easily understood ways.



Here's the simple truth:
you can't innovate on products without first innovating the way you build them “

– **Alex Schleifer**
Airbnb

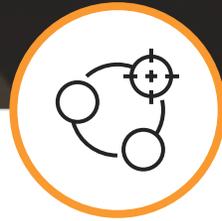
Unifying Design Principles Help to Guide Discussions and Decisions on the Design System

While design principles will vary from organizations to organization, we would modify the Airbnb list slightly for digital learning product design:



Unified

Each piece is part of a greater whole and should contribute positively to the system at scale. There should be no isolated features or outliers.



Relevant

Whether content or a feature, every aspect of the learning experience will have relevancy to the learner and the subject matter.



Inclusive

We believe that learners should be able to see themselves in each learning experience. Our use of imagery and iconography will be inclusive of all .



Human

Use of use of language, imagery, and interactions will feel personal to the audience.



As learning designers, we must look outside of our profession on our journey to adopt best and next practices to define the products we create.

At WeLearn, we believe in equipping our clients with the ability to do big things and to do great work.

An emerging part of our practice is to work with organizations who are looking for a new way of doing things.

We look for partners who seek out ways to enhance the impact of their digital learning products, whether they are for their employees, their customers, their partners, or their members.

That work begins with defining the organization's unifying design principles.



Iconic Brands Do It.
And So Should Learning Organizations

Design is the Foundation of a Truly Great Digital Product



Whether it is an app on the [Apple App Store](#), [Netflix](#), or [Amazon](#) - every great digital experience starts with design. Yet when it comes to creating digital learning products, designers tend to focus on the didactic design and, to a lesser degree, the visual design of the learning experience.

Brands like Amazon, Apple, and Netflix are iconic, and the foundation of everything they do and every product they create, or that is created for, their platforms is a design system. **Here are a few examples:**



Apple Designing for iPhone



Amazon Design and User Experience Guidelines for Fire TV



Netflix Global Rebrand

Design is the Foundation of a Truly Great Digital Product (continued)



According to User Experience Designer, Paul Boag, a design system consists of the following components:



Design is the Foundation of a Truly Great Digital Product (continued)

We believe this structure, slightly modified, works for creating a design system for digital learning solution products:



UI Components and/or templates

A pattern library or a library of templates for your preferred authoring tool ensure consistency in the products you create. This can grow over time.



Design principles

These are your overarching design principles, like the ones we discussed in our Klingon vs. Dothraki post.



Visual Design

These are clear expectation for using of color, imagery, and iconography. They help keep your brand and visual cues consistent throughout your learning experiences.



Instructional and Content Guidelines

These outline instructional design standards as well as tone and voice for content creation.



Digital Service

You need a manual for project management and project governance.

Design is the Foundation of a Truly Great Digital Product (continued)

We know this sounds like a lot of work, but we believe there are the several benefits of creating standards for the digital learning product development



Improved learner experience



Consistency of learner experience



Accuracy in costing



Improved partnership models with external vendors



Design is the Foundation of a Truly Great Digital Product (continued)

We would be remiss if we did not pause and acknowledge the panic some may feel in having a design system



Some creatives may think a design system will choke innovation and creativity.

We understand-standards sound like four walls, and a confined space, but a design system is not confining-it creates freedom and harmony, where creativity can flow organically in a unified direction.



It is a living, breathing approach to building digital products.

Your design system can evolve and consider new ways of developing and building products, so long as it is core to your unifying design principles and is scalable.



The life span of the digital learning product is another important aspect of a digital design system.

Having a digital design system helps ensure the product can be maintained, long after the original development team has moved on to new projects.

Some of you may be feeling excited by this topic. That is great! We would love to hear from you and continue this dialog with you. We would love to help you on your journey.

Some of you may be feeling intimidated by this topic. That is cool-we would love to hear from you too, and we are glad to help you on your journey as well.

Remember we are all in this together as a profession. Together we learn.





Patterns You Want to Repeat

In the world before Minecraft, we had Tinkertoys, Legos, or even Lincoln Logs.

They were building blocks we could use to build a castle, spaceship, or house. The parts all fit into a specific pattern or function; once you knew how each part fit in relation to the others, the sky was the limit.

Pattern Libraries do the same for digital product development. As a component of a digital design system, pattern libraries represent the common approaches to key elements of a digital experience.

As you scan, you will see a range of patterns that are potentially applicable to digital learning experiences.

Think of the last time you developed a digital learning experience. How often did you stretch to describe an interaction you were envisioning to your development team? How often did you struggle to point your development team to a digital experience to serve as inspiration?



Pattern libraries help to form a language between learning experience designers and developers. Having a pattern library facilitates the rapid creation of digital experience prototypes, enables you to develop MVP's (Minimum Viable Products) for users testing, and ultimately enables you to develop truly impactful digital learning products.



Pattern libraries are the building blocks of the design system, and as with the wider design system, a pattern library is not intended to restrict creativity and innovation, but rather to serve as a living structure of commonly used pieces of functionality or interactions that can be built into digital learning products.

Here at WeLearn, we are excited about the intersection of UI/UX and instructional design and the opportunities it presents to learning organizations.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in how to leverage pattern libraries inside of your organization, or if you have a current great use case to share.



For learning organizations that use authoring tools, we believe the concept of having a pattern library is just as applicable. For those organizations that use a specific tool, your pattern library would be built around the types of screens or interactions the tool can produce and how and when those various interactions should be used to create a digital learning product.

For learning experience designers, pattern libraries are a key ingredient in creating digital learning experiences that are both impactful and loved by your learners.



Do Learners Dream In Corporate Jargon?

Do your learners dream in technical speak?

Do they dream in the latest corporate buzz words?

We have spent a lot of time talking about changing the way in which we, as digital learning designers and digital learning developers, can change the way in which we build digital learning products.

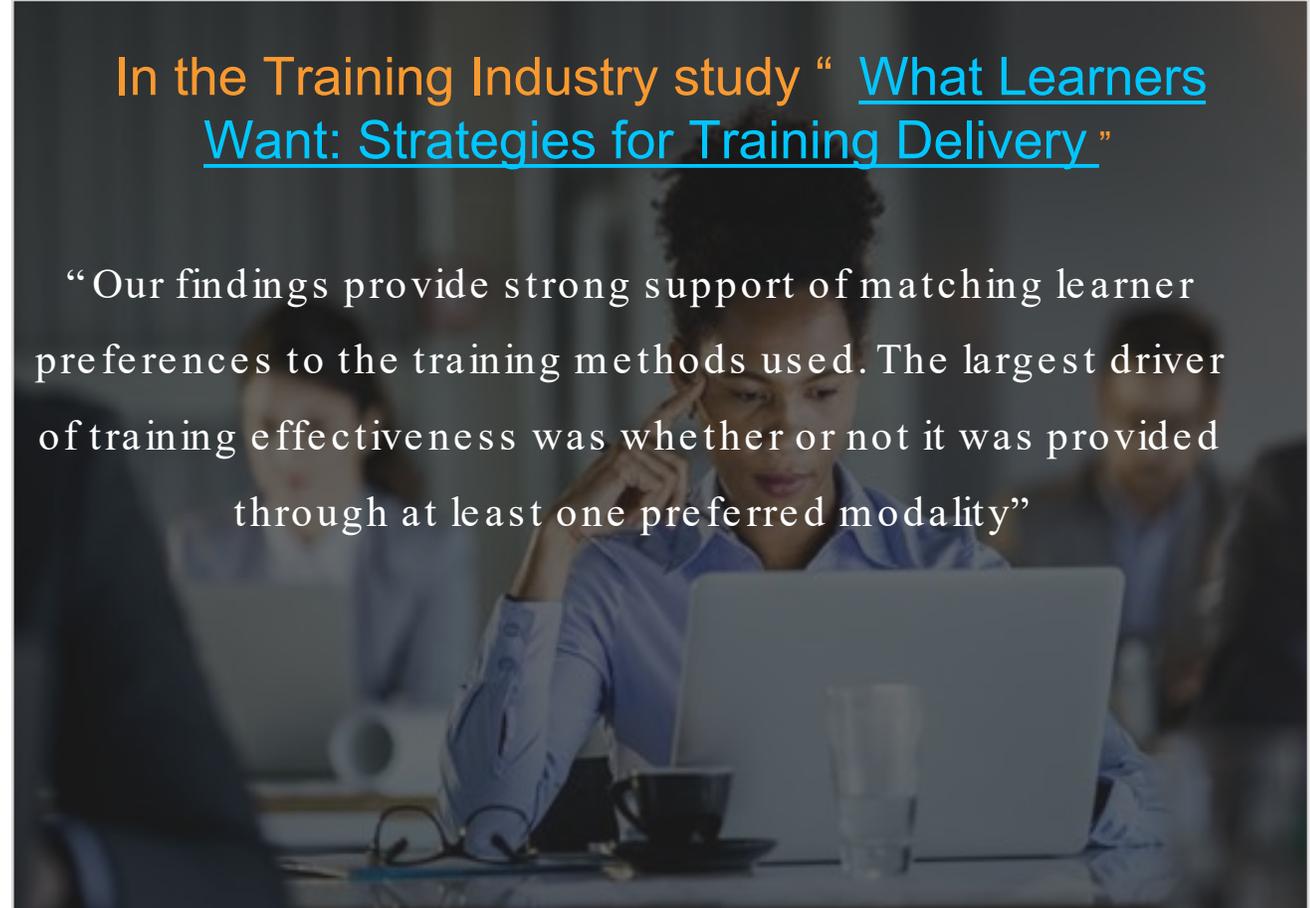
We declared eLearning dead., discussed creating unifying design principles (while speaking Dothraki and Klingon), took a page from the playbook of iconic brands. and talked about some patterns that are worth repeating-but now we want to turn our attention to one of favorite topics: Content.

As learning professionals, content is our bread and butter. It is what we do, right?

But what makes for great content in a digital learning experience? As technology has evolved, so has the way learners consume content.

In the Training Industry study “ [What Learners Want: Strategies for Training Delivery](#) ”

“Our findings provide strong support of matching learner preferences to the training methods used. The largest driver of training effectiveness was whether or not it was provided through at least one preferred modality”





So, what is the key to great content in a digital learning experience?

We believe the content must be human. The language we use must be accessible to the audience. It should flow seamlessly into the learner's common context for the way they consume digital content. It has to compete with the cute puppies, and have a chance at winning our learners' attention.

The content (and the entire learning experience) should be inviting not intimidating. It must be educational and entertaining, concise and relevant.

As you may have learned by now, we enjoy looking beyond the learning profession for inspiration, and when it comes to content, we are fans of our colleagues in the content marketing space. They are masters of the dark art of creating content we love-content that keeps us clicking and scrolling for more.

When the modern learner has a choice between the typical learning content and let's say, a great puppy video on YouTube, let's be honest:

A cute puppy will always win.

Learners do not dream in jargon, and the reality is, neither do we.
When it comes to creating content, humanity is the key.

Here are a few of our favorite best practices we think apply to digital learning content creation:

01 Deliver value with every interaction the learner has with the digital learning experience. One of the reasons we come back and interact with online content is that it delivers some value like relevance, social currency, or a new perspective.

02 Meet the moments of need. Digital learning experiences can be long form but have a strategy to atomize the content so it's accessible the very moment students need it.

Include features like job aids, internal blogs and wikis, an internal video channel, or all the above. One of the keys to content marketing is to have a plan for reusing content in multiple channels.

03 Create Learner Generated Content. Where possible, find ways to invite the learner into the content creation process within the learning experience. You can do this with expeditions, journaling, or action planning -give them the tools not only to create their own content, but to share it with other learners.

04 Surprise and delight! This is one of our favorite learning experience best practices. Try to find ways to surprise and delight your learners. Think about Easter egg content or provide a valuable interaction that they were not expecting.



Stop Us
if you have heard
this one.

A former student government president, a former game designer, an amateur photographer, a self-taught coder, an English major, and a Hollywood script writer walk into a room. What do they do?

**This is who WeLearn is. We are those people.
This is who we are.**

Some of you might be scratching your head and saying, "wait where are the project manager, the instructional designer, the developers, and the learning strategist?"

We are those people too, but our paths have wound us to a place where our passion is to develop truly awesome learning experiences.



As learning organizations, as we move to embrace our roles as digital learning product developers, we must also embrace new ideas about the people (the humans) who make up our teams and all the experiences they bring to the table.



Some of most awesome learning experiences we've seen came from learning designers who did not major in instructional design-in fact, some of us do not have degrees at all.



Yes, we all have that friend who has their PHD in instructional design and instructional technology-and they are totally awesome too-but the point is, we need to expand our thinking about who fits the role of a learning designer, because diverse backgrounds make teams better. They make the analogies we use more diverse. They make the stories we tell through the products we create richer.

So Where Do You Start?

Whether you are a learning leader, a leader of people, or an individual contributor, start by looking outside our profession for opportunities to develop new skills.

Here are a few of our favorite ideas:



Take the content marketing certification from HubSpot

If it is free, it is awesome, and it exposes you to a new way of thinking about how we create and rescue content



Take a design thinking course

We are all creative, but even we must imagine a world outside our box. There are great courses out there—choose one and see what happens.



Take an improv class

We are practitioners of “Yes, And.” It is in our DNA and it is how we collaborate and innovate with our partners



Follow interesting design blogs

There are tons of them. One we like right now is [DesignBetter.co](https://www.designbetter.co) They inspire us to be better.



Take a coding course,

Even if you must start with one for kids (don't judge—some of us did that). The goal here is not to be great out of the gate, but to have context. You never know, you might find joy in it.



Talk to US! We are passionate on this topic, and part of our work is helping organizations aspire to and achieve a higher level of learner experience

We've had this discussion with financial services institutions, higher education institutions, and not for profits. We love these conversations and can work with you to bring this change to your organization.

Our mission is to build better humans through learning.

We know that the digital domain is an important medium for us meeting that mission, and we believe the key to being successful in that medium is making sure the digital learning experiences we design are relevant and impactful, feel modern, and are grounded in a technology experience familiar to learners.



WELEARN

www.WeLearnLS.com

We thought long and hard about how you should get to know us – and we could describe ourselves in conventional terms – but it is more important for you to know

- 01 Have **heart**. We believe in treating everyone with kindness and compassion while trying to find a way to have a positive impact on the world
- 02 Are **family**. We are kind, selfless, inclusive, and loyal people who have each other's back
- 03 Say **"Yes, And..."** We like to tackle big challenges, create good trouble, and like good improv – always create space for new and better ideas so we can continuously move forward.
- 04 Are **curious**. We are passionate about learning and actively pursue professional and personal experiences and growth
- 05 Are **fun**. We believe that hard work and fun can occupy the same space. After all, most of the best ideas happen outside of the office when we set our minds free.
- 06 Are **collaborative**. We practice open and honest communication that facilitates the free flow of ideas in all our interactions and work
- 07 Just **deliver**. We work with great focus and intention – pushing ourselves to **deliver awesomeness in everything we do**