

# Trading Spaces: From the Classroom to the Cyber-Room. Interior Decorating for the Virtual Course

*by Sigrid Bomba and Jane Clark*

**W**e fully understand the cognitive and aesthetic impact of a well-decorated classroom in the physical world, but how does that knowledge transfer into the virtual classroom?

As teachers, we mark our academic territory with our personal sense of style. A splash of summer yellow to a mud-luscious frog dangling above desks help to define both our teaching personality and our rich course content. Recreating this stamp of uniqueness in the cyber-world requires that we carefully consider the five C's of cyber decorating: comfort, content, cohesiveness, color, and clips.

## Comfort

Our students' first online experience can be quite harrowing. As online course builders, we need to adorn our cyber-rooms with a warm and inviting décor that encourages open and productive discussion. Just as you hang a poster on a wall of a physical classroom, the posters in our virtual cyber-rooms need to reflect both positive and academic messages.

Course ambiance can also be created by the warmth of our words. An enthusiastic welcome should begin any course. Either synchronous online availability or asynchronous turn around response time should be clearly stated within the welcome message. For web-enhanced, flexnet or virtual courses, the facilitator's office hours and physical availability should be included. When introducing an online course, provide a chat room for students to practice an online exchange. You may wish to include an additional discussion forum that allows students to ask questions directly to the course facilitator.

Words of encouragement should be peppered throughout the entire course. Assignments and assessments should have clearly stated expectations with deadlines repeated in numerous places. Rubrics also help to support a high degree of comfort.

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## Trading Spaces, continued

Adding to your students' comfort is the degree of ease with which they can navigate through your particular platform. If possible, documents and external links should be organized into folders. All course information should be organized in a logical and user-friendly format. Before course activation, soliciting feedback from several students and an online peer should prove beneficial.

All courses should include a final survey. In the final survey, questions regarding ease of navigation, tone of the facilitator's feedback, and the student's comfort level should be included. The final survey is critical in determining the effectiveness of the course, course builder, and facilitator.

White space surrounding the course text is dictated by the level of the course. For example, if the course is designed for a third grader, paragraph breaks should be wider. Also, the white space around the course title and text should increase. However, a college course would have an increased amount of text with minimal white space.

## Content

With all of the technological bells and whistles available today, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that the course content drives the decorating embellishments rather than the decorating driving the course content. The bells and whistles must enhance or clarify the content. In other words, the content text and information should be the focus of each page with the graphics taking a subordinate position. Concept maps that accompany text allow the student a snapshot view of the relationship between concepts (Kremer, 1). Assignments and directions should be concise and directed specifically toward the intended audience (Kelley, 1). Small movements or muted color change graphics should be placed above or below the text. This allows the reader to scroll the text into a position where the animation cannot be viewed during text reading. Animated graphics are fun, but frequently deter from the content depending on the degree of animation. Embedding animated graphics should be seriously considered.

*Inspiration* and *Kidspiration* software are the champions of content text enhancements. Research pertaining to learning effectiveness clearly states that content information is more readily obtained and with greater depth when the information is distributed in both a text and non-text (visual representation) mode (Chase 1, 6-8). This software allows the course builder to create simple and complex graphic organizers with little time invested. Both programs also contain a conversion option where the graphic organizer can easily be converted to a linguistic format.

## Cohesiveness

Text and decorative embellishments equally contribute to the cohesiveness of the course. Fluency supports comprehension. When our students stop to decipher an unfamiliar word or a confusing graphic, the cognitive process is interrupted. Regaining focus is difficult, but when reading fluency is repeatedly interrupted, comprehension seriously deteriorates.

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Fonts for titles and subheadings can be selected from any number of serif and sans serif fonts as long as they are easily readable. “Fun” fonts help to lighten a heavy academic tone and can be enhanced by adding color. These “fun” fonts should only be used for titles and subheadings. For the bulk of the content text, select a serif font. Newspapers, textbooks, and magazines all use serif fonts for good reason. The serif font adds clarity to each letter and, thus, contributes to visual fluency.

### Color

Decisions concerning color should be made after the course text has been written. As previously stated, the decorating should be subordinate to the course content and, therefore, color and decorating decisions can be made after the course has been written. Course colors can be divided into two main categories: the masthead and the content pages. For best results, choose one dominant and one accent color. Certainly this does not exclude other coordinating colors, but consistency of color supports the fluency of the content text. Using too many colors, clashing colors, all dark colors or all milky light colors will interrupt the visual flow of the course and, therefore, hinder comprehension.

After the course builder clearly identifies the target audience, viewing a complete color palette will provide a spectrum with which he or she can “play” with color choices. From the palette, first decide on a color grouping such as primary or pastels. Younger children are attracted to the primary colors. A barn-red wagon with a Kelly green tree are common graphic colors associated with emergent and beginning readers. Older audiences provide a wider opportunity for choosing colors. If your audience is predominately young adults, a choice of bright trendy colors may be appropriate. Currently, that choice would include the neon colors. A lime green with a purple accent would be especially appealing to the teen and preteen audience. Usually, courses designed for the adult are lengthier. Here, you can vary your color choices within the weekly assignment. One week’s assignment may have an Earth tone theme, while the next week may be a textured theme.

Most online courses contain a masthead or banner that the student sees upon entering the course. The colors chosen for the masthead should be the anchor colors for the remainder of any short course.

Using color to alert the student to specific text is also effective. For attention grabbers, use opposite colors on the color wheel (i.e. yellow and purple, orange and blue, etc.). The opposite color may be used no matter what color theme you have chosen as your dominant and subordinate colors. An upcoming quiz or a homework reminder using orange in lieu of the traditional black helps to direct the reader’s attention. A constant color associated with a particular content concept will enhance the student’s comprehension. For example, in an Earth Science course, the course builder may use the color blue for all concepts or vocabulary words relating to water or the color brown for all newly posted materials and the color red for project assignments.

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## Clips

Clips include any graphic material imported into the course such as graphic organizers, maps, photographs, video, diagrams, and picture clips. Informational clips should directly correspond to the text with clearly identifiable labels, drawings, and font. The size of the clip is relative to the size of the text. A single line of text does not warrant a four-inch clip, whereas a large body of six-inch text may be enhanced by a one-inch graphic. If the clip is a diagram that clearly is the focus of the content, then the size should be significantly increased. Keep in mind that large clip files will increase downloading time. Diagrams, maps, and other informational clips should be crisp. Using tools such as shadow fonts or frayed edges for creating informational clips deter from comprehension. Using too many clips within one page can also lead to reader confusion and points the attention of the student to the graphics rather than the course content. Likewise, animated clips are both eye-catching and fun, but the unnecessary motion detracts from the content.

Within a weekly assignment, graphics that depict similar characteristics should be consistently used throughout the assignment. Examples of similar theme graphics are below.



Graphic theme for a younger audience



Graphic theme for an older audience

Inserting video clips certainly adds to visual and content enrichment. All video clips should be accompanied by expository captions. The course builder should clearly state a purpose for the clip and give the student a specific assignment relating to the clip. An example of a video caption is below.

## Video Clip



*The clip above highlights several turning points during the Civil Rights Movement. As you view the clip, record these events and think about how they contributed to the overall success of the movement.*



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Notice that the reader has been provided with the topic of the clip, the purpose for viewing the clip, and a prompt for further content synthesis.

Younger students enjoy cartoon-type figures that represent children of their own age. Photographs and more complex graphics can be used in adult and young adult courses. Figures should be engaged in activities described within the text and represent ethnic as well as gender diversity.

Audio clips greatly enhance courses such as foreign language and speech courses. Musical clips, when paired with video, contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the content. Using musical clips without video is not recommended.

The music, unless directly related to the content (example: music written during the Civil War in a history course), will distract the reader.

Using the mantra of the design world, form follows function, you will find that the decorating possibilities are endless. Discovering your own particular style within the course contributes to a feeling of success for your students. The placement of furniture within a physical classroom rarely changes throughout the school year. Students know where to sit, know the location of the computer lab, and know where the teacher can be found. Your cyber-room is much like the physical classroom in that the students need a comfortable routine for locating information. They know where information will be because it is consistent. They know that certain colors indicate certain activities. And they know they will be safe and secure in the warm and inviting environment that you have so thoughtfully created.

### Article Resource URLs

- Microsoft Clip Art and Media: <http://dgl.microsoft.com>
- Free Clip Art Kingdom: <http://www.clipartcastle.com>
- Barry's Clip Art: <http://www.Barrysclipart.com>
- Tech4Learning: <http://www.tech4learning.com>
- Clip-Art.com: <http://www.clip-art.com>
- Discovery's School Clip Art Gallery: <http://school.discovery.com/clipart/>



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