



## Five Things

Instructional Designers Can Learn From Screenwriters  
About Training Motivation



# Executive Summary

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**Y**ou built it and nobody came—it's a common dilemma faced by enterprises launching online training curricula. Motivating participants to sit through training material is becoming increasingly difficult and critics are quick to point out that staring at a small screen is inherently problematic. In the end trainers feel pressed to employ *extrinsic* motivational strategies (such as making training mandatory or sending test results to managers.) Unfortunately, training via a computer often *is* problematic—think of the numerous distractions; absence of social consequences for quitting; and the tedious read and click environments. Screenwriters have been wrestling with many of the same motivational issues for years and have found ways to keep eyes glued on the big (and little) screen. In fact, building a three act screenplay is as formal and structured a process as designing training; the only difference is the dramatic structure is hidden under plot whereas instructional design is often conspicuously apparent throughout.

Creative instructional designers don't restrict their training to the premise that eLearning (or any other self-driven learning methodology) requires extrinsic motivational elements for successful completion. Training *can* be intrinsically interesting and motivating. Screenwriters have been building such interest for years, and what follows are five techniques they use that can be equally effective in instructional design.

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# Technique # 1:

## Ethos, Pathos and Logos

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Aristotle developed three keys to effective writing: the artful application of ethos, pathos and logos – the use of character (or credibility), logic (or reason), and emotion respectively. An excellent example is in the TV series *Star Trek*. It is expressed through the individual roles of the fictional characters: Captain Kirk (character), Spock (logic), and Dr. Bones (emotion). The screenwriters of the series purposefully built a charismatic leader who was often buffeted by appeals to reason and/or emotion as a foundation for compelling story telling.



There are several ways this rhetorical strategy can impact and influence training. For example, putting your subject matter expert in front of a camera may suffice to logically work through content, but screenwriters know that such a character should play only a supporting role. A charismatic and engaging character is essential to hold audience interest – not just someone who knows what they’re talking about. There is a reason Spock wasn’t the star of the series—the same reason most subject-matter experts should not drive the instructional presentation. In addition to engaging characters, training must take time to plant emotional hooks.

What is it about training that will touch the learner on an emotional level? For the purposes of instructional design, think of emotion as the values held by the participant. Connecting those values with the course goals will not only touch the learner on that necessary emotional level, but it will also motivate them to continue the training. Effective training takes the time to draw these out and reference them accordingly.

Today’s training typically draws from only the pathos or logic side of the triangle. While a reasoned presentation is important in building a clear and instructionally valid message, screenwriters will never let the underlying logic overshadow credibility and charismatic design. They know if they lose their audience, nothing else really matters.

“We still subjugate or overlook emotions and intentions as a key learning factor and then we wonder why our learning solutions are inadequate or why learners are resistant or unmotivated to learn, especially online.”

– Margaret Martinez, *The Learning Place* (2004)

## Technique #2: Build a Thematic Argument

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Screenwriters are conscientious about building a story that begins with a premise and leads to a certain conclusion. They often refer to such a conclusion as the film’s theme. A theme, in essence, is an argument. For example, the theme in Star Wars could be expressed as “success comes when people work together and stay true to themselves.” Having a good argument with a premise and conclusion is essential to telling a story and keeping an audience engaged.

Although many instructional designers use argument in their training, often they neglect to set up a premise, conclusion, and action in between. Instructional designers are accustomed to defining instructional goals and connecting them with content—this characteristic is the hallmark of the majority of training

today. Building an argument, however, as with structuring a movie’s theme, is a more complex process than simply mapping to instructional objectives. A screenwriter will carefully construct a path that leads the audience to believe in both the film’s premise and its ultimate conclusion. Likewise,

skilful instructional designers

will move the learner through a series of supportive conclusions. Like a screenwriter leading the audience through plot points, the effective instructional designer will guide the learner through agreeable points that build toward the main instructional goals.

This is especially relevant in soft skills training. For example, in sales training – where the audience is typically A-type personalities who are very busy, under constant pressure, and don’t necessarily want to be distracted by training material – the learner will often challenge information that doesn’t readily fit with what they already believe to be true. Building a structured argument prepares them to accept such new conclusions within the body of the training itself. A trainer that gets their audience to say “Yes, that’s right” numerous times will find it easier for them to convince an often skeptical learner that what they are ultimately proposing is also valid.

In film, the ability to give up preconceived ideas and believe in the theme of the story (even to the extent of ignoring minor inconsistencies) is called the “suspension of disbelief”. Screenwriters who take the time to build careful thematic arguments draw the audience into the film, and for at least 90 minutes or so, make worlds with spaceships and monsters perfectly believable and reasonable – even to salespeople.

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## Technique #3: Conflict is Good

The essence of drama is conflict.

For the screenwriter, any scene without some kind of conflict runs the risk of testing the patience of the audience. One of the elements of classroom instruction that is so often lacking in technology-based learning is the ability to challenge the instruction – that raised hand in the back of the room that brings up a valid, but alternative point of view. When it happens, things get suddenly interesting and the greater the conflict the greater the interest. Good instructors instinctively know the value of conflict when they teach. In addition to encouraging alternative points of view, they will often follow the platonic method by asking questions instead of always “telling” the class what they are suppose to know. Again, asking questions is a challenge to something, an expression of conflict between ideas. Anyone who’s benefited from such talented instructors knows how much more interesting the training becomes.

Can instructional designers utilize conflict in eLearning and other self-paced training?

The answer is a resounding “yes”. In fact, eLearning is an optimal environment for conflict because it can be contrived within the presentation itself. This is no different than the screenwriter who contrives his or her scenes so that conflict plays a fundamental role. The best eLearning will utilize dramatic structure to introduce characters and situations that are not only credible and relevant, but present an opportunity to challenge and create conflict within the overall training design.

Screenwriters know that they will

never hold an audience’s attention without conflict. Savvy instructional designers will employ this same principle to keep the training audience engaged and interested as well.



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## Technique #4: Create a Noble Goal

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Every archetypal hero is trying to accomplish something. It's more than just a desire, it's what screenwriters sometimes refer to as a noble goal. With such a goal in mind, the protagonist works throughout a film to accomplish this lofty endeavor, while fighting off the antagonist or villain who is directly opposed to the hero obtaining their desired ends. Infusing a noble goal into your training helps instill a sense of purpose and/or interest. If using role-play scenarios as part of the overall training strategy, developing a character who clearly has some noble purpose in mind will not only make him or her empathic (are more credible) to your audience, but will set the stage for a story "spine" that can thread together various instructional elements into an overall theme.



A noble goal can also be used as part of an introduction to the training, giving a larger sense of relevance and possible benefit that the learner can achieve as a result of the curriculum. Don't just make it about money (if the training is rewarded with merit increases in pay or you are targeting revenue generating activities). Put something higher into the mix, such as fully meeting the needs of customers, creating a safer place to work for co-workers, etc. In a culture that uses fictional heroes in the pursuit of noble goals, strategically placing such within training can produce satisfactory and engaging learning paths.

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## Technique #5: Hold Something Back

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The old adage of “tell them what you’re going to say, say it, and tell them what you’ve said” may be the underlying approach to most eLearning, but screenwriters have a somewhat different approach. They know that in order to create interest in a given topic, more important than what you say is what you *don’t* say – what you purposefully hold back. The basics of dramatic structure teach you to put a question into the mind of the reader / viewer, but hold off answering that question until the end of the film / play / book. It is an unanswered question or not having all of the facts readily at hand that drives the audience forward.

Sophisticated instructional design will employ equally sophisticated rhetorical strategies, and holding information back is just one tool a writer can use to keep a learner interested in a course. Obviously the bulk of the training experience is about comprehending new information; but placing one, pervasive and driving question at the forefront of the material and then answering it at the very end will not only help the participant stay motivated, but it will create a sense of completeness and end-user satisfaction. This is where the power of role-play or scenario-based design within technology-based instruction really shines.

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## Conclusion

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More than just a medium for an electronic book, online and video based training has all the capacity to enable compelling story-based instructional events that not only have a valid instructional design, but often evoke better memory retention and application in novel environments. Learning the secrets that screenplay authors use to establish and drive motivation are not only applicable in instructional design, but within a media-based culture can be a preferred methodology for instruction.

## About the Author

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Platte F. Clark is a member of the Writer's Guild of America and has the unique perspective of working as both a screenwriter and instructional designer. His education includes graduate work in both Instructional Technology and English, as well as over 15 years experience in creating customized training content for a variety of Fortune 500 and military organizations. In addition, Platte has authored numerous screenplays, including the adaptation of the best-selling children's novel "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever", and is currently working with the producer of Schindler's List, Jurassic Park, and Minority Report.

## About Xcelus

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Xcelus Studios brings innovative and unique learning solutions to global organizations. In contrast to the ordinary training typical of corporate curricula, Xcelus draws upon a unique team of experts to provide fresh, and instructionally sound e-Learning, CBT, instructor-led training, and "blended" solutions.

Our staff includes proven leaders in instructional design, script writing, flash, 3D animation, marketing, programming, and film production. The work of our team members is visible in many key organizations such as American Honda, Novell, Franklin Covey, Pixar, and Hitachi Data Systems.

If you're ready for a whole new approach to training, or want to evolve your courses to the next level, we're eager to show you how partnering with Xcelus will enhance your learning solutions.

Your audience has changed...  
Shouldn't your training  
change as well?



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