

Visual Identity Systems For F2F and Online Courses

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Abstract

A course identity system, much like corporate identity systems, helps to attract students, informs them of course features, structures instructional materials and activities, and signals a teaching perspective. Visual examples address marketing materials, syllabi, learning tasks, and online presence. Implications of a visual identity system for academic programs are suggested. Design guidelines for universal design, page design, typography, graphics, and multimedia materials are provided.

Keywords: courses, F2F, online, identity system, syllabi, CMS

Introduction

A visual design strategy for a course identity system includes both the physical artifacts used by instructors, including syllabi, student activity guidelines and media, as well as the design of any online presence. This paper first describes four benefits of a course identity system. Elements of a course identity system are organized by marketing materials, syllabi, learning task sheets, instructional materials, and the online course presence, which may include a course management system or an external online site. Examples of these materials are provided by the authors' face-to-face (F2F) and online college courses in instructional design and interior design. An implication of an identity system for academic programs is suggested. Visual design guidelines will be organized by universal design, page design, typography, graphics, and multimedia materials.

Benefits from Using a Visual Identity Design System

A course identity system, much like the corporate identity systems designed over many years by the British design firm Pentagram (1978, 2010) and the currently fashionable term of branding (Wheeler, 2009), has four purposes: attract students, communicate features and requirements, structure learning, and signal a teaching stance. Examples follow this section.

First, a visual identity system addresses issues of marketing the course and advertising its existence to potential students. A visual design strategy attracts students to seek out more information about the course. Subsequent materials provide sufficient information to persuade the student to enroll. The design of these materials as discussed in this paper addresses student issues of relevant, useful, and doable. Developing a visual strategy for the design of marketing and instructional materials help an instructor to think through their own set of branding questions. What is this course about? Who should take the course? Who are my students? Why should students care? What do students need to know and do to complete the course? Thus, a visual strategy prompts instructors to think about important teaching issues. These issues also address questions of learners, content, and treatment necessary for any media materials. Who is my audience? What is my message? How do I translate this message into media?

Second, a visual identity system specifies how course features and requirements are communicated to a student, whether in a F2F course or at a distance in an online course. These course materials include the syllabus, a web site, and the possibility of a course management system (CMS).

Third, a visual identity system contributes to the structure of a learning task through consistent visual features. Many of the design principles are based on the work of visual literacy practitioners (Burmark, 2002) and researchers (Moore & Dwyer, 1994), particularly using a cognitive psychology perspective to ground the design of visual messages. Mayer's (2001, 2005) work on multimedia use identifies principles that help people learn; specifically, how the use of words and text supports the cognitive processes of selection (making objects

stand out), organization (use of hierarchies, structures, and pathways), and integration (repeating elements and visuals).

Fourth, a visual identity design, addressing issues of color, page organization, font choices, and the use of tables and pictures, communicates to students how the instructor view approach to the course and the educational enterprise in general. The decision to “go visual,” particularly in educational courses, signals to students that the instructor has put some thought into the course materials and endeavored to design a course that is relevant, useful, and clear.

Course Materials

Marketing Materials

Marketing materials are typically used in academic settings to attract applicants to a program. But marketing materials that support individual courses can be used to attract applicants to programs as well as attract currently enrolled students to elective courses. Even though students usually take courses because they are required, marketing materials can still be used as a way to introduce a course to students before the course begins. While these materials may serve to spark enthusiasm for the course, this pre-semester communication may help get students up to speed in an online course. Productive work begins during week one rather than the first week being an orientation.

Marketing materials have typically included flyers or brochures, and these are still useful today. Print materials on bulletin boards, for example, remain cost-effective communications in a building and signal program activity and people’s involvement in that program. Print materials may also be distributed through personal contact, through the mail, or as email documents or attachments. The visual layout of marketing materials can be guided by graphic design principles, which includes proximity (related items together), alignment (items connected to each other), repetition (use the same design elements), and contrast (make items different; Williams, 2008).

Another major component to marketing materials include a visual logo or icon to identify the specific course and the academic program. The logo element in a course identity system provides a commonality in all course materials and signals to potential students that the instructor is organized and has thought through the course. Students gravitate to courses that are relevant to them, look interesting and doable, and are good values for their time and money. The design of the logo can become important in the design of supporting materials, based on the colors and shapes of the elements within the logo, as well as the thinking or emotions suggested by the overall look of the logo and even an underlying metaphor. In Figure 1, for example, the academic program logo with colors identifying the institution is complemented by a course logo, which includes school colors, the iterative nature of the course (the blocks of activity), as well as course number, name, that the course is delivered online, and that the course is being delivered by this instructor for the 20th time.



Figure 1. Academic Program Logo and Course Logo: Use of Logo in Marketing Materials.

Increasingly, marketing occurs through social media channels, such as a Facebook page, which enforces its own visual layout. However, the use of one's logo/icon serves to identify the course in the Facebook universe and also provides a visual element consistency from physical materials to digital presence.

Another category of marketing materials includes audio clips, movies, or podcasts. For courses these media materials are short in duration and provide information about a course. The audio and/or visual treatment specifies features that interest, attract, and even entertain the student. Such features can include a point of view, a specific setting and situation, the use of music, and editing decisions. An example of an editing decision is to embed a media clip of an actual teaching session in a screencasting movie. Screencasting products capture an online session where live video, audio, and movement around the computer screen linking to files, web sites, or a course management system may occur. These products may enable other media files, such as still images or video clips, into the screencasting movie.

Syllabus

The major course document is the syllabus, which includes information on course purpose, learning outcomes, instructor information, required materials, teaching approach, assessment plan, academic policies, classroom policies, and a tentative schedule. The syllabus is commonly viewed as a contract between student and instructor. Some institutions may have required formats and layouts. Generally, college faculty members have some discretion in the design of the syllabus. Some faculty members include all learning activity details within the document, creating a long document. Another approach is that the syllabus should cover the required components and range from 3 to 5 pages. Details of learning activities can be documented in individual task sheets, which are discussed below.

Figure 2 provides an example of a visually designed syllabus. The course logo consists of a set of letters, PBL, rotated 90 degrees. "PBL" quickly communicates the topic of the course to students in a teacher education program. The rest of page 1 lists the learning outcomes and how those outcomes are assessed. A clear match of outcomes and assessment, a good feature of any syllabus and course design, would naturally resonate with these new teachers. Common subheadings and font size and type are used throughout. A two-column newsletter-like format is used to record assessment, policies, required text, instructor contact information, but also recommendations on completing an online course and benefits of enrolling. Page 3 of the syllabus uses different colors to mark off four different sections of the course schedule.

EDP 740 Principles of Instruction ONLINE Spring 2011
<https://ecompass.wvu.edu> eCampus the online learning, live TV

Course Description
 An online course exploring live on design and online teaching for public school or college settings.

Course Materials
 eCampus: <https://ecompass.wvu.edu>
 Textbook, Unit Readings, Outlines for unit design, unit readings, professional development, unit reviews, and PBL topic modules on eCampus site.

Assessment
 Unit Readings: 10% (via PBL project template) due Apr 20
 eCampus: Use your MIX/Canvas to log on. Make sure your computer is up-to-date. Run through the "Getting Started" link on the course eCampus main page to test out your device for your own good as well as other system users.

Course Schedule

WEEK	Weekly Date	Weekly Content	Course Content
Monday email date:	First by eCampus by: WED 10:00 AM	Office Hours: eCampus Help Chat ROOM 7:00-10:00 AM	
Week 1	Monday Jan 31	Course Welcome eCampus module: PBL to PBL (3-12)	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 2	Monday Feb 07	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 3	Monday Feb 14	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 4	Monday Feb 21	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 5	Monday Feb 28	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 6	Monday Mar 07	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 7	Monday Mar 14	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 8	Monday Mar 21	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 9	Monday Mar 28	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 10	Monday Apr 04	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 11	Monday Apr 11	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 12	Monday Apr 18	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 13	Monday Apr 25	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 14	Monday May 02	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit
Week 15	Monday May 09	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit	Unit 1: Unit 1 Welcome to eCampus PBL topic, getting questions, scope of unit

Figure 2. Example of a Visually-Design Course Syllabus.

Learning Task Sheets

Task sheets are documents that provide details to the learning activities mentioned in the syllabus. Task sheets provide the following information: task rationale, deadlines, procedures or recommendations, and assessment details. Including the course logo visually connects both documents (see Figure 3). The design of the task sheets could be similar to the syllabus, using the same subheading formats and fonts, and this might be recommended if the fonts are very distinctive. The task sheet formats, however, should be kept consistent.

The figure consists of two side-by-side pages from a course document. The left page is the syllabus for 'EDP 640 INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN'. It features a course logo in the top left corner, which includes the text 'Online', 'EDP 640 Fall 2011', and 'Instructional Design'. The syllabus text includes the course description, prerequisites, objectives, and assessment methods. The right page is titled 'DA1 Your Personal ID Model'. It features the same course logo in the top right corner. The page contains a due date of August 30, 2011, a procedure section with five steps, and an assessment section with a 5-point scale. At the bottom of the right page, there is a table for performance evaluation.

Performance	Yes/No or Scale
Due by subject date	Yes/No
Colour definition	Yes/No
ID model representation/evaluation	Yes/No
Task reflection	Yes/No
Book feedback	Yes/No

Figure 3. Re-use of Course Logo in Syllabus and Activity Guidelines.

Instructional Materials

Instructional materials include print handouts and activity sheets, computer-based presentations, and audio-visual materials, all of which may be used in classrooms and online. Creating standardized formats for print, presentations, and media materials can speed up the materials development. Such timesavings can be considerable for online courses that may require all materials to be available for the entire semester. The use of the course logo/icon across all materials provides instant brand identification and consistency across materials. Once the logo is created the image can be used in word processing and computer-based presentation software, as well as inserted into movies.

The design of computer-based presentations has been influenced by recommendations that range from the corporate use of the medium as advocated by Microsoft to the view that these presentation templates have limited our ability to think (Tufte, 2006). Tufte's (1997) text, *Visual Explanations*, provides guidelines on visually depicting information that changes over time. Mayer (2001) provides multimedia principles based on his summary of the research on how people learn from visuals and words, the most important of which is that we learn better from a mix of pictures and text than text alone.

The use of audio and visual materials, such as audio clips, video clips, and YouTube movies can serve several instructional purposes. The materials can provide students with an orientation to a new course introducing students to the features and requirements of a course in a way that brings a review of the syllabus to life. Some parts of a syllabus review in a media clip can be revised and used as a course briefing for possible students. Audio and video clips may serve as actual classroom or online instruction. One way to organize the sequence

of the presentation, activity, or lesson is to follow the learning principles for effective instruction, such as Gagne's instructional events (Gagné, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2005). A sequence would include review, a visual organizer identifying a new topic, a mix of new information with an activity applying this information, review on what was presented, and ending with administrative information on "what's due when." In addition, each section of the presentation could feature distinctive color or design changes to signal these instructional sequences.

For classroom use, instructors routinely print out a handout repeating the slides on the screen. This strategy is useful if the room is large and people may not read your text well, or if the hardware fails. If color and contrast are important in the presentation, then the handouts need to be printed out in color. Another habit is to post in email or online a copy of the presentation online for those to review or for those who could not attend the F2F class session. However, the design of presentations used in the classroom may differ from the design of presentations that will be seen on a student's computer screen. Review the slides for possible editing to serve as a review product. Remove slides that might be unclear to someone who watches the presentation at home but did not hear what was said about the slide in class. For example, a PechaKucha presentation, which includes 20 slides that run 20 seconds each ensures a fast-paced session. However, a recording of the live commentary would be necessary if the presentation would be used as a review. This recording could be done through the use of a stand-alone video camera, a course management system video capability (e.g., Wimba in Blackboard), or recording the presentation at a later time using screencasting software. The resulting media file will be large, so an online site would be needed to archive the file.

Another presentation approach is the use of a Prezi presentation. Prezi is an online site where information is visually organized and stored (see Figure 4). A user can zoom in and out or select a particular part of the presentation map for viewing. The sequence of sections can be programmed into the presentation, but the user can choose to focus on any section. Organization, layout, and motion of text and visuals are important decisions in Prezi presentations, and they can be accessed online or downloaded, and access can be secured if necessary.

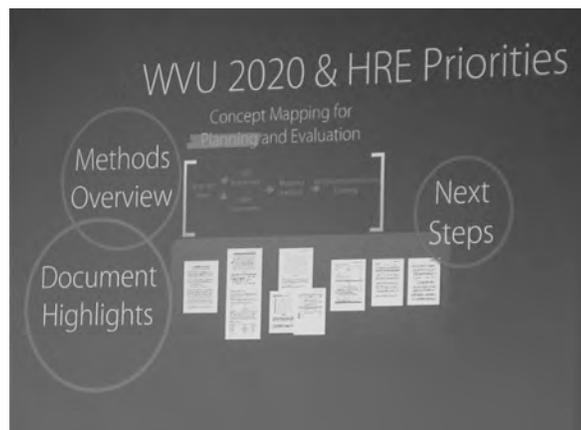


Figure 4. Prezi Example.

In addition to the official student evaluations an institution uses, course evaluation materials can be teacher-developed and administered at the beginning of the course, during the course, and at the end. Maintaining a course identity with these materials is relatively simple involving repeated use of visual elements, such as the logo or icon or a distinctive use of fonts in headings and text. Another feature of course evaluation is the use of class pictures, which can be used in future course deliveries to signal that students have taken a course and a temporary learning community has developed.

Course Management Systems (CMS) and External Sites

Online teaching increasingly uses a CMS to integrate course materials, interaction, and assessment. The student can access all materials in one location as well as post work. Course identity materials, such as a logo or icon, can be used within the header location on the main screen or within a designed module. The CMS is likely to have the capability to make changes in what the student sees in terms of background color and arrangement, type, and visual nature of icon images (see Figure 5).

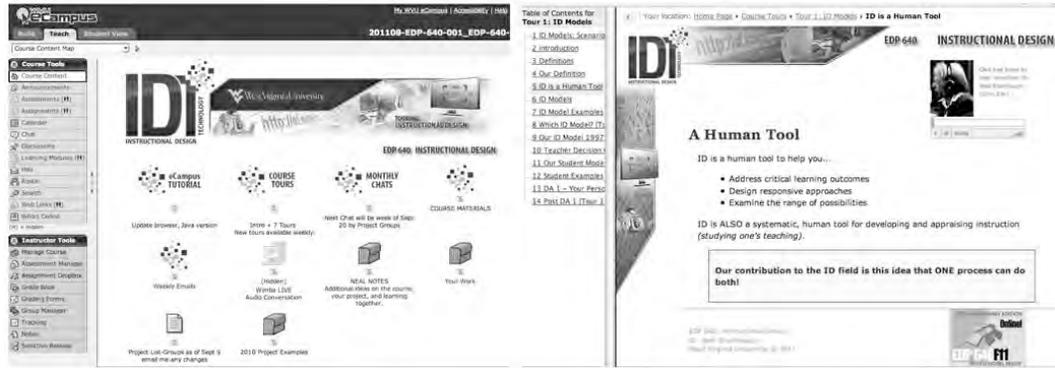


Figure 5. Consistent Visual Features in a CMS.

A CMS maintenance suggestion is to move files to folders when their priority has been reduced, so as to minimize screen clutter. Another maintenance task during the course would be to communicate announcements to students within the system. Students benefit from updating the contents of folders icon and file descriptions to signal due dates. Important files can be placed on the course's main page and then moved to folders at a later time so as to reduce clutter on the screen. The header and footer information, for example, can be an area to signal upcoming deadlines or future encouragement (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Updating Footer Information on CMS Site to Mark Valentine's Day.

External sites may be created that augment the CMS site or are standalone instructional sites. Repeating visual elements on the CMS site, web sites, and the syllabus reinforces course identity. The left image in Figure 7 is from a course syllabus, while the right image is the home page of an external site available to host teachers of the students enrolled in the college course. External web sites have been around longer than course management

systems, and design guidelines exist for web site development, such as those found in the Web Style Guide (Lynch & Horton, 2009).

The figure displays two screenshots related to an online course. The left screenshot is a course syllabus for 'EDP 740 Principles of Instruction ONLINE Spring 2011' at West Virginia University. It features a table with two columns: 'Learning Outcomes' and 'Activities'. The right screenshot is an external course web page for 'EDP 740 Principles of Instruction S2011' with a navigation menu (Description, Files, Units-Handouts, Links, Participants, AR 2011) and a 'Spring 2011 Theme' section.

Learning Outcomes	Activities
1. Design a unit (3-5 lessons) using ProjectBased Learning as the overarching teaching strategy supporting a driving question (3 weeks, JAN)	1A. Working with teacher/instructor document Unit plan using PBL Project Template form. This is the same form that WV teachers use to publish their PBL units. Post on eCampus site. Obtain feedback from me, classroom teacher, and PBL-trained teacher. 1B. Develop instructional materials.
2. Teach unit in an educational setting (4 weeks, FEB)	2A. Teach unit, either solo, co-teaching with others in this course (juniors), or with public school teacher/college instructor. Post the unit on eCampus. 2B. Document teaching; send me written observations from teachers using a feedback form.
3. Present your findings on your PBL teaching in a professional development presentation with other educators (4 weeks, MAR)	3A. Create presentation and handout summarizing Unit Plan, Teaching, Lessons Learned, Recommendations. Post presentation materials on eCampus. 3B. Schedule and deliver professional development session with public school teachers. Gather teacher feedback.
4. Revise your unit based on teacher feedback and publish on WVDE web site (3 weeks, APR)	4A. Post revised unit on eCampus 4B. Post WVDE rubric checklist for readiness to be published on state PBL site.

Figure 7. Course Syllabus and External Course Web Page.

Implications For Academic Programs

The benefits for a course visual identity system could also benefit academic programs. The push for student enrollment in academic institutions is forcing faculty members to think strategically about academic programs, not just teaching of courses. Making decisions about developing a visual identity system for courses forces a faculty member to think about how potential students and enrolled students perceive and even engage in a course.

Issues for course design also apply to their home academic programs. What should be taught? What are the learning outcomes? Who is the audience for these programs? The design of any book or movie typically requires a treatment document to convince a publisher or producer. The treatment document spells out the audience, the message, and how that message gets translated in a medium. A similar document and thinking process would benefit faculty members who collectively decide in academic programs who their learners are, what is to be learned, and the ways to represent and teach this content.

Guidelines for Course Print and Online Materials

Appendix A lists the guidelines for a number of design areas, including universal design, page design, typography, forms, graphics, and multimedia.

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Appendix A: Guidelines for Print and Online Materials

Design Category	Design Guidelines
<p>Universal Design (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2011)</p> <p><i>Select goals, methods, assessment, materials in a way that will minimize barriers and maximize flexibility</i></p>	<p><i>To support diverse recognition networks:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide multiple examples • Highlight critical features • Provide multiple media and formats, image descriptions • Support background context <p><i>To support diverse strategic networks:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide flexible models of skilled performance • Provide opportunities to practice with supports • Provide ongoing, relevant feedback • Offer flexible opportunities for demonstrating skill <p><i>To support diverse affective networks:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer choices of context and tools • Offer adjustable levels of challenge • Offer choices of learning context • Offer choices of rewards
<p>Page Design</p> <p><i>Standardizing design of the page</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency across pages: footers, headers, page numbers, subheadings, fonts • White space use to improve readability • Subheadings to indicate topic change <p>Web pages are governed by technical standards, such as found at: http://versie1.webrichtlijnen.nl/english/guidelines/</p> <p>Web page style issues can be found at Lynch & Horton, S. (2009).</p>
<p>Typography (Williams, 2008)</p> <p><i>Maximizing understanding of text</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic typographical principles • Proportional fonts: always use proportional fonts, fonts with characters of different widths, unless you have a specific reason not to! • Serifs: serif fonts are easier to read on paper and be printed and use sans-serif fonts for screen presentation. • Fonts: try not to use more than two fonts in a document. • Emphasis: never use all caps. Do not use underlining. Use italics or bold for emphasis. • Paragraphs: always use indenting instead of tabs to indent paragraphs, and paragraph spacing instead of blank lines to separate paragraphs. • Punctuation: use curly quotes over straight quotes.
<p>Forms</p> <p><i>Recording student progress</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent design • Multiple access points • Periodic review
<p>Graphics (Williams, 2008)</p> <p><i>Organizing design elements</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity: group related items together. • Alignment: connect items to each other. • Repetition: use the same design elements. • Contrast: make items different.
<p>Multimedia (Mayer, 2001)</p> <p><i>Selecting, organizing, and integrating knowledge</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multimedia principle: People learn better from words and pictures than from words alone. See Appendix. <p>Principles for managing essential processing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Segmenting principle: present lesson in learner-paced segments rather than as a continuous unit. • Pre-training principle: audience should know the names and characteristics of the main concepts. • Modality principle: animation and narration is better than from animation and on-screen text.

	<p>Principles for reducing extraneous processing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coherence principle: remove extraneous words, pictures, and sounds are excluded rather than included.• Redundancy principle: animation and narration is better than animation, narration, and on on-screen text.• Signaling principle: words should include cues about the organization of the presentation.• Spatial contiguity principle: corresponding words and pictures should be presented near rather than far from each other on the page or screen.• Temporal contiguity principle: corresponding words and pictures should be presented simultaneously rather than successively. <p>Principles based on social cues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personalization principle: words should be conversational rather than formal.• Voice principle: words should be spoken in a standard-accented human voice.• Image principle: Adding a speaker's image to the screen does not always help. <p>Principle for learner differences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual differences principle: Design effects are stronger for low-knowledge learners than for high-knowledge learners. Design effects are stronger for high-spatial learners than for low-spatial learners.
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