

Supporting SMEs— with Pizza

When instructional designers partner with subject matter experts (SMEs), one of their roles is to help SMEs choose the most crucial content for learners to absorb and present it in a meaningful way. This process leads to a “good mix”—much like the results of a successful recipe.

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As instructional designers, we appreciate working with subject matter experts (SMEs) as they know a lot about their areas of specialty. However, they don't necessarily select the most relevant material for a course, nor consistently create a logical flow for presenting it. This is understandable as their area of expertise is not instructional design.

Therefore, when we instructional designers partner up with SMEs, one of our roles is to help them choose the most crucial content for learners to absorb and present it in a meaningful way. This process leads to a “good mix”—much like the results of a successful recipe.

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

When I teach budding chefs to make a recipe such as scratch pizza, I first prepare my cooks by setting their expectations of the process. I like to ensure they have the time: an hour to prepare the dough and toppings; then a few hours later, another half hour to roll out the dough and compile and cook the pizza. I check that they have the tools needed: measuring cups, a rolling pin, a pizza stone, a couple of bowls, and a wooden spoon for mixing.

Then we collect the ingredients we will need. The pizza dough calls for yeast, flour, salt, and olive oil, but offers the option of adding either water or milk, the choice of which impacts the dough's texture and flavor. However, both aren't needed as there would be too much liquid in the dough, making it hard to knead.

The scratch pizza recipe also offers a choice of different toppings, so I'll ask chefs-in-training to choose one group. In my recipe, the pizza includes tomato sauce topped by one of the following: sliced mushrooms and peppers with mozzarella, pesto mixed with artichokes and Parmesan, or marinated eggplant with pitted olives and provolone. Any one of those combinations would be delectable, but throwing them all together? Too much!

The order of ingredients matters when making scratch pizza. We wouldn't put the vegetables on, then dump tomato sauce on top of them. We add ingredients in the proper order for the pizza to have the best overall impact.

Once we assemble the pizza, we determine how long to cook it. If we cook the pizza longer, it will have a crispy crust, but too long and it will burn. Should we take it out of the oven too soon, the pizza will be underdone and indigestible.

Once we sit down to enjoy the pizza, we'll consider the outcome—how does it taste? Does the mix of toppings work? Is the pizza too greasy, or is there is not enough cheese? We'll use what our taste buds tell us and confer with each other to improve the pizza next time.

STEPS FOR SMEs

Supporting SMEs in creating learning experiences has parallels to making scratch pizza. First, I aim to set expectations with SMEs up front regarding their commitments for the duration of the project. Should they plan on two hours per week, with four hours during critical weeks? Or a total of 16 hours allocated most heavily up front? Once projects get started, if they morph and timelines change, I keep SMEs updated and check in on their ability to meet the new deadlines before setting them in stone. We also discuss other resources they may need, perhaps someone with deeper expertise on a specific topic or access to a particular media library for images or videos to be used.

As instructional designers, we help our SMEs select an appropriate array and depth of content and reinforcing activities. We do this by fleshing out the learning objectives together so they have a guide by which to curate their content. Otherwise, they might struggle to cull content from the plethora of knowledge they are typically eager to share. Any “nice to know” information can potentially overload the learners.

SMEs and I also need to introduce topics in a logical order for the learners—an order in which each topic builds upon the previous one, just as our yummy pizza toppings build upon the crust. For process training, I can help SMEs by designing a flowchart for a specific series of steps and collaborating with them to ensure we convey the key points accurately. The proper order is important for the best overall learning impact.

SMEs and I work together to determine the amount of time each topic in a training requires. If we plan too much time, the learners might become overwhelmed or burned out. If we allot too little time, the content may be inadequate or indigestible.

After courses launch, SMEs and I will check in: Did the order of content work? Did we spend too much time on one topic, but not enough on another? Were learners able to complete activities and learning assessments effectively? We can use this information to evaluate our “mix of toppings” and update our

course for next time, if warranted.

These steps with SMEs ensure that the training supports the learning objectives and is presented in a way that reinforces learning. As instructional designers, we can partner with SMEs by setting expectations, collaborating on appropriateness of content, and deciding on the order and time frame of topics.

And after the course is complete? We can always enjoy some pizza! 🍕

4 Best Practices for Supporting the SME

- 1.** Set expectations with subject matter experts (SMEs) regarding their time commitment and other resources needed.
- 2.** Curate the content that is vital for the learning objectives and ensure it builds in a logical manner.
- 3.** Determine the appropriate amount of time for each topic.
- 4.** Evaluate the training effectiveness following the course launch and plan updates for the next delivery.