

Melissa Adams
Assignment 1
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Good Eats with Alton Brown
“Hooked and Cooked: Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fish”
and Keller’s ARCS Instructional Model

A man and his salmon, alone in an unsympathetic world, with neither kitchen nor grill to comfort and cook them (respectively), the man, a MacGyver’s MacGyver of cuisine, takes on the task of smoking a big, fat, juicy Chinook salmon with little more than a cardboard box and questionably attained hardwood sawdust.

Having been denied kitchen access by his wife, ostensibly for the purposes of an enforced non-cooking vacation, Alton Brown, host of Food Network’s *Good Eats*, finds himself with a freshly caught Chinook salmon and no where to cook it. Inside a worn coastal motel the beautifully filleted fish lay inside a cooler and Brown lay restless on a saggy bed, pondering the difficulty of his situation. In a moment of brilliance he devises a plan for smoking that fish and sets about immediately to cure it with culinary seasonings smuggled from home and resources at hand in the motel room. While this fascinating display of experience and compulsive behavior is enthralling, it is just the beginning of the journey to follow where the protagonist emerges triumphant, defying his oppressors, with perfectly smoked fish (and a largely reusable smoking device).

The above describe episode, “Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fish”, aims to entertain and instruct. It is designed for a good time, but if the viewer leaves knowing a little more about smoking, so much the better. Its format and content are equally appealing to the casual, reasonably educated adult viewer who has no intention of ever smoking a fish, and to her husband who has every intention of duplicating the episode down to the deplorably executed Northwest Coast art-like substance on the motel room wall. Because much of television can be best described as a soul-crushing experience, the rollicking good fun and captivatingly educational nature of this episode deserves the very best treatment: an academic analysis. Specifically, in terms of its success as a piece of instruction, how well does this episode hold up as an example of Keller’s ARCS Instructional Methods Model? Furthermore, if this program is a true example of ARCS in action, it would be a pity to waste it. In such an event, can one take what is learned from the instructional elements of this episode and apply the techniques to other fields, specifically, to the instruction of information-specific topics?

ARCS

During the 1970s and early 1980s John Keller, Professor of Instructional Systems and Educational Psychology at Florida State University, became interested in the variability of motivation and effort in learners and what affect this has on the success of their learning. Keller suggested that people who are not motivated to learn expend less effort

in the learning process and have a lower degree of success and satisfaction in their studies than those people who are motivated. Since Keller believed that motivation and effort are directly linked to how much a learner values an activity, he developed a successful motivational design process model, called ARCS, which he grounded in the Expectancy Value theory. This theory generally states that people will engage in an activity if they perceive that it offers them a chance to satisfy some need.

The ARCS model provides a framework of four essential components with which one can design motivating learning experiences. While it is crucial that these components be established early in the activity, and will generally take place in order, it is often beneficial to reestablish each component throughout the activity to maintain learner motivation and effort.

Attention: For an activity to be successful, it must first present some novel situation to the student, such as a mystery to be solved, a surprising image, or an incongruous situation of some type.

Relevance: After catching the learner's attention one must give the learner some sort of contextual meaning in order to keep her attention. Highlight the familiar aspects of the activity – give examples of the ideas presented in the activity with which she can identify. Present the material in variety of ways to accommodate different learners.

Confidence: Tell the learner where the activity is going and the steps needed to get there successfully. Design these steps to be meaningful to the learner and provide gateways to success.

Satisfaction: Support the learner's intrinsic enjoyment of the activity by offering her opportunities to see how she can benefit from giving a good amount of effort during the activity.

Keller believes that the Attention and Relevance components of this method help establish the value of activities for the learner, while the Confidence and Satisfaction portions help the learner develop expectations for success during the activity. These components in place, the learner is expected to be motivated to learn, extend good effort in learning, and to have a greater degree of achievement as a result.

“Where There's Smoke, There's Fish” and the ARCS method.

A is for *Attention*:

The story begins with the host, Alton Brown, and a companion salmon fishing and engaging in an amusing dialog. Already viewers (henceforth, “learners”) are interested, especially those who had been uninitiated into the world of Alton Brown. “What's going on? Aren't most cooking shows set in kitchens?” The dialog between the men reveals that Brown has a problem: his wife has driven him out of the kitchen and into an enforced cooking-free vacation, and because he cannot be trusted she has taken the extra measure of paying off the innkeeper to ban him from the motel kitchen as well. Brown laments that even if he does catch a Chinook, (which he of course does) he has no way to cook it. There has been a tricky problem established, and the learner wonders, “What's he going to do? That salmon ain't gettin' any fresher.”

While the program certainly opens with arousing incongruity and a vexing problem, *Attention* is constantly renewed throughout the program. There is novelty: in his curing process, Brown uses two telephone books and (*ahem*) borrowed shelving from the motel room. At once the learner is interested in this surprising use of found materials and also amused as she recalls instances in her own life where items like these have served alternate purposes under duress. There is also uncertainty plaguing the learner throughout the program. As Brown begins to collect materials for his improvised smoking chamber, the learner wonders how each item will be used. "A cardboard box? Won't that catch on fire?" She wonders what he is doing in an unattended cabinetmaker's shop. "Why, he's looking for hardwood for the smoker...he's not going to use a cabinet...is he?"

Instruction is periodically varied. Skipping over lengthy smoking processes, text is flashed upon the screen doling out little morsels of trivia associated with the topic of the program. These bits of information are not critical to the learner's instruction in how to smoke fish on the fly. They break up the presentation and leave the learner tantalized, contextually enhanced, and ready to get back to the makeshift smoker. There is a steady stream of concise and witty verbal instruction - technique laced with the science behind it - aimed directly at the learner. However, when Brown is finally constructing the smoke chamber, he verbally describes the process in the manner of someone talking to himself. The learner is given a break from direct verbal instruction and yet is compelled to listen. Throughout the program, Brown's running monologue is melded skillfully with explicit and interesting visual direction, thus giving the learner two equally effective learning opportunities should she be more inclined toward either style.

If one can choose a "Most Valuable Component" for the ARCS award, without risking tiresome debate, *Attention* is it. One must establish *Attention* early on and refresh it regularly throughout instruction; without it the rest is more difficult to establish. The information professional, charged with instructing about the use of information must develop a hook, so to speak, a conundrum, a surprising event, in order to capture his learner's curiosity. In a workshop about searching databases, the instructor could create a mystery a group of particular learners would enjoy as a framework for the topic. In addition, the instructor must be mindful that an activity that plods along in a uniform manner is almost certain to fail to captivate. Give the learners a chance to vary the learning through breaking up the instruction into lecture about the mystery and the tools at hand, discussions about the case, practice with the tools, group work in formulating a plan, student presentations, etc.

R is for *Relevance*:

The learner is immediately aware of the problem facing Brown and his ultimate goal. Specifically the learner is apprised of Brown's desire to smoke his prized fish and although she does not know how he will do it, she knows there is a plan underway to achieve that goal. The learner can then view what transpires through that lens, which makes each step in the process significant to her. In general, the learner is faced with the familiar need to eat: "Where There's Smoke There's Fish" is at its most basic level the

story of one man's need to eat and how he is going to satisfy that need. Whether or not the learner is interested in cooking in general, or smoking a fish with a motley crew of components in particular, in a more philosophical interpretation of the relevancy of the program, she sees in Brown's quest a familiar situation: faced with the need to do something without one's preferred materials, one sometimes must improvise. It is a celebration of the ingenuity of the human brain and the learner is on Brown's side and mentally (at a minimum) cheering him on because she recognizes the struggle. The learner is engaged because the story could be her own.

Very few people are terribly interested in learning about anything that is not relevant to them in some way. Even the most esoteric material can find a home, on some level, in someone's schema if the relevancy and goals of the instruction are established with care. For instance, when designing a piece of information-based instruction, one of the things to remember is that everybody needs some information, sometime. The instructor should not neglect pointing this out in concrete ways when designing lessons, and take care to let the learners know why is going to be accomplished and how. In the case of the mystery mentioned above, the mystery should be something easily recognized by a wide variety of people either personally or culturally. The instructor should also be very clear about the ultimate goal in solving the mystery and describe the manner in which he is going to provide practice with the tools necessary in finding a solution.

C is for *Confidence*:

In general, "Where There's Smoke, There's Fish" is different from most cooking shows where the learner might be required to own a flambé pan, to know when melted sugar has reached the "hard crack" stage, or is asked to make aubergine chrysanthemums. This episode offers the learner a chance to feel confident that she too can smoke a fish even without advanced culinary training. Once she does the sensible thing by going down to the Central Market to buy the fish, the learner knows success is only a-couple-of-holes-poked-in-a-box away.

Brown also establishes early on that smoking fish is quite a simple process with only four (well, five) basic steps which he lists verbally and in print: "Cure the fish, wash the fish, dry the fish, smoke the fish, (eat the fish)" With this list in place the learner knows what she is about to learn. Although she may not know specifically how this new knowledge will be presented to her and what it will entail, knowing that "wash", "dry", (and "eat") are on the list, she can enter into the instruction with the confidence that she already knows how to do some of what is to come.

Although the smoking process is fairly straight forward and the needed materials are fairly mundane and relatively easy to procure, the learner sees Brown exhibit an exceptional degree of responsibility to produce a quality product. Brown even warns the learner, although smoking fish is largely a hands-off process, as one lets the smoker do most of the work, this is not a time to "catch a movie." As the learner can see in the end, through Brown applying himself to the process, personal responsibility pays off in the form of a beautifully smoked Chinook.

The information professional needs to ensure while there is challenging material in the activity, there should be some familiarity as well. The learners need to be given a chance to feel as though there is something they already know and can do before giving them something seemingly impossible to accomplish. In the example of the mystery and finding bits of information in order to solve it, the instructor should establish a baseline of knowledge that the students already have, such as using basic Google. The instructor could begin with this and then give instruction about more advanced use or the use of other more complex search tools.

S is for *Satisfaction*

There are criteria established and followed in order to achieve success and satisfaction with the process. Again, Brown reminds the learner while smoking is a simple process, things must be done well for the project to be successful and to produce satisfying results. For example, the learner is instructed to cure the fish for a certain amount of time and told that curing for a shorter period would result in a less tasty fish. The learner knows what the criteria for evaluation are and the steps necessary to fulfill them for a personally satisfying outcome.

There are certain limitations with instruction that is by nature not interactive. Although Brown cannot motivate the viewer directly by stoking her effort-reward-satisfaction engine, she can see that his motivation and ultimate satisfaction is rooted in his own intrinsic desire to smoke that fish. The viewer is caught up in his enthusiasm and he imparts some of his own motivation to her, leading her to moments of satisfaction as he successfully accomplishes each step.

Brown and, by association, the viewer experience frequent satisfaction due to extrinsic rewards. With each step in the process completed to a degree of perfection only thought possible on “Living, with Martha Stewart”, but with 82% more practicality, Brown (and the learner) are rewarded and therefore encouraged to stay engaged and keep up the good work.

Finally, unless one is Vegan, and perhaps even then, there is no way around it: that smoked fish looks good – really good. The learner connects with Brown’s visual and gustatory enjoyment of his final product. There are intrinsic and extrinsic reinforcements leading to ultimate satisfaction for Brown, and the learner, as he pulls the still hot and smoking Chinook out of the box and then pushes his too dainty fork into the firm yet flakey meat.

Designing activities which are arousing, relevant, and have opportunities for success often go a long way in establishing an intrinsic desire in the student to engage, but being mindful of the need for extrinsic reward is crucial. Learners need to know from an outside source - the instructor - that they are on the right track and that the specific things they are doing are leading them to accomplishment. Criteria need to be established for the learners so they know what the expectations are in advance, and what the results could be if those expectations are met. In the case of the mystery the possibility of moments of discovery and success should be built in throughout the activity so the

learner is motivated to continue. The instructor should give some thought to the different ways the learners could be successful and watch out for moments when he can encourage the learners with specific examples of how their work is contributing to their success in solving the mystery.

In Conclusion

Whether one calls “Where There’s Smoke There’s Fish” an exceptionally accomplished piece of instruction or simply quality television, the episode engaged and motivated the learner. The ARCS model of instructional design easily served as a framework of analysis for this program to describe the success of the instructional intent of this episode. Through this analysis one sees not only an example of good instructional design, but also understands the definitions and possible applications of each of the ARCS model components in designing instruction for use in other fields, such as information and library science.

References:

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