

## New Learning Designs

Since the 1980's, the instructional design of interactive courseware has evolved to take better advantage of the capabilities of the technology systems that support it.

This article describes three of the most important changes in learning design to come out of this era:

1. Functional Content Organization
2. The RDA Learning Model
3. Learner Preparation.

These three development tools have helped make interactive curricula the most effective form of distributed instruction ever built.

To help illustrate how these tools are used, we will examine their application in a course we designed and built for the Chicago Transit Authority, called *Competing For Customers*.

### 1. Functional Content

The *Competing For Customers* course has been designed based on a *functional* structuring and delivery of the content. Individual modules are organized around specific functions employees perform on the job. This performance-based approach makes it easier for learners to relate to and remember the content.

To determine what functions this course needed to focus on, the CTA's internal customer satisfaction data was reviewed. It was easy to see from this review which performance areas the employees needed help with. They needed help in giving relevant and useful information to their customers, in helping these customers make connections on the system's buses and rails, and in handling difficult customers. These areas accounted for 90 percent of the CTA's customer complaints.

Under this course's functional design, these performance problem areas became the three major modules: Giving Information, Making Connections, and Handling Difficult Customers. A fourth module, Preparations, gives ideas and suggestions that will help employees become better customer service professionals.



### 2. RDA Model

The functional design of this course does not end at the main menu. For each problem area it covers, course designers asked "What does the learner have to be able to *do* to deliver excellent customer service?" The answer was the same for each module. Employees had to be able to:

1. **Recognize** customer service situations and conditions, specific to each problem area
2. **Make Decisions** about how to handle them from available information
3. Successfully put these decisions into **Action**.

This Recognition, Decision Making, and Action (RDA) process became the model for organizing and delivering content throughout the course.



Module 3, “Handling Difficult Customers” demonstrates this structure on two levels. First, the entire module itself is covered in three lessons—each lesson focusing on one step in the RDA process. Second, each lesson covers the entire process as well by focusing on one step, and reviewing the other two (e.g. lesson nine focuses on the Action step, but for the specific material covered, it also reviews the Recognition and Decision Making steps.)

All three lessons in the module are constructed around a single video scenario of a typical transit customer. The star of this one becomes a “difficult customer” as a result of her experiences. The scenario illustrates her encounters with three CTA employees on her way to work.

Lesson 7 details her encounter with the first employee—and focuses on the Recognition part of the RDA process. Lesson 8 covers her encounter with the second employee—and focuses on the Decision Making part of the process. Likewise, Lesson 9 focuses on the Action step.

This RDA process is demonstrated in more detail in Lesson 9 through three interactive exercises.

## Exercise 1: Recognition

In this activity, learners must identify specific conditions or behaviors that might indicate a difficult customer situation, or the potential for one. They do this by clicking on cues they see or hear during a video scenario. Their inputs are collected by the system and feedback is provided at the end on the cues they’ve either found or missed.



By the end of this exercise, learners clearly understand that this is a difficult customer situation, and can identify specific cues that could prepare them for handling it.

## Exercise 2: Decision Making

Now that a difficult customer situation has been identified, the learner must decide how to handle it.

While developing this prototype, it was found that most employees already knew how to deliver excellent customer service. However, their behavior didn’t always demonstrate it. We also found that many employees believed their current behavior was OK... acceptable...and at times, even justified.

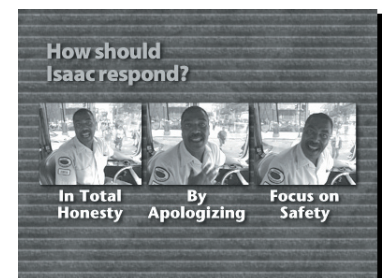
Before bringing learners into the Action step of the RDA process that this lesson focuses on, it was necessary to allow the learners to see that their *current* behaviors may not be working as well as they thought.

This is accomplished by presenting the learner with a difficult customer situation. It is the first part of a video scenario. In it, the customer steps into a bus and curses the driver.

The learner is asked how the driver should respond. Three response options are presented...they are examples of decisions employees currently make about how to handle difficult customers. The learner gets to view each response—from the customer’s point of view—and without seeing how the customer responds. After viewing all three, the learner must select what they think is the driver’s best response.

After selecting, the learner now gets to see the customer’s response—and determine if this is the best response the driver could get. Feedback explains why it isn’t. The learner is then asked to try each of the driver’s other response options to see if they fare any better. But, it is clear after viewing each one, that none of these options (the learner’s current response decisions) work very well.

It is only now that most learners realize their current responses are less than effective, and are prepared for listening to a new and more effective approach.



## Exercise 3: Action

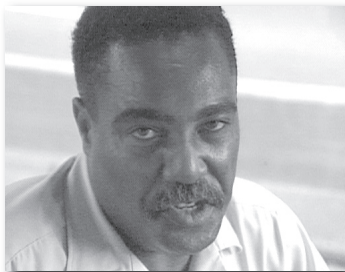
It isn't until this section of Lesson 9 that learners are adequately prepared for the primary content—the Seven Step Process for Handling Difficult Customers. And instead of delivering the content right up front, as traditional courseware would do, the learner “discovers” it through feedback embedded in interactive exercises. The exercise described below is just one example.

In this exercise, the learner is asked to determine if Isaac, the CTA employee in the video scenario, prepared for the difficult customer identified and worked with in exercises one and two.

First, they view his performance, then answer the question “Does Isaac prepare?”

Feedback to this question presents content associated with the first step in handling difficult customers.

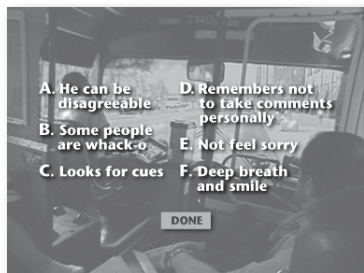
An unusual sequence was added to this exercise when it was discovered during focus group readings of the script, that some employees still harbored negative attitudes about the customer in the video scenario. It



became necessary to draw these attitudes to the learners' conscious level by having Isaac voice them himself. Once out in the open where the learners could sympathize with and relate

to them, the narrator addresses the issues and succeeds in modifying Isaac's attitude—follow-up analysis showed that our learners' attitudes were successfully modified as well.

Before completing this exercise, there are still four specific things Isaac could have done to prepare for the difficult



customer. Rather than simply telling the learners what they are, they are asked to identify them themselves. Since most employees already know what excellent customer service is...this activity simply helps them bring it back to a conscious level.

## 3. Learner Preparation

In developing many “soft skills” courses like this one over the years, Interactive Communications has found that the teaching of the content itself may not be the most difficult or important task. With these courses, the most difficult task is often getting learners to believe that they should want to, or need to, modify their behavior in the first place. In these cases, the content may take second-seat to this behavioral requirement. If learners do not honestly believe there is a need for them to learn or change, they won't—no matter what we do or say.

For this reason, most of our interactive courses (as this one will when fully produced) begin with a Discovery Exercise that addresses learner attitudes and perceptions—preparing them for the content that will follow.



These Discovery Exercises generally involve a video scenario where learners must perform some aspect of the content to be covered. This exercise requires them to perform in an area where we know their skills are weak. It's an intentional setup. A setup where we allow them to struggle...and fail.

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*New Learning Designs: Functional Content, RDA Process, Learner Preparation*

But in the process of this struggle, they discover their own weaknesses. They discover that what they are currently doing may not work as well as they thought. They discover that they do in fact, need to learn.

During the Discovery Exercise in this course they discover that:

- Customer service *is* a problem
- *Their behaviors* may be a part of this problem
- It is a problem *they have the power* to do something about
- And that this course will *give them the tools*, and the *experience in using them*, to successfully handle customer service problems.

By focusing the learner's attention on a scenario that captures the essence of what the course's training is designed to address, and presenting it in a way they can personally and emotionally relate to, we accomplish our most difficult task of getting learners to believe that they should want to, and need to, modify their behavior in the first place.