

Color Your World

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Color. The sky. The grass. The earth. The oceans. Their rich colors are a joy to behold. On a bright, sunshiny day, their colors lift us up. On a dark, stormy day, their colors subdue us. Color clearly affects us. And yet, color is often an afterthought, if thought of at all, in our classrooms. This is unfortunate; because people see color before they absorb content; because every color has a unique wavelength; and because our brains respond uniquely to different colors.

Staging Color

Purposeful color may be missing from the classroom but it is critical to the theatrical world. Daytime outdoors presentations lack intimacy, intensity and focus. The natural light is indiscriminate, shining the same on all it touches. But once the sun hides, the stage comes alive with color. Artificial lighting, purposely focused, tells the audience members where to look, what to feel and how to respond. The manipulations, moods and emotions it communicates enriches and enlivens the production.

Different colors have specific functions in this colorization scheme. In general:

- Red heightens intensity, suggesting danger, passion and excitement.
- Pink fosters cheerfulness, youth and festivity.
- Orange welcomes friendliness, warmth, celebration and clarity.
- Yellow displays optimism, cheerfulness, sunshine and renewal.
- Green accents nature, calmness, friendliness, integrity, practicality and wealth.
- Blue brings forth sadness, sincerity, peacefulness and serenity.
- Purple bounds with optimism, imagination, royalty, dignity and poise.

Without these colors, the stage is dark, cold and colorless.

Selling Color

Successful businesses also focus the power of color to establish and communicate brand identity.

- Coca-Cola soda cans are red with excitement and energy.
- The FedEx logo is a combination of relax-it'll-get-there purple and on-the-move red.
- FedEx also, to launch its ground service, changed the red to an appropriate moving-by-earth green.
- UPS promises safe and sensible ground-brown transportation.
- Pepto-Bismol calming-pink communicates instant relief.
- Home Depot constructed its logo in positive-can-do orange.
- Kodak yellow shines a light for do-it-yourself photographers.
- BP advertises "beyond petroleum" in earth-friendly green.
- IBM ("Big Blue") offers stability-delivering blue.
- Apple Computer products project high-class ivory for elegance and purity.
- McDonalds golden arches attract attention with a highly-visible-from-a-distance yellow. In addition, McDonald's French fry containers have a red-for-excitement

background, yellow look-at-me-first lines to attract attention and the ever present golden arches shadowed with reassurance-blue.

These companies have carefully selected their colors for the message each color communicates. If you doubt this point, imagine McDonalds with purple arches, IBM in yellow lettering or a bottle of green Pepto-Bismol. The right color can and does make the brand.

Presenting Color

In a completely different environment, a perspective client approached me with a problem. The session she was about to deliver would inform 200 notoriously difficult employees about the possibility that their work schedule would drastically change. It threatened to be an acrimonious session. The client was looking for tools to make the message more palatable and asked for my opinion about the PowerPoint presentation.

There was in fact a potential serious PowerPoint issue. The client had placed red text on a black background. The look was dynamic. Bold. Exciting. Demanding. The color scheme was likely to inflame passions and make the session more difficult to present and the audience more challenging to control.

The presenter changed the presentation colors to a dark navy background with pale blue text and key positive message points printed in yellow. The presentation went off without major complaint. The client was amazed. I was not. Although it was not certain that the PowerPoint color scheme was responsible for the lack of reaction, the changed color scheme did allow the message to be presented without provocation.

Learning Color

In learning environments, there are millions of PowerPoint templates, often designed by people with a sharp eye for color. Unfortunately, many people with a sharp eye for color don't have the equivalent level of knowledge when it comes to learning applications.

Although the research on the effects of color is ongoing, we do know some basic information. These basics do not add up to certainty, but they should be a filter for learning design and delivery.

Bright Colors:

- Bright colors spark energy and creativity, elevating and maintaining energy levels.
- Lighter colors, especially off-white, beige, and grey are mostly neutral in effect.
- White represents purity and innocence but, because of its brightness, can be highly disruptive to the eye.
- Red is the most emotionally intense color, stimulating a faster heartbeat and breathing. It fosters excitement and short-term high energy. It can also trigger aggressiveness when people are under stress.
- Yellow is the first color the brain distinguishes. It enhances concentration, is conducive to positive moods and physical activity but can become overpowering when overused.

- Orange has characteristics half way between red and yellow.
- Pink is restful and calming with a tranquilizing effect.

Dark Colors:

- Darker colors lower stress and increase feelings of peacefulness.
- Blue causes reactions the opposite of red, increases a sense of wellbeing and is conducive to studying, deep thinking, and concentration.
- Purple suggests sophistication and creates a tranquilizing mood.
- Green is calming. Reminiscent of home and hearth, it is the easiest color on the eyes and aids productivity and long-term energy.
- Brown, evoking the hues of the earth, is solid and reliable.
- Black projects authority and power.

Classroom Color

So, what does a colorful classroom look like?

- Workbooks - printed in on a cream colored or light grey stock to ease eyestrain.
- Walls – green and brown to project natural earth into the room.
- Wall decorations – posters alive with quotes, statistics, acronyms and other class related material, in a variety of colors; red for exciting and adventurous quotes, pink for otherwise intimidating statistics, and green and blue for reassurance;
- Around the room – Plants in the corners to bring a little outside inside.
- Lighting – Focused to highlight contrasting areas of light and shadows.
- Tables – Alive with Post-it notes in a wide variety of colors, brightly colored centerpieces and props aligned with class content.
- PowerPoint – Slides with light off-white or pale colored text with the important words showcased in yellow popping on a calming dark blue, purple or green background with a dash of red to hint at energy and excitement.
- Presenter – Neatly dressed in colors that compliment the environment including dark colors for a calming influence and a smattering of bright colors to indicate the adventure to follow. And, for learning situations where the instructor is seeking a casual and responsive atmosphere, no black clothing.

The point of this exercise is not to suggest that every classroom should look like this. Each situation is different and requires specific color choices aligned with the content, much in the same ways that different businesses apply colors aligned with their brands. An awareness of colorful applications is helpful. For without this awareness, you could be inviting disengagement or, much worse, hostility.

Smart instructors use every tool at their disposal, including color. Do so and you will have colored your world for learning success.

This article is inspired by information found in the Lenn Millbower's book Show Biz Training (AMACOM, 2003). Lenn is also the author of ASTD InfoLine: Music As A Training Tool, and Cartoons for Trainers, Training with a Beat: The Teaching Power of Music and the composer-arranger of Game Show Themes for Trainers.

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