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## Chapter 06. Instructional Message Design for Adult Learners

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**Instructional Message Design:  
Theory, Research, and Practice  
(Volume 3)**

**Chapter 6. Instructional Message Design for Adult  
Learners**

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## 6. Instructional Message Design for Adult Learners

Pamela J. Smith-Downing

### Key Points:

- Designers need to consider the potential for adult learners to be distracted by noise in their instructional message designs.
- Examples of media and television commercials can be used to inform instructional message design best practice.
- The messages in our instructional designs can be impacted by technical, physical, physiological, organizational, cultural, psychological, and semantic noise.

### Abstract

As stated in Chapter 1, message design is all around us, from the presentations we see in meetings and classes, to the instructions that come with our latest tech gadgets, to multi-million-dollar training simulations. The instructional message design field of study pulls from many applied sciences, including cognitive psychology, industrial design, graphic design, instructional design, information technology, and human performance technology, to name just a few. In this chapter, we will visit several adult learning theories and examples that guide our research into adult learning, look at different real-world instructional message designs for adult learners, and discuss directions for future best practices. Learning about effective instructional message design tools and techniques has been and will continue to be a critical aspect of the overall instructional design process. This chapter will serve as an introduction to instructional

message design for adult learners and further awaken the desire for learners to explore and implement tools when designing messages for adult learners.

## **Introduction**

Instructional message design for adult learners can be seen in various messages in this world around us all. Instructional message design for adults will not be effective without learning the foundation of how adults learn. Merriam-webster defines the word andragogy as the art or science of teaching adults (Merriam-webster, 2023). In this chapter, we will explore the history of adult learning. We will examine the principles of some of the great minds on the subject, such as Malcolm S. Knowles (1973), who resurrected the word andragogy in 1968. However, the term andragogy was first coined in 1833 by a German teacher named Alexander Knapp to categorize and describe Plato's theory of education.

The root word of andragogy refers to methods and principles used in adult education. The word comes from the Greek *άνδρ*-(*andr*-), meaning "man," and *άγωγός* (*agogos*), meaning "leader of." Therefore, andragogy literally means "leading men." Knowles was one of the first proponents of adult learners' training techniques. His book, *The adult learner: A neglected species* is still a widely sought-after book in adult learning. We will also explore some of the intended adult education outcomes according to Knowles's perspective.

Instructional message design is the use of learning theories to effectively communicate information using technology. How does the adult learner learn in this ever-changing environment? How are instructional messages being released to adult learners? How can we use effective message design to foster the self motivation of our students? Techniques must be in place to ensure that instructional message designs are appropriate for the intended adult audience and that it is effective.

Andragogy will continue to play a significant role in instructional message design as the history of adult learning is explored and the questions above are answered. We will explore instructional message design techniques (good and bad). We will also

look at Robert W. Pike (1989), an expert in human resources development and author of the book *Creative training techniques*. Mr. Pike has facilitated thousands of adult training seminars. His principles of adult learning, referred to as “Pike’s Laws of Adult Learning,” are a great asset in adult learning techniques. Finally, we will examine the future of instructional message design in academic and professional development contexts and how the future might look for the adult learner. Now let’s take a look at the history of andragogy.

### **Brief History of Andragogy**

The history of andragogy, which consists of learning strategies focused on adults, begins in Greece with Plato's educational theories. Although the term did not originate with Plato, he was indeed teaching adults. Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher born in Athens during the Classical period in Ancient Greece. He founded the Academy, a philosophical school where he taught philosophical doctrines that are widely known today as Platonism (Barrow, 2012; Mason, 2010).

His theories were called Plato’s **theory of forms** (based on the theory of ideas), the **theory of the soul** (immortality of the soul), **epistemology** (man's intuition about what is knowable and what is real), **ethics**, **politics**, **rhetoric**, and **poetry**. Plato’s ideas expanded on and were inspired by his teacher Socrates, and the Socratic Method of adult and social learning (Paraskevas & Wickens, 2003). Plato's theories are still debated today. These theories are more centered around philosophical debates, but nonetheless, Plato began the education theories discussions.

Alexander Kapp further strengthened Plato’s educational theories. He was a German educator and editor and in 1833 he originally introduced the term andragogy. Kapp interpreted andragogy as the process of engaging adult learners in the structure of the learning experience. Kapp tapped into the understanding, knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, attitudes, and preferences of the adult learner (Svein, 2017). His contribution was crucial to the foundation of understanding what adult learners bring into a learning environment. Adults bring their knowledge, skills, and experience into any teaching situation in ways that younger students can not.

Moving on into the 1920s, over 100 years after Kapp's introduction of andragogy, Eugen Rosenstock was responsible for the theory of adult education (Svein, 2013). He was a central force in the work on adult learning in Germany. He was a leading researcher and practitioner in the first theoretical, academic reflections on adult learning and implemented his theories in practical actions. His work influenced key figures of adult learning in the inter-war and post-war periods. His philosophy of learning centered on school being for children, and life being for adult learners (Svein, 2013). However, he is unfortunately not referenced in much adult learning literature.

Fifty years later (in the 1970s), an American educator named Malcolm Knowles popularized andragogy and the theory of adult education (Knowles, 1973). As was stated in the introduction, Malcolm S. Knowles was among the first proponents to create a framework for educators and trainers whose job it is to train adults. Though we must keep in mind he built upon the foundations of adult theory that were present before his time.

In Knowles's book, *The adult learner: A neglected species*, he resurrected the word “andragogy” (Knowles, 1973). Knowles's goal was to create a unified theory of adult theory. They were based on the four brief assumptions below:

- 1. As they mature, adults tend to prefer self-direction.**
- 2. Adults' experiences are a rich resource for learning.**
- 3. Adults are aware of specific learning needs generated by real-life events.**
- 4. Adults are competency-based learners, meaning that they want to learn a skill or acquire knowledge that they can apply pragmatically to their immediate circumstances.**

Almost 20 years (1989) after the popularization of Knowles's adult learning theories, Robert W. Pike entered the adult learning scene (Pike, 1989). He is an expert in human resources development and adult learning. His principles of adult learning,

referred to as “Pike’s Laws”, and his book *Creative training techniques* help revolutionize adult learning worldwide. “Pike’s Laws of Adult Learning, have built upon the original philosophy to provide similar guidance for trainers” (Bishop 2013). Below is a brief description of the four principles of Pike Laws in regard to adult learning (Pike, 1989):

**Law 1: Adults are babies with big bodies.** It is accepted that babies enjoy learning through experience because every exploration is a new experience. While somewhat counterintuitive, adults (as do young children) appreciate the ability or option to explore on their own.

**Law 2: People do not argue with their own data.** Succinctly put, people are more likely to believe something fervently if they arrive at the idea themselves.

**Law 3: Learning is directly proportional to the amount of fun you are having.** Humor is an important tool for coping with stress and anxiety and can be effective in promoting a comfortable learning environment.

**Law 4: Learning has not taken place until behavior has changed.** It is not what you know, but what you do that counts.

As you can see, andragogy has evolved over the centuries and adult learning techniques continue to evolve in the field of instructional message designers for adults. The foundation has been set for instructional message designers in adult learning environments to continue to build on this foundation. Pedagogy for younger learners have different motivations, which can be supported through appealing to their curiosity, making learning entertaining, and praise. However, adult learners have internal (inherent passion, excitement for learning, desire to achieve a goal) and external (need a new job, need a certification to keep a job, need money, need to help and support a family) motivations. Two classic examples from television can be used to illustrate how we can foster or erode this motivation through message design and communication noise.

## **Two Classic Examples: Effective and Ineffective Instructional Message Design Techniques**

What does one think about when they see the words instructional message design? The average person that is not privy to the world of instructional message designers, will immediately focus on the word instructional and equate it with an instructor teaching a specific topic to a specific segment of society. However, instructional message design goes further than that. The various means to get a message out to your target audience are growing more and more as designers push the envelopes to engage their intended audiences.

Some would go so far as to suggest: will there be a need for instructional designers in the future? Well, I would not push the envelope that far, we certainly need humans to create instructional messages for specific intended audiences. Instructional message design explores how various media and delivery systems might be used more effectively to help optimize instructional communications within context-specific instruction (Bishop 2013).

Instructional messages are all around us, and they are strategically designed to relay messages good or bad, to intended audiences. Instructional design can have an affective emotional impact on our learners. Instruction design seeks in part to change the attitudes and actions of learners, and instructional message design is how we communicate that intent. Media and television commercials have similar goals, to influence the attitudes and actions of their audience, and thus there are lessons for instructional designers to learn from them. We can certainly just look at the millions of dollars that are spent every year for a 30-second commercial during a super bowl football game in America. Wow! Who would not want to have that coveted job on a special project as an instructional designer to relay a message for a specific brand during this event? It's exciting to see what message will be the most talked about commercial, or instructional message, the next day at work or in the office around the water cooler. What instructional message did the instructional designer try to convey to the intended 50 million viewers watching on their televisions and other devices? Did the instructional message designers knock it out of the park, or was the audience confused and left thinking, 'what was the message behind the message?'



One of the best received commercials during a Superbowl was the 1980 classic with “Mean” Joe Green (an NFL Hall of Fame defensive tackle for the Pittsburgh Steelers football team during the 1970s) and a young kid (see Figure 1). The kid was giving “Mean” Joe Green a pep talk after a bad game, however, not only did he use his words, but he also utilized a message in the form of a classic Coke. The classic Coke was instrumental to the instructional message in that commercial. It instructed the audience, just by the iconic imagery of “Mean” Joe Green guzzle down that Coke, to go and buy a Coca-Cola when they are having a bad day and they too can start smiling again.

The juxtaposition of a huge, hall of fame football legend having a bad day and a small child who idolizes him is still classic instructional message design. Let’s go back to the meaning of an instructional message design and dissect this commercial. Was the instructional message designed in the real-world an application of instructional and learning theories? To design the tools and technologies used to communicate and effectively convey information?

## Figure 1

*Coke's Classic Mean Joe Green Superbowl commercial*



Coca-Cola - "Have a Coke and a Mean Joe Greene" (Commercial, 1980)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xffOCZYX6F8>

Kid - "Mr. Green, Mr. Green?"

Mean Joe - "Yeah.."

Kid - "You need any help? ...I just want you to know, I think, I think, you're the best ever,"

Mean Joe - "Yeah, sure,"

Kid - "Want my Coke? ...Its okay you can have it"

Mean Joe - "No,"

Kid - "No, really you can have it,"

Mean Joe - "Okay" (drinks Coke as happy music plays)

Kid - "See you around"

Mean Joe - "Hey kid, catch" (throws jersey at kid with a smile)

Kid - "Wow, thanks Mean Joe!"

I would agree that this commercial did utilize designed tools such as the wording on the Coke bottle, the uplifting and well timed music, the hulking and limping football player whose day is changed by the simple act of a child, and the product bottle and label design itself. Please take a moment and view this commercial and see the various instructional design messages in this classic.

Welcome back, since we just finished viewing this great classic it's only fitting to watch one of the worst commercials in Superbowl history. Remember we are examining the instructional message design and our audience is adults. The Groupon commercial was aired in 2011 and intended to get folks to order Tibet's well-known fish curry dish (see Figure 2).

## Figure 2

### *Groupon's Culturally Insensitive Commercial*



Groupon Super Bowl Ad "Tibet"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwgYqIZUtZ0>

“Mountainous Tibet one of the most beautiful places in the world, this is Timothy Hutton, the people of Tibet are in trouble, their very culture is in jeopardy... but they still whip up an amazing fish curry, and since 200 of us bought at Groupon.com we are each are getting \$30 dollars worth of Tibetan food for just \$15 at a Himalayan restaurant in Chicago, save money, unlock great deals in your town, Groupon.com”

The company logo was in a simple font and easy to read, and the audience knew which company the ad was promoting. Although there was a famous actor named Timothy Hutton in the commercial, the instructional design message was lost. The fish curry dish that he spoke about did not make audiences rush to the Groupon website to purchase discount tickets for the dish or travel to Tibet to enjoy this great fish curry dish in person.

What was the problem, the message? He starts off talking about how beautiful Tibet was, and then goes further to comment on how the people in Tibet are in trouble, and how their culture is in trouble, but come get savings on your fish curry dish with Groupon. It was an instructional design message that had adults furious; asking what in the world were these ad executives thinking with this obviously disturbing example of cultural insensitivity. I certainly would not want to be the instructional designer behind that Groupon message.

The message attacked and minimized someone's culture, and that was a horrible instructional design message where adults rallied around to have it removed. In essence, the message in the ad was saying, we don't care about the trouble that your country is facing, just whip us up a bowl of fish curry, and we will keep coming for the wrong reasons not the right ones, and by the way we don't care about how bad your country issues are either. But this restaurant in Chicago has great curry chicken.

Below is the exact quote from Groupon after receiving all the negative feedback from this horrible instructional design message: “We hate that we offended people, and we're very sorry that we did ... we thought we were poking fun at ourselves, but clearly the execution was off, and the joke didn't come through" (CNN, 2011). Instructional design messages for adult learners in any medium must be carefully

designed in a way that the learners can process the message without any communication noise. This design clearly had communication noise in its message, and it took over the positive message which was to buy Groupon discount tickets for your local restaurants.

Instructional message practitioners need to consider strategies and review processes to design a message that will not offend or turn off adult learners. Such as, are the colors culturally appropriate? Can the audience envision themselves? Does it bring a sense of belonging? If there are jokes, do they come off as appropriate or offensive?

Why am I taking the time to praise a 43-year-old Superbowl commercial at the time of this writing, and pointing out a poorly designed Superbowl commercial from over 12 years ago? The point is that after all these years, these instructional message designs still provide teaching moments. A text on a bottle can represent a world brand that makes you begin to utilize your cognitive senses, schema, and start salivating for the item. While the Groupon ad's message design still serves as a culturally insensitive and misplaced joke.

Instructional message designs pull from many applied sciences, including cognitive psychology, industrial design, graphic design, instructional design, information technology, and human performance technology. Instructional message designers have to create, evaluate, and adapt the intended outcome from this blending of best practices for adults and how adults process information. Take the learning process seriously because it is serious and important (McLagen, 1978). Adults learn differently and have different motivations that have to be taken into account during message design.

The various concepts, principles, and key points used by instructional designers are growing every day. Concepts such as color, animation, fonts, videos, etc. do matter in the world of instructional designers, and when you get the details correct, then you will get the message correct. Regarding the Groupon commercial, their message was buried with negative noise that had adult learners turning away from the intended message and moving toward a whole new message that the creators of the commercial never expected. The adult learners were now sending messages to the company to cancel the commercial because of the poorly designed instructional message.

When designing for adult learners, instructional designers must be willing to learn from past mistakes and embrace lessons learned from past instructional designers and past targeted audiences. When

designing for adult learners' designers will be motivated to utilize creativity as much as possible. However, instructional message designers must design with balance in their projects and understand learner characteristics. According to McAnany “ designers must know and understand learner characteristics in order to create effective instructional messages and materials” (McAnany 2009).

Adults have a reference point for many of these instructional design messages. They can distinguish between what they want to reference or not based on their experiences. New adult learners can be somewhat nervous in any new educational environment. Can it be because there are other adult learners that are also bringing their various experiences as well into the learning environment? Successful Adults learners are motivated to learn; they have invested their time and funds to learn specific subjects. Some adults do not need the motivation to learn they are independent. As independent learners, they can often have a passion for learning, and the learning environment can be fun for them. Though bad instructional message design can tax that motivation.

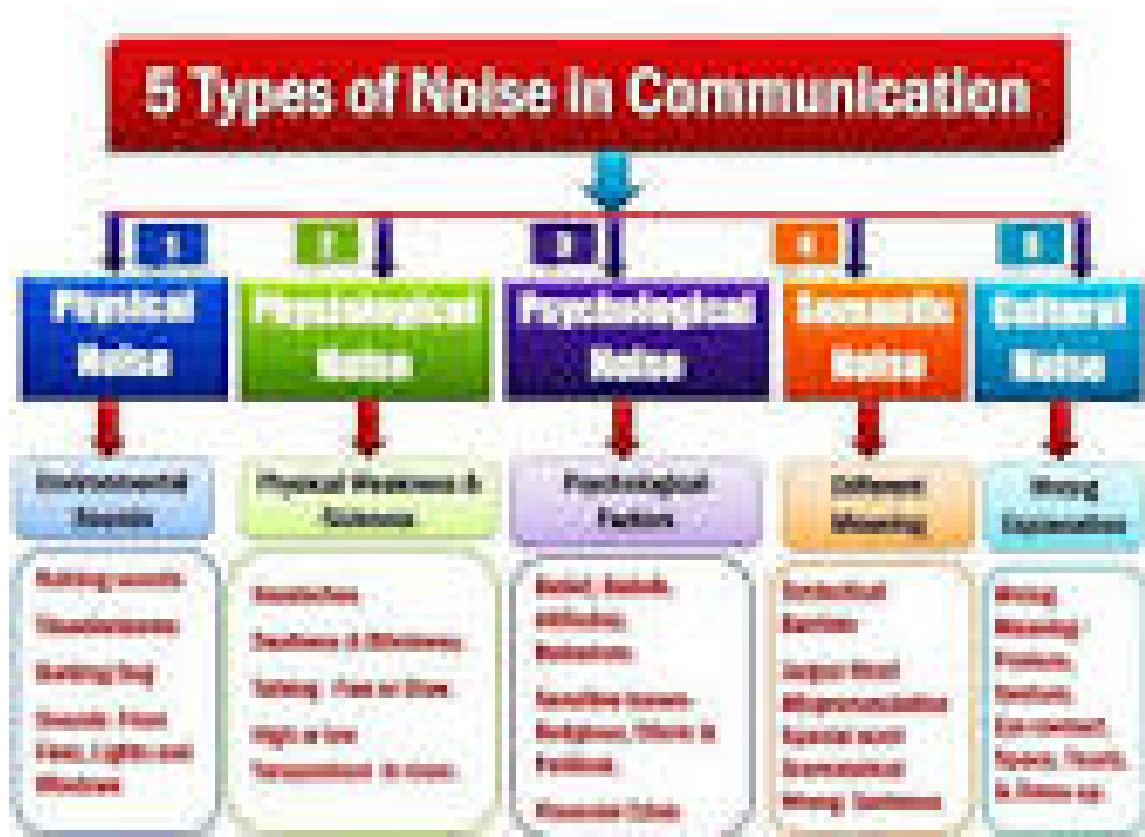
### **Communication Noises to Avoid for Adult Learners**

I mentioned the fact that the Groupon commercial was overcome with communication noise. In the instructional message design, you want to stay away from conflicting messages while designing for adult learners. In the Communication System Model, the following communication noises can hinder the intended message in instructional design for adults. However, let's define communication noise. Communication noise is defined as any barrier to the effective communication process (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The messages in our instructional designs can be impacted by technical, physical, physiological, organizational, cultural, psychological, and semantic noise (Oaks, 2023). Noises are the ineffective communication process between senders and receivers. In other words, did the sender's communication relay the exact message to the receiver with no communication barriers? We can certainly see that Coca-Cola sent the correct message to the receivers and after reviewing the message, adults were ready to go out and purchase a Coke to brighten up their day.

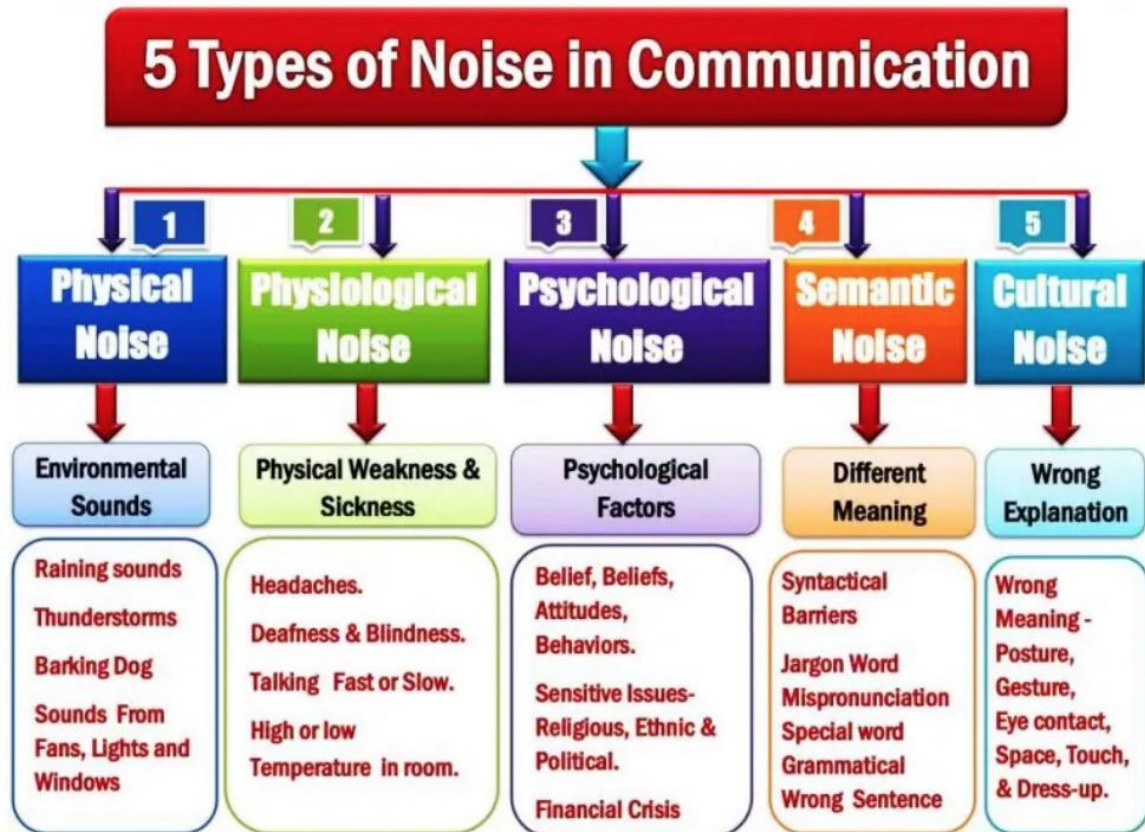
However, in the case of the Groupon commercial, we certainly saw that the sender did not get the correct message to the receivers, and therefore the response back to the sender was unfavorable. Let's take a closer look at the 5 top communication noises.

Refer and compare Example 1 below to Example 2 on the page after, there is certainly some sort of communication noise sent to the reader. You cannot make out the 5 top communication noises on the chart below. As an instructional message designer, I failed in ensuring that you can receive the message I intended to relay to you. Sharon Fisher (1989) states that visual learning is one of the top adult preferences regarding learning environments.

### Example 1:



## Example 2:



<https://news Moor.com/tag/psychological-noise/>

Clearly the intended audience can see a little better five types of noises in communication and a brief example of each noise on this second figure. When designing instructional messages for adults, designers must remove all noises to ensure that learners can process the information without any interference. For example, if Example 1 was presented to adult learners, they would quickly summarize that the instructional designer did not take the effort to review the picture of the chart or was not concerned about the communication noises that would result from the feedback of not seeing the picture of the chart



(note, while Example 2 is easier to read, can you still see the visual noise it also contains in its smallest red text?).

What type of noises were represented in the Groupon commercial? If you guessed psychological (personal biases, assumptions, attitudes) and cultural (contexts, expectations, morals, etiquettes) noises, then you are correct. Groupon did not eliminate sensitive issues surrounding the people of Tibet. Also, they failed to recognize the impact of differences in culture, race, and economic status, which clearly resulted in the wrong meaning for the commercial. It was fine to market Tibet and their delicious fish curry dish but, the disconnect and lack of insensitivity of having a Tibetan waiter serve you while stating that the Tibet people are having major problems sent the wrong instructional message design.

### **Future Research**

Communication designs can be based on a wide variety of technologies or a combination of technologies. Technology in the form of tools and techniques includes the study and the use of typography, color, illustrations, photographs, modeled graphics, augmented reality, animation, video, video games, simulations, and virtual reality (Ramlatchan, 2019). The future of instructional messages for adults is bright. The ongoing world of technology will enable designers to interact with adult learners at an amazingly fast pace with innovative technology, while factoring in the latest on adult learning.

The sky's the limit as it relates to the future of instructional message design and based on the above current tools, designers will be armed to design meaningful and state of the art messages for customers worldwide. Now with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI), instructional designers are having heated discussions on how far is too far as it relates to AI. The ethical and moral implications of artificial intelligence as it relates to adult learners and instructional message design will have very interesting implications for future research and practice. With the fast and furious pace of new technology, instructional designers will have a great

arsenal to design from and the possibilities of great designs for customers will be endless.

## **Conclusion**

Andragogy continues to evolve, and we owe a great debt to those founding fathers from Plato to Pike. New techniques and theories are being created as innovators and educators introduce new techniques and tools for the adult learner. Instructional message designers will utilize these technologies for adult learners, to connect their experience to new ideas.

Adult learners are motivated by learning that they can directly apply in their real-world contexts. Since adults are independent learners, they often have a passion for learning, and poor message design can negatively impact that motivation. Instructional message designers must continue to study the foundation of andragogy and seek out information on how to design for adults. Of course, design projects will always get feedback from the customer but utilizing some of the founding fathers of adult learning's techniques will serve as a foundation when designing for adult learners.

As the saying goes, there is a right and wrong way of doing things. Welcome the opinion of other instructional message designers when designing for adults so you can avoid a worldwide apology like Groupon. Continue to draw inspiration from some of the instructional message designs like Coca-Cola and their "Mean" Joe Green commercial. These two examples illustrate some of the many aspects of communication noise that can distract our adult learners from our instructional message designs. Designers need to consider the potential for adult learners to be distracted by noise in their instructional message designs.

Pay attention to the communication noises in your designs that will have adults frustrated and some completely not engaging at all because the communication noises were too loud, and the intended design message was lost. Our instructional message designs can be impacted by technical, physical, physiological, organizational, cultural, psychological, and semantic noise. Poor message design may only result in more cost and time delays. The goal is to eliminate as much noise as possible as my example of the bad illustration in

Example 1 depicted. The end goal is to design with excellence always at the forefront. Finally, as instructional message designers for adults, never lose your passion for designing for adults. Designers should aspire to be the trailblazers that many can glean from, just like the trailblazers Max Miedinger and Eduard Hoffman who co-created the typeface Helvetica. So many of us are utilizing and will utilize some version of Helvetica in our instructional designs. Continue to design with boldness, passion, and creativity, while incorporating some of the techniques in this chapter.

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