Seductive Details in Training

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What are seductive details?

In a learning environment, seductive details are interesting but unimportant details that are not necessary to achieve the instructional objective (Garner et al., 1989). The information may be tangentially related to the topic but is not relevant to the main teaching goal. Such details are often included for the purpose of making the topic more interesting and engaging. There are many potential types of seductive details; they can be visual, verbal, or aural—static or dynamic images (e.g., illustrations, photos, animations), written or spoken words (e.g., text, narration), or sounds (e.g., music; Sundararajan & Adesope, 2020).

Why are seductive details important?

Seductive details are important because they impair learning, compared to when they are not included (Sundararajan & Adesope, 2020). More specifically, seductive details are most detrimental to learning outcomes when: the details are static rather than dynamic, the material is on paper vs. digital, backtracking in the material is allowed, and learners have no prior knowledge of the subject (Sundararajan & Adesope, 2020). There are no differences in the effect of seductive details as a function of format (e.g., audio, image, text), timing (e.g., beginning, interspersed, end), size, placement relative to core content (near vs. far), frequency, and inclusion of learning objectives (Sundararajan & Adesope, 2020). Thus, these factors cannot be used to avoid or limit the negative effects of seductive details.

In short, adding interesting but extraneous content to instructional materials has a negative effect on learning, and the impact is particularly strong for novices—an audience whose attention is often sought with interesting hooks. Training developers should take this evidence into account when developing curriculum, and trainers should be mindful when sharing anecdotes, examples, or experiences. Child welfare case examples are particularly ripe for interesting details, many of which may be central to the learning objectives, but many of which may not be. What may seem like innocuous asides or engaging anecdotes could interfere with learning. For this reason and many others, training content should always be aligned with the instructional goals of the training.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► Including interesting but unimportant details in training has a detrimental effect on learning.

► Seductive details are most detrimental to learning outcomes when: the details are static rather than dynamic, the material is on paper vs. digital, backtracking in the material is allowed, and learners have no prior knowledge of the subject.

► There are no differences in the effect of seductive details as a function of format (e.g., audio, image, text), timing (e.g., beginning, interspersed, end), size, placement relative to core content (near vs. far), frequency, and inclusion of learning objectives.

► Training developers should take this evidence into account when developing curriculum, and trainers should be mindful when sharing anecdotes, examples, or experiences.

References

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Sundararajan, N., & Adesope, O. (2020). Keep it coherent: A meta-analysis of the seductive details effect. *Educational Psychology Review, 32*, 707–734.

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