

EDUC 892: Learning Object Review

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Learning Object

Title: What Makes a Journal Scholarly?

Author: Eileen Stec, Rutgers University

URL: <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~estec/tutorials/scholarly.htm>

Review

This learning object – discovered on MERLOT - uses Flash to teach learners about the peer review process, both how it works and how to determine if a journal is peer-reviewed (using a specific resource – *Ulrich's International Directory of Periodicals*, or *Ulrich's* for short – which is available both online and in print). While not explicitly stated in the tutorial, the target audience appears to be undergraduate students. The author is a librarian at Rutgers University, who apparently developed this tutorial as an assignment for an instructional technology course (which seems somewhat ironic).

Content Quality: 2

In this tutorial, the author appears to conflate two separate but related concepts: scholarly communication (relating to the author and content) and peer review (relating to a process). The author's foundational premise is that journal articles are not scholarly unless they have been subjected to a specific process of peer review (i.e., one followed by peer-reviewed journals). This is a misleading statement that could unnecessarily confuse undergraduate students, who will encounter scholarly communication that is not designated "peer-reviewed."

The second half of the tutorial describes how to use a specific resource – found in many academic libraries – to determine if a journal is peer-reviewed. The content itself is accurate, but because of the age of the tutorial, the learner is misled to believe that this is the preferred method. In fact, most academic research databases provide this information, negating the need to use a separate resource, except in rare cases.

Learning Goal Alignment: 3

Two learning objectives are declared in this tutorial. They are clearly articulated and appropriate for the intended audience (or, rather, the assumed audience, as described above). While there is no assessment of learning, the activities and content of the tutorial appear to align closely with the stated objectives. The author cleverly and effectively uses the familiar concept of a referee in sports to help learners understand the concept of peer review, and to introduce related vocabulary. At one point, the author asks the learner to respond to three questions. The first asks the learner to "take a guess." The question relates to content already presented, but is not testing the learner's understanding. The second and third questions are related to a visualization exercise, and attempt to link to prior knowledge. However, the third question seems to leave the learner hanging, with no apparent relevance, since the tutorial leaps directly into addressing the second learning objective. The link between the third question and the content of the tutorial eventually becomes clear, but it takes some time to get there (and only in the context of using the online resource; it does not apply when using the print version of the resource).

Feedback and Adaptation: 2

There are three points in the tutorial where learners are invited to respond to questions; the tutorial provides responses to the learner about the correctness of their response, and if incorrect, provides the correct response. However, this has no impact on the subsequent content. In other words, the tutorial does not adapt in any way based on the learner's response; but this does not seem to negatively impact the learner.

Motivation: 3

Because this content addresses concepts that most undergraduate students will need to understand, the content itself will provide motivation for learners. The tutorial provides additional features that may increase motivation: the opportunity to interact with the animation at certain points, such as rolling over images to get to supplemental content; control over pace of the content; and the use of visualization (if the learner chooses the "sound" option at the beginning). At one point, the author asks, "Wouldn't it be nice to know if a journal is referred before you try to locate it?" which acknowledges the learner's potential interest in efficiency (saving time). However, the content offers little challenge to the learner, and the lack of an opportunity to test for understanding (i.e., assessment), along with the repeated demand for the learner's attention to move forward (the "continue" button) with seemingly little benefit may detract from any other motivating features.

Presentation Design: 3

The tutorial offers a clean design, with few visual distractions. The layout of text, images and navigation features is generally consistent throughout, minimizing visual search and enabling the user to learn with minimal distractions. There are a few exceptions, such as when the author presents questions to which the learner is expected to respond, or dialogue boxes offering the user choices, and one animated sequence toward the end of the tutorial, demonstrating the online version of *Ulrich's*. The author offers two versions of the tutorial: "sound" and "silent." In the "sound" version, the audio quality is excellent, except during the part when the narrator leads learners through a brief visualization exercise. At this point, the quality of the audio decreases, and sounds as if the narrator is speaking from inside a tunnel or bathroom. There doesn't appear to be a good reason for this, and it may prove distracting. Regardless of which option the learner chooses (with or without the audio track), the author makes another puzzling choice during this visualization exercise, placing a large purple square on the section of the stage reserved for visual, non-textual content – puzzling since the learner is encouraged to close her eyes at this point. A better choice might have been to leave the stage blank.

Interaction Usability: 3

The consistent appearance of buttons requiring user input makes it easy for the learner to interact with the tutorial. Additionally, a visual cue (an arrow) highlighting the "Continue" button ensures that learners will be able to find this button on subsequent frames. However, the lack of a "back" button has a significant impact on the object's usability, since the learner's only option for reviewing content is to start over from the beginning. The one place where the navigation breaks down is when the author poses questions of the learner; the "Continue" button disappears, and the feedback to the learner integrates the navigation function, which appears in a different location on the stage depending on the learner's response. This forces the learner to devote cognitive resources to figuring out how to move forward in the tutorial. The author does not provide a "help" function, but this is not an important shortcoming since user interaction and navigation is generally clearly indicated.

Accessibility: 2

This learning object is not accessible to visually impaired students who rely on screen readers (tested using Web Anywhere - <http://webanywhere.cs.washington.edu/wa.php>) or to learners using mobile devices (such as a Blackberry smartphone). However, the author has included some nice features that do address accessibility, allowing learners to choose between “sound” (with an audio track accompanied by textual bullet points) or a “silent” version, where the text is presented on the screen in its entirety. If the learner chooses “sound,” she is alerted with a visual text message on the succeeding frame that she should be hearing sound at that point.

Reusability: 1

The reusability of this learning object is severely hampered by two factors: its faulty premise, and the need for access to a specific resource (*Ulrich's*). Absent a learning situation where the misleading statement discussed above can be placed in its proper context, this learning object has little value.

Standards Compliance: NA
