



Learning Through Lived Roles: Personas as Pedagogical Anchors in Online Higher Education

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Objectives

- Explain how personas function as a scalable engagement framework that operates consistently across levels of technological complexity, **from written narratives to AI-driven interactions**.
- Identify the four engagement mechanisms activated by persona-based design – **authentic contextualization, cognitive organization, perspective-taking, and multimodal alignment** – and recognize how these mechanisms remain consistent regardless of modality.
- Evaluate how emerging technologies, including AI chatbots and XR avatars, **extend persona-based engagement while maintaining the same theoretical foundations** as lower-tech approaches.

Auburn Online Team



Course Production
Student and Faculty Success



Media
Video and Audio Production



Instructional Designers
Learning Architecture



Programming
Development and Engineering



Project Management
Coordination and Delivery



XR/Creative
Immersive Experiences

Contributing Designers: Auburn Online ID Team



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The Engagement Challenge

Online higher education continues to expand, yet student engagement, perceived relevance, and authentic transfer of learning remain persistent challenges.

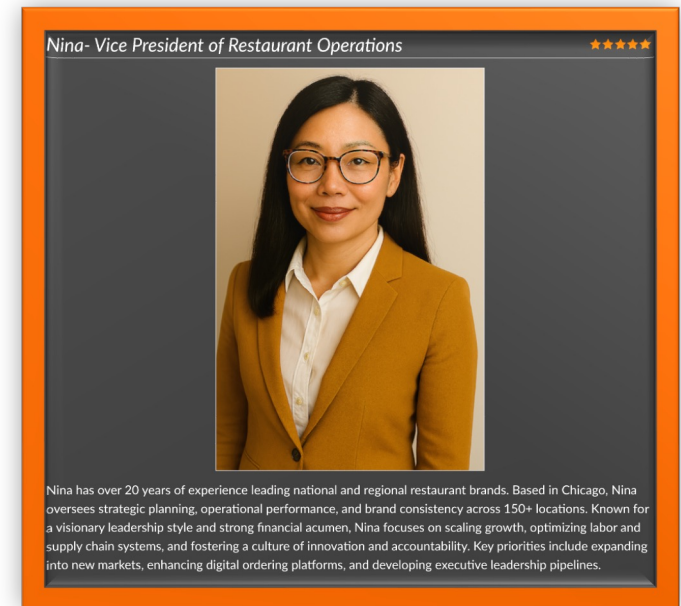
Technology dominates the conversation about digital pedagogy, but engagement is shaped less by the tools themselves than by how instructional design situates learning in meaningful human contexts.

What Are Personas?

Definition

Deliberately constructed representations of people in defined professional, social, or disciplinary roles, used to embed course content within authentic human scenarios.

Personas function as pedagogical anchors that connect abstract disciplinary concepts to real professional and social situations.



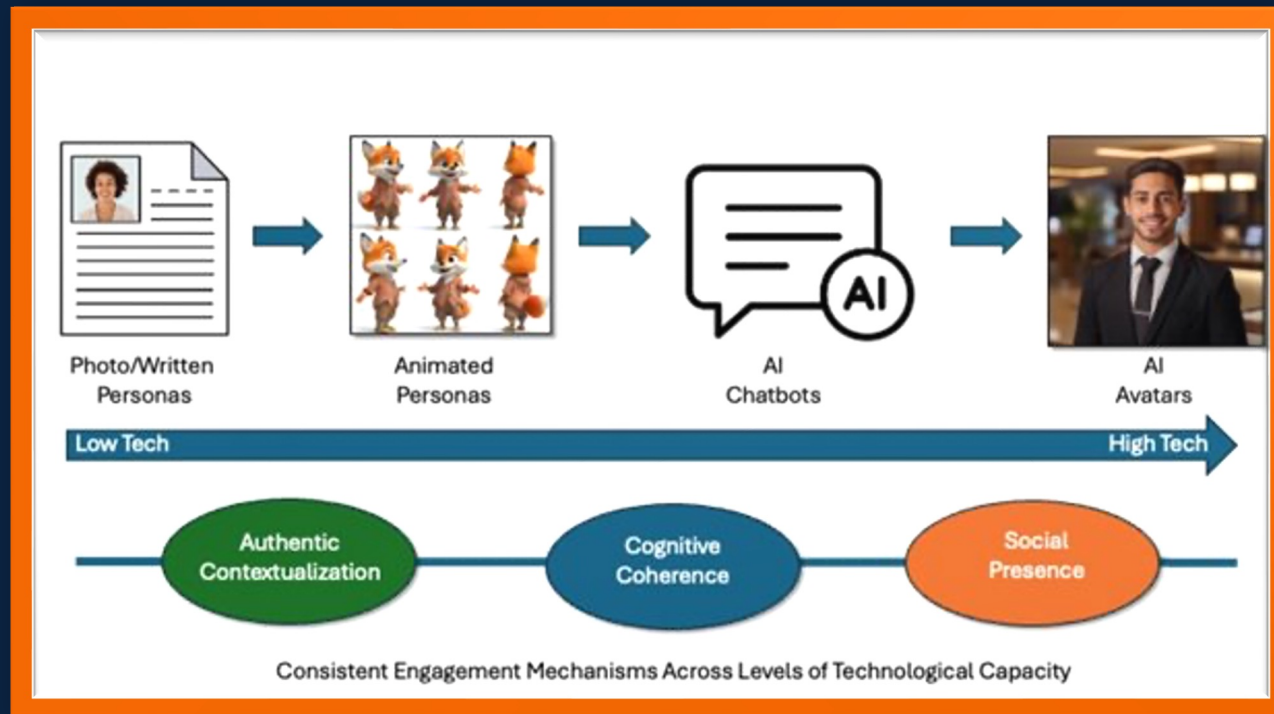


We often implement personas within specific learning experiences; however, today we will discuss their fit within various **pedagogical theories, across multiple programs, and with varying levels of technological complexity.**

How Personas Drive Engagement

- **Authentic Contextualization** – Learning embedded within realistic roles, settings, and professional scenarios
- **Cognitive Organization** – Narrative structure groups concepts within coherent roles, goals, and decision-making processes
- **Perspective-Taking** – Multiple personas enable learners to interpret problems through contrasting professional lenses
- **Multimodal Alignment** – Text, visuals, audio, and interactive elements reinforce the same persona-driven narrative

Levels of Technological Complexity



Theoretical Foundations

- **Situated Learning** – Knowledge is inseparable from the contexts in which it is applied (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
- **Sociocultural Theory** – Learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978)
- **Cognitive Load Theory** – Learning is optimized when design minimizes extraneous processing and supports schema construction (Sweller et al., 2011)
- **Narrative Coherence** – Consistent characters and contexts organize information and support schema development (Bruner, 1991)



Static Personas

Situated Learning

Static Persona: Foundations of Management

The Challenge

Required management course serving primarily non-business majors.

Students enter without a clear sense of how management theory applies to their intended careers.

The Design

Seven (7) personas representing the most enrolled majors: hospitality, public relations, health services, apparel, building science, wildlife, aviation.

Each persona at a distinct management level, grounding VRIO and Porter's Five Forces in field-specific scenarios.

Situated Learning

Static Persona: Foundations of Management

Sage Charles
Hospitality Management

Julianne Davis
Public Relations
Management

Aiden Newman
Health Services
Administration
Management

Jesse Fisher
Apparel Merchandising
Management

Devin Hamilton
Building Science
Management

Will Johnson
Wildlife Enterprise
Management

APPLY THE PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT

Emma Brown works as a Supervisory Manager at SkyRegional Airlines, a regional carrier serving 15 cities across the Midwest. She directs a team of twelve maintenance coordinators, crew schedulers, and flight dispatchers who track aircraft status, manage crew assignments, and coordinate responses to weather events and other disruptions that impact scheduled flights.

Over the past six months, several team members have left while new personnel have joined the team. Emma has noticed a gradual but significant decline in team morale and overall work attitudes. What was once a cohesive, efficient team now seems disengaged and less productive. The airline's CEO has requested that Emma develop a comprehensive plan to address these issues while maintaining operational efficiency and safety standards.



Sociocultural Theory

Static Persona: Social Work

The Challenge

Distinguishing scholarly interpretation from historical record.

New social work students need explicit differentiation between history and faculty expertise.

The Design

Call-out boxes featuring a cartoon representation of the faculty member, clearly labeled "Instructor's Interpretation."

Sociocultural Theory

Static Persona: Social Work

INSTRUCTOR'S INTERPRETATION



INSTRUCTORS INTERPRETATION

Throughout this and other modules, you will see this box appear at important junctures. These boxes indicate that your instructor is offering a professional interpretation and critique of historic events using the critical worldview analysis strategies have discussed. In these text boxes, your instructor will also identify contemporary events and examples that are similar to historic events. It is not expected that you agree with your instructor on every issue raised. It is expected that you use these reflections as (a) opportunities to exercise critical thinking to make your own interpretations and judgments and as (b) mini-examples for conducting your own critical worldview analysis for your main course assignment.



Animated Characters

Sociocultural Theory

Animated Characters: Mass Timber Systems

The Challenge

The Auburn Timber Collaborative course spans five interconnected industries – forestry, engineering, architecture and design, landscape design, and construction management – requiring undergraduate students to understand the full lifecycle of mass timber, from forest stand to finished building.

The Design

Five personas each represent a distinct role in the mass timber value chain. We started with static character profiles, but we also integrated animated personas to provide engaging conversation style information.

Recurring across multiple modules, the personas allow students to encounter shared topics through each professional's unique lens, building an understanding of mass timber as an interconnected process.

Sociocultural Theory

Animated Characters: Mass Timber Systems



Narrative Coherence

Animated Characters: Brewing Sciences

The Challenge

The class is a 120-hour practicum bridging online coursework with commercial brewing environments.

Students need a coherent through-line connecting brewing science theory to authentic work with faculty, industry partners, and professional organizations.

The Design

AU Brew, an animated beer-can persona, narrates the practicum—framing purpose, scope, and cooperative-education expectations.

It functions as a narrative organizer anchoring coherence as learners move from classroom concepts to field practice.

Narrative Coherence

Animated Characters: Brewing Sciences





AI Chatbots

Cognitive Load Theory

AI Chatbot: Workforce Training

The Challenge

Workforce employees drafting program assessment plans need contextualization, cognitive organization, and social presence – not just a static rubric.

Formal facilitator review arrives too late to shape thinking mid-draft.

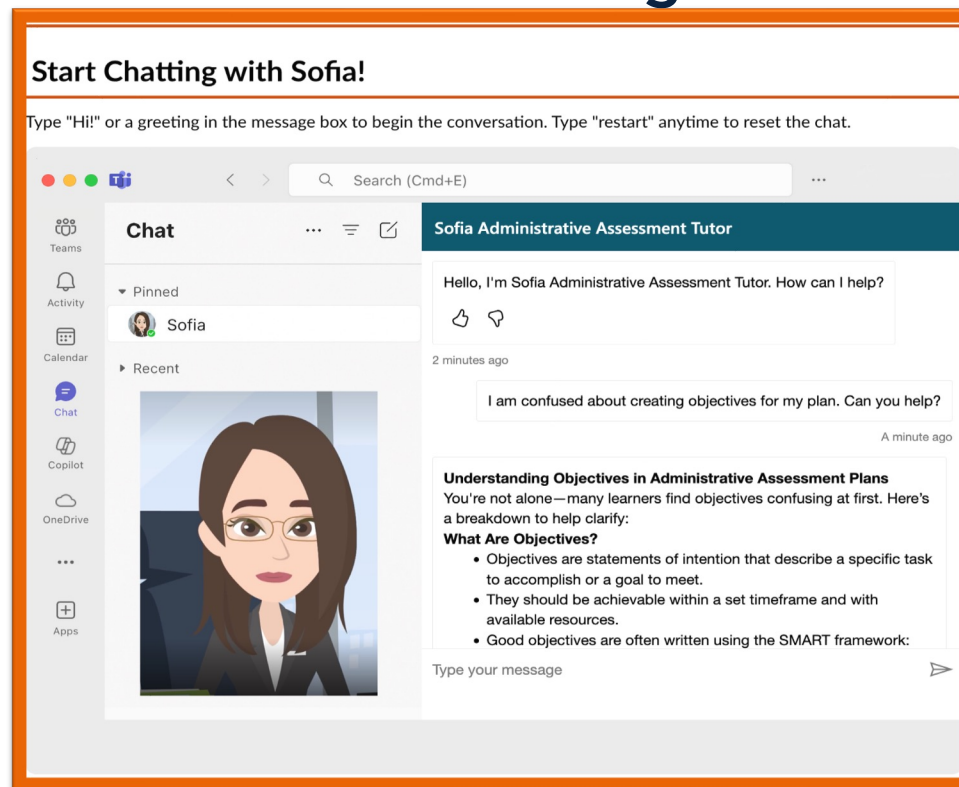
The Design

An AI chatbot persona trained on facilitator rubrics and exemplar submissions engages employees in structured dialogue as they draft.

This chatbot delivers formative feedback on alignment, clarity, and completeness before formal facilitator review.

Cognitive Load Theory

AI Chatbot: Workforce Training





AI Avatars

Situated Learning

AI Interactive Avatars

The Challenge

Students in Occupational, Career, and Placement Services need to evaluate real workplaces for accessibility and appropriateness for individuals with disabilities – but accessing varied job sites in person is logistically difficult and inconsistent across cohorts.

Traditional case studies and role-plays lack the authentic context, social presence, and interactive practice students need to build evaluation skills before entering the field.

The Design

An XR experience modeled after the Auburn University HR department places students in a simulated workplace they're likely to encounter in practice.

A human-appearing avatar acts as the HR manager – welcoming students and responding to their questions about the job position being evaluated.

Situated Learning

AI Interactive Avatars



Pedagogical intentionality, more than any single technology, shapes the impact of personas. What matters most is how consistently roles, contexts, and perspectives reinforce relevance, cognitive coherence, and social presence across modalities.

As AI continues to advance, we will keep evaluating how personas – and the technologies that bring them to life – shape learning.



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