get more from your website with tips and reflections of learning & design

November 27, 2006

A reflection of what I learned in this course and how I will take that knowledge to my professional career

CEP: 817

The Design Cycle Explained!

can the theories of learning and design be put to use in real life?

The importance of design and user testing...
exploring learning by design as a professional

November 27, [Day of the Month]

Introduction and message from the editor

A Guide to Web Design

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3
A note from the editor

After completing, or nearly completing CEP 817 (Learning Technology by Design) I have been assigned to publish a final paper which reflects what I have learned from this course about design and how it will be brought out in my professional work. So for my final paper I have elected to publish this magazine as a means to describe in a creative way, what I have learned about design this past semester.

This Magazine is intended to describe what I have learned about design and apply that to the professional web design that I deal with in my profession.

A brief background of CEP 817

How do you design something? What makes one design better than another? How do you know that others will like something you design? These are all questions that I asked myself several times over while beginning my first class in Learning and Design at Michigan State University. I enrolled into this class with the thought of “I wonder what they can possibly teach me about design that I don’t already know?” and as it turned out, I did not know very much to begin with about design, and this class taught me very valuable information about both learning and design that I will be able to take with me and apply in my professional career. One of the more powerful themes I took away from this class was the cycle of design and how it continues to revolve and feed itself with new ideas, and new results. In this course we studied the six steps of design as laid out by Scott McCloud. The six steps of design include the idea and or purpose, form, idiom, craft, and surface. (McCloud, 162-84). It was interesting to learn about each and everyone of these areas of design and how they relate to one another, but for me what I learned from this course was how these steps are included in the higher level of what I call the Design Cycle which is comprised of learning, design, and implementation and they way that this cycle will be beneficial in my own professional career.
Designing a website can be a daunting challenge both technically and conceptually. So how would one go about starting a design with a website? In this article I will cover several of the key notions to consider before starting your website design project. Although there are several key steps to consider, there are three main phases that this can be broken into, these phases are Learning, Design, and Implementation. Although these steps can be applied to most web design projects they are inherently different and unique for each project and will vary in difficulty as compared to the purpose and form to your mastery of the technologies being used. So now that you have an idea of what we will cover we will start off with the learning phase of the website design.

The Design Cycle

Learning is the first key component to starting a website design project. What exactly is Learning? Well that is truly a question for the ages, but in this context it is referring to developing the idea and purpose of the website as well as learning the technologies required to put that idea into its chosen web form.

The idea and purpose of the web project are the ground roots of the entire design task. It is this stage that you must identify what it is you are actually going to be doing, are you going to develop an informational based website, how about an interactive site with lots of multimedia, or possibly a dynamic site that allows you to access information from a database or other central information system or even an entirely new web presence for a school or business or even a web based store. Once you have the concept of the web site down the next step is to determine what is this sites purpose? What will people use the site for? Who will use the site? You will need to determine the use of your planned site, will it be a supplemental site to pre-existing site or will this site be designed with the intent of being a main site of information? This information should be known in advance so you can accurately define the scope of your project.
Once you have identified the actual purpose and idea of the site you are going to design the next step is to accurately define and choose the form your website will take. In this context the form will be based on the currently available web technologies, will your site be comprised of frames? CSS? Will it be designed in HTML, XHTML, Java, Flash, etc? The hard part comes from trying to match your idea and purpose while staying within your scope of work (you don’t want to take on something you won’t have the time, budget, or goals to complete). Also you will want to consider what type of content will there be, you may decide to include a blog or wiki or some other Web 2.0 technology to add variety and or enhanced user experience.

One of the more complicated areas with choosing the form for your project is that you may decide that the best design for your site may require the use of a technology that you are not familiar with. If this is the case you will also need to budget both time and resources to allow yourself the adequate time to learn how to use new technological tools as say Java Script or Flash or even an HTML editor for those who are new to the world of web design. To aide you in your study for new technologies it is very helpful to pickup training manuals and online tutorials as they can usually get you going and on your way to starting your project.

Although it is very important to have a technological understanding of your web form and the idea and purpose of your project, the learning does not end there. In fact, you will continue to learn and shape the design as you progress through the remaining steps. It is however, very important for you to have a ground platform to build on, the stronger the foundation of your project the stronger the end result may be. You may come across a new feature, or discover that one feature you have is not going to work or no longer fits the overall schema of the design any longer and so you will continue to reshape and remold the design. As you work with new or familiar tools you will become more proficient in them and naturally branch out to try new features, or advanced skills.
phase 2: design

After you have planned out what you want to do, the next step is the design of your site. This is considered the meat and potatoes section of the entire design project. This is the section where the actual site design takes place. For the majority of web developers, this section tends to also be the most time consuming. Within the design section there are two basic elements that are addressed. The first element is that of the genre of the website and the second is the actual structure of the site. In many cases, your site design may tread across multiple genres, but it is important that you identify the main genre that your website is to take so you can stay on target with what your overall purpose of the site will be.

Choosing the genre of the site can be a tricky choice, there are so many different genres to consider; should your site look like an official site or perhaps a more casual blog entry site? These are the decisions that you will have to make. When trying to decide on a genre keep in mind the items from the previous phase, when choosing you should keep in mind the purpose of the content and site as well as your ability to design what you have in your head in reality. If you have never programmed in Flash for example, it would be quite a feat to develop a commercial looking Flash site on your first attempt. When choosing your genre I would recommend that you choose a genre that will allow for you to deliver your content to your selected audience with the intended theme and professionalism.

Your design may end up very disappointing if for example, you were posting airline flight status via a blog or wiki (who would trust that?), so keep that in mind when trying to choose a genre. Also, it may be beneficial to look at your site in comparison to other sites that may have similar content and or purposes, what genre are they using, does it work would you do something different? These questions can help you stay on target and focus in on the genre you wish to take. Of course there are the occasions where the information you have to present warrants the creation and pioneering of an entirely new genre, sites such as YouTube Wikipedia have done this and have received great success as a result.
After the genre has been selected the next step in the design process is to create the form of the website. When creating the form, you need to take special care to thoroughly think through the layout and placement of all the components that you are going to include in your web design. This process is the most visible one that most people think of when “designing” a website. At this point you should be able to use the information you have already selected to help guide the initial structuring of your project. When deciding on a location for your navigation menu, graphics and body text and color scheme you should be running those through a sort of check and balance system with respect to the genre you are working with, and the purpose of your website. At this point you should also be asking yourself questions like “where would I expect this item to be if I were visiting the site?” this will help you add a reason for why you place things where you do. At this point, it would also be very beneficial to checkout several other publishing's, both on-line and print that deal with web design, this way you can identify general rules of thumb, common mistakes and helpful hints from other professional web designers.

Although you will have the freedom to put things wherever you would like many times there are simple items that will make and or break a web design. Color choice, text font, and navigation are three of the biggest deal breakers you can focus on, if these items are not inline with what the audience is expecting, your site may not prove to be very aesthetically pleasing and may turn away your audience viewers. Web design is a great medium in which you can take vast creative freedoms, but that comes with an inherit risk that if you stray too far from the original purpose of your site you may alienate the very audience you are trying to attract.

The final section in the Design phase is to use your craft to implement the tools and skills that you have obtained in web design and to do so in the confines of the overall purpose of the website. That is to say, this is where you flex your technological muscles. When developing the form of your site you have decided on what should go where and how it should look, this next step is the actual creation of the items that will populate your site. Depending on your skill level and experience with web design and publications you might be adding simple text forms, tables and occasional pictures, all the way to advanced Flash animations, interactive Java Script and even shopping carts to commercial sites. It is in this step that many times the designers will take some liberty to experiment with a new technology or a new way of presenting something traditional.

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Menus are a great example of this, instead of a plane text menu why not use your Java skills and create a floating menu that includes dropdowns and sub-menus. Depending on the scope and time frame of your web design project you may have a copious amount of time to dabble in the expressionist forms of new technologies and slick new features that you would like to add, however, more practically you will find yourself constrained by both time and financial budgets that will truncate your free ranging ability to “play” with new features.

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**The Big Kahuna: E-Portfolios**

**A Showcase for the World**

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**Take a Closer Look at E-Portfolios:**

E-Portfolios are going to change the way students and professionals share their personal, educational and professional accomplishments with the rest of the world.

E-Portfolios will allow for individuals to share their selected best work, or samples of their work to prospective college admissions, employers and/or clients. With the use of this new technology people will be able to demonstrate a much more dynamic synopsis of who they are and what they are capable of to their intended audience.

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**About This Site:**

The purpose of this website is to serve as an informational portal to the discussions and awareness of E-Portfolios and their impact on the educational system.

This site is not meant to promote or discourage the use of this new technological application, but rather to provide information on the advantages and or disadvantages of using E-Portfolios.

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**References:**


In the last phase of web design we come to the Implementation phase, in this phase you should concentrate on the surface appeal of your design, testing and revisions of your site. What does it mean to construct the surface of your design? Well in this respect the term surface is referring to the way that your site will look to the viewing audience. How is this different from the form or craft section? In the form section you designed where things should go and how they should look, then you actually built and coded the items in your site in the craft step, and now in the surface step it is time to polish what you have designed. In other words you are making sure all your code looks and behaves the way it should. This is the final stage in preparation for launch. This step of the phase is where you should concentrate on the small things such as do the graphics load? Do they load at an appropriate speed for your audience? Does your site conform to the W3C standards? What about accessibility and use? Will screen readers for visually impaired people be able to adequately communicate your site to the viewers with special needs? Once you have addressed these issues and are satisfied then you can move onto the final phase of the Implementation, user testing and revision.

The final step of designing a web site is to test the site with users that will represent an accurate sample of the intended audience. This step is very important because this is the time when you will actually get feedback from your users before the website is officially published. User testing although very important can be very expensive, in lieu of spending a large sum of money that may either not be economical or even feasible you can run a user checklist test, which is relatively cheap if not free, and does not require a large amount of participants. (AllThingsWeb). Within the user checklist you can create and define specific things to have the user try and accomplish while on your site, this will help highlight areas that need to be revised based upon the users experience. There are several ways to obtain this user testing, Keith Instone recommends that you know the purpose of the site (which you should already have clearly defined), then find users who will represent the people that will actually find use from your site. Once you have found your testers Instone recommends that you watch the user navigate your site, taking notes while they do will help you better understand their experience on your site. After the users have tested the site you can then take the data you gathered and head back to the drawing board for minor and or major revisions that may need to be made to your site. (Instone, User Test Your Website). Regardless of how you user test your site, it’s just important that you obtain feedback on how the users felt about your site from this information you can be sure to accurately tune your web site design to fit the needs and expectations of your audience. Although user testing is the last step in this web design guide it can be performed at any stage along the design process, and may prove to be more beneficial if you do so in stages, this may help eliminate the need to make drastic time-consuming changes at the end of the project.
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