

Chapter XII

Designer Communities: Developing a Knowledge Base of Strategies, Tools, and Experience

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Abstract

This chapter highlights the importance of developing and sustaining a knowledge base among designers to enable the collective sharing of strategies and tools for communication within project teams. This chapter identifies and discusses the need to capture collective wisdom of designers who work in close proximity within the same university. It examines a case study of a project that illustrates changes in the design context in relation to types of projects (CD-ROM, Web-based, learning management systems) and discusses these trends through the eyes of two designers. It also discusses the trend away from large standalone projects to networked “learning objects.” It examines these trends in relation to a number of strategies that support the learning design community and its work.

Introduction

Designers are often required to immerse themselves within temporary project communities to develop teaching and learning interventions using CD-ROM and Web-based approaches. As part of this community they need to be effective communicators of project needs, processes, products and outcomes with all members of the team. As each project is unique, designers build a rich repertoire of strategies to handle the challenges they face which are often relevant to subsequent projects. This chapter looks through the eyes of two designers who have become part of a localised designer community within the University of Wollongong (UoW), Australia. The designers illustrate their perspectives through a case study that typifies changes in the nature of their design work. In particular, the types of projects have changed over time as well as the project size, scope and outcomes. These factors have implications for the designer's role, which are further elaborated within the chapter. In addition, the designer's role within the community, re-usability of design patterns and output, and the nature of production teams are also discussed. This chapter suggests that there is a trend away from large projects to a broader range of smaller developments in-line with current thinking about "learning objects."

The key objective of the chapter is to highlight the importance of developing and sustaining a knowledge base among designers to enable the collective sharing of strategies and tools for communication within project teams. This chapter identifies and discusses the need to capture collective wisdom of designers who work in close proximity within the same university. While this seems obvious, it requires substantial energy and discipline to facilitate this exchange in a busy work environment where designers have their own allocation of projects, and have difficulty allocating time for professional development activities. Jonassen & Reeves (1996) acknowledge that those who design and develop multimedia products learn a great deal—possibly more than those who access them as a learning resource. Therefore if the design/production team are to share transferable elements of their collective experience, these have to be recorded and circulated among relevant design communities. This chapter will also discuss project specific and team community factors associated with the case study to highlight the challenges associated with the designer's role and the strategies adopted to address those challenges. It will also identify some of the structures that need to be instigated to allow designers to store and share this knowledge. The goal is a sustainable developer community that is continually learning.

The following case typifies a period of transition from a culture of large multimedia project development to an environment where many smaller and typically Web-based projects were developed. This transition required a more substantial project management infrastructure and extra management staff who could potentially collect valuable data on production processes to facilitate strategy and tool sharing among design teams.

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