



BUILDING A WEB-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IS PLANNING A USER EXPERIENCE

Planning a web-learning environment is central to web-based pedagogy. You may approach planning by thinking: “how do I teach this particular whole?” Planning is often guided by various practices used in traditional classroom pedagogy -- the way face-to-face teaching is usually done. Models for teaching derive mainly from the classroom world. An example of this is when a teacher mostly gives lectures. If this is the case, then the teacher may think that what he or she mainly wants to do is to share content on the web.

When you plan to teach your subject using the web, it is useful to think about it from a student’s point of view before you start thinking about the content. This means that you take the students’ point of view into consideration right from the start. The question is: what kind of experience do you want to bring to the web-course? What do you want the experience to be? What does this mean for your planning?

One problem students often face is that the course a teacher has built into the web isn’t very clear. The students may think that the instructions are difficult to understand, or they can’t understand what the assignments are. Thus, they don’t know what they are expected to do or to achieve.

You can evaluate a web-based course by using the so-called ‘cognitive walk-through method’. This means that someone, either you or a colleague, will ‘walk through’ the web-based course to observe and comment on each part of it. Another person observing this walkthrough can take notes on all places where the observer hesitates or doesn’t understand something. The cognitive walk-through should not be a discussion-based process, because the teacher might start explaining things to the observer. Explanations are not at the core of this exercise; the idea rather is to find all the points that need further development so that changes can be made.

You might ask what the difference is between planning that starts with teaching and the planning of a user experience? The difference can be either enormous, or quite subtle. But even a subtle difference may have a big impact. A user experience has to do with the use of a product or a service – in this case a web-based course. It refers to the experience the student -- that is, the user -- has when studying on the web. From the student’s point of view a web-based course is a service and the student is the user of that particular service.



The user experience of a web-based course refers to the various emotions and attitudes that are related to the use of a particular web-based course and to studying by using this course. The experience includes all the perceptions, meanings and values the student feels when using the interface. Thus, the student's experience includes many emotional reactions that are a significant part of learning. For these reasons it is important to invest in creating a good user experience.

When you plan a web-based learning environment, you should always start by thinking about the users' experience. The user experience is a relevant factor in the interaction between a human being and a machine. Forgetting this will often lead to problems. The problems may of course also be of a technical nature. The problems might also arise from the execution or unclear instructions. Sometimes you need to be super clear to make sure that the students can easily understand everything when they are working with a web-based course.

Let's think about how you should communicate in a web-based learning environment, and what the communication should be about. Let's also think about why thinking about communication is itself important.

Think for a minute about how you usually plan a web-based learning environment for your students. Where do you start? What guides your planning?

A web-based learning environment can be a platform, a social media page or a digital tool; it can also be digital learning material or an instruction. A teacher in a web-based learning environment builds a learning whole in the way he or she sees best.

Planning a web-based course often starts with the goals of the course and matters relating to the organization of the course. These might include the length of the course, the timetable, the teachers and so on. Then you proceed to planning the structure of the whole and all the parts included.

Everything you add to a web-based learning environment is, in a way, communication. This includes all text, images, drawings, charts, infographs, statistics, symbols, videos, podcasts, tables, questionnaires, calendars, timetables, instructions and assignments. Each of these communicates something.

Communication isn't always planned. Not many of us are trained in web communication. Do we think about whom exactly we communicate to in the web-based learning environment? Who is the user? Do we think mostly about what we want to include in the platform, or do we perceive the elements as communication? Do we think about getting a message across? Or do we mainly think about the content and the ways we can share the content? The communication in a web-based learning



environment is very often text based and the implementation of the course may also be mainly text based.

In a web-based environment, people observe things by glancing. Users skim through the text instead of reading it word by word or sentence by sentence. Users often survey the content by moving between different parts in no particular order; they reach conclusions based on what they perceive. Sometimes the users don't reach conclusions at all, but just move on quickly.

The user is looking for something meaningful or important, and can pass by some elements quite quickly, thus missing parts. When you want to understand something, you read a text word by word. Text-based messages in electronic form are often problematic in web-based teaching.

When you plan communication in a web-based learning environment you need to consider what is the most important 'must-know' information and weed out 'should-know' and 'nice-to-know' types of material. One should stick to essential information.

How do you take into consideration the fact that people tend to browse instead of reading in a web-based environment? You might think about using fewer words, condensing the message, writing shorter sentences and avoiding subordinate clauses. You can also use symbols, or visualize the information, processes and timetables. Use images that support the content instead of using them simply to decorate the page. You can also use headings in a way that guides the learning experience. Or you can make more use of lists, boldface and italics to highlight important points.

It's also useful to think about the size of the screen and the lay-out of the content on the screen. Sentences should not run across the whole page. Long sentences are hard to read, and thus the content will be hard to understand. Paragraphs should be kept quite short. The general rule is that one paragraph should be formed of a maximum of six rows.

You should also consider the different devices that students will use. Will this course be accessed via a computer or a handheld device? Will it work just as well for the user on either? Will the implementation scale down and work on a mobile phone screen? You might use screen size as a starting point for your planning, if you think that your students will mainly use mobile phones.

When you plan the studying, you might also think about how you can create an interest and catch the students' attention. We generate interest through language; language has an impact. What kind of headings do you use? Are they catching? A question or a claim often creates interest and activates thought. What is your particular style of writing? Are you writing for the right target group? Or are you



writing to/for yourself? Think about what changes you might make when you are addressing the particular target group of your web-based learning environment.

In a web-based environment you should use short, clear sentences. You should start the instructions with a verb, because verbs express acts, occurrences, and modes of being. Verbs stimulate action. The student is looking for information about what he or she should do next; verbs communicate the actions the student is looking for. Good verbs to use include, for example, read, look, answer, do, start, open and so on.

We use communication and messages to inspire, to move, to inform, to describe, to brief, to orient, to explain, to stop, to teach and many other things. What is the point of the messages? What elements should the teacher use when communicating something essential to the students, when he or she is guiding the participants? These guiding elements form a part of the web-course and you use them to describe the whole course and its parts. When you start planning the course, you should sit down to think about what you want to communicate and what this message means to you and to the users.

When you plan a web-based learning environment, you should always make it user-friendly, or in this case 'student-friendly'. This means that you must always plan a communication that matches the needs of the target group. To do this, you need to think about both the content of the web-page and the form this content should take so that the target group can work on the basis of the information.

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