

Lecture Notes: Introducing Information Architecture

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How Did We Get Here? (a brief history of mass communication)

- The Oral Tradition
- The Written Tradition: prehistory
- The Written Tradition: for the priesthood only
- The Written Tradition: for the rich and famous only
- Tabloids and Prairie Home Companions
- The Industrial Revolution
- Mass Production
- De-mystifying Technology: WWII through the '60's
- Transistorization
- Fear And Loathing Of Technology
- The Lowest Common Denominator
- The doctrine of "information on demand," and the divergence of information into two media: static and fluid
 - 24 hour cable
 - "New schools"
 - PCs
 - Email
 - The Web

Bottom Line:

The soul of a society is preserved in amber, in its stories, artifacts, and processes.

Without documentation, the only way to replicate anything is via archaeology.

But the glut of documentation available to today's reader, writer, and web surfer, has redefined the task of learning forever.

When that information reaches critical mass, it can only be contained, maintained, organized, and made accessible by an information architect.

What Is Information Architecture?

Richard Saul Wurman defines Information Architecture as "the structure or map of information which allows other to find their personal paths to knowledge."

If you take what he says literally, it makes perfect sense.

Imagine a building without a design; a collection of rooms, floors, and corridors assembled with no master blueprint and little or no ongoing planning.

- Would you be able to find your way around such a building?
- Would you even know what's there?
- How long would it take before you shrugged and gave up?

Architected Information Is ...

- Delivered on both static and fluid media
- Low maintenance, high re-use (write once, use many single-sourcing strategies)
- Data-driven (modular)
- Based on cognitive models (schema theory)
- User-driven (navigation and design)
- Organized according to LATCH, Context Navigation, Learn-Browse-Discover schemes

Architected Information Contains ...

- Visual metaphors
- Linguistic models (controlled vocabulary)

What Is an Information Architect?

- 1) the individual who organizes the patterns inherent in data, making the complex clear.
- 2) a person who creates the structure or map of information which allows others to find their personal paths to knowledge.
- 3) the emerging 21st century professional occupation addressing the needs of the age focused upon clarity, human understanding and the science of the organization of information.

—Richard Saul Wurman

Who are Information Architects?

- Librarians and Information Scientists (Cybrarians)
- Graphic Designers
- Journalists
- Usability Engineers (UI, interaction designers)
- Marketing Specialists
- Computer Scientists
- Technical Communicators

The Technical Communicator as Information Architect

Most Technical communicators already

- research,
- codify,
- crystallize,
- clarify, and
- disseminate

information that is essential to the manufacture, operation, or maintenance of a particular device or service.

They can do this as:

- Traditional Technical Writers
- High-level Technical Writers
- Course/Training Material Developers
- Knowledge Engineers

- Data Miners/Analysts
- Technical Journalists

The technical communicator...

- designs information
 - What? Where? Why? How? For whom?
- develops information
 - Content management, alphabet soup
- delivers information
 - Information delivery systems, medium dependencies, and platform dependencies
- maintains information

Knowledge Engineers

- Develop and maintain content for database- and/or web-driven knowledge systems
- Audience: generally less technical
- Writing style: modular
- Requires good general background in the subject area

Data Miners/Analysts

- Sift through legacy material, analyzing data for trends and linking material to help users to discover new paths to knowledge
- Audience: knowledge system users
- Writing style: modular
- Requires good general background in the subject area, excellent indexing ability

IA Platforms and Media

- Data warehouses/CBR systems
- Knowledge Systems
- Book design (doc-in-a-box)
- Web sites
- Interactive multimedia
- Help systems

The Human Factor

- Market analysis
- Audience analysis
- User-centered design (requirements)
- Prototyping
- User interface design
- User testing (as opposed to system testing)
- Ongoing evaluation

Balancing the Needs of Many...

- Marketing and Sales goals (revenue and buzz)
- Customer Support goals (low cost and high revenue)
- Engineering goals (high product acceptance)
- Technical Communication goals (on time delivery of user assistance)
- Information Systems goals (low risk, easy to set up and maintain)

...With the Needs of Many More

- Production/Operations goals (simple process oriented)
- Personal goals (looking smart and productive)
- Your boss's goals (getting a promotion)
- The organization's goals (growth in all dimensions)
- Your staff's goals (learn marketable skills)
... and, most important ...
- The user's goals

Common IA Issues

- Media independence vs. media optimization
- Is the Web the only information channel?
- Least common denominator vs. the “Wow Factor” (Shockwave, Java, RealAudio)
- Browser incompatibilities

Technical Communication Sites

- Sun Product Documentation
 - docs.sun.com
- Sybase Support
 - support.sybase.com
- Apple Support
 - www.apple.com/support
- Microsoft Support
 - www.microsoft.com/support
- Informix Answers OnLine
 - www.informix.com/answers

toptenlinks.com's Top 10 Web Design Firms

- Studio Archetype
 - www.studioarchetype.com
- Agency.com
 - www.agency.com
- Novo/Ironlight Interactive
 - www.novoironlight.com
- Ikonic
 - www.ikonic.com
- Razorfish
 - www.razorfish.com
- T3 Media
 - www.t3media.com
- Blue Marble ACG
 - www.bluemarble.com
- K2 Design
 - www.k2design.com
- fine.com
 - www.fine.com
- Rare Medium
 - www.raremedium.com

IA Innovation

- Smithsonian Without Walls
 - www.si.edu/organiza/museums/ripley/eap/rt/loader.html
- Time-Warner Pathfinder
 - check out the Fly-Thru Tour on www.pathfinder.com/fortune/fortune500
- Plumb Design
 - check out www.plumbdesign.com/thesaurus
- Perspecta
 - www.perspecta.com

Web Communities

- The Well (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link)
 - www.well.com
- Ebay
 - www.ebay.com
- America Online
 - www.aol.com
- Netscape Netcenter
 - www.netcenter.com
- Silicon Investor
 - www.techstocks.com
- Amazon.com
 - www.amazon.com
- Edmunds Automotive
 - www.edmunds.com
- JavaSoft
 - www.javasoft.com/nav/developer/
- iVillage
 - www.ivillage.com

Home-grown Information Architecture

- Freda's personal site
- Rich's personal site
- Richard Anderson's personal site
- More mundane uses of IA
- This class' site: <http://www.beginnersmind.net/pia2000>