Let Your User Be Your Guide
User-Centered Taxonomy Development in Complex Domains

Problem
You can’t always design for topics you know really well. What should you do if your next project is in a complicated but unfamiliar field, such as the law or medicine?

Imagine this: You’re a great IA, and you’ve been asked to build an intranet for a global health research organization. Data management, search, and research collaboration are all part of the assignment. Unfortunately you don’t know your vital registry from your common indicators! You better figure out what you’re doing right quick. How can you gain a basic understanding of the topic while simultaneously producing actionable insights about taxonomy, navigation, and content?

Solution

Step 1: Mental Modeling (Young)
- Build “towers”, i.e. mental spaces, from interviews and surveys
- Outcome: Formulate questions for guided topic mapping

Step 2: Guided Topic Maps (Tonkin)
- Participants draw topic map
- Researcher leads exercise by using towers from previous step as question prompts
- Outcome: Important entities and relationships made explicit

Step 3: Prototype Taxonomy (Holsapple)
- Researcher proposes specific metadata elements to support each mental space, based on attributes revealed in concept mapping
- Outcome: Draft taxonomy reviewed by experts

Step 4: Evaluation (Zhang)
- All metadata elements evaluated according to usefulness with respect to tower they support
- Combination of surveying and consensus building
- Outcome: Iteration and prioritization

Step 5: Sitemap + Wireframe Iteration
- Build according to what you’ve learned
- Define priority tasks from Step 1, Mental Models
- Top-level pages should be clear from the concept map too
- Iterate and circulate until consensus

Reasoning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task-based</th>
<th>Conceptual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Young</td>
<td>Step 2: Tonkin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview-driven mental modeling</td>
<td>Guided topic maps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generative</th>
<th>Evaluative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Zhang</td>
<td>Step 3: Holsapple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation through task-based surveying</td>
<td>Collaborative + iterative review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This process is intended to capture the two axes that are important in user-centered design: task-based (what the user is trying to do) versus conceptual (abstract notions about the makeup of reality); and generative (brainstorming new designs) versus evaluative (testing existing designs).

The multi-step process above covers all the combinations shown at left.

Send Feedback or Get in Touch

Adam Taplin
taplina@uw.edu
@aktaplin

Dr. Jinha Lee
jinhalee@uw.edu
@ElegantLogic

Works Cited


