Educational Website Usability: Generic or Discipline-Specific?

Researchers at the Open University are conducting a survey of academic content specialists, lecturers and website developers/designers involved in developing or providing content for educational websites. One of the questions they are seeking to answer is whether there are generic guidelines for the good design of educational websites or whether they depend on the discipline.

If you have experience of developing an educational website, please fill in the 15 minute questionnaire at http://elsa.open.ac.uk/usability.survey.

The survey is being conducted by Agnes Kukulska-Hulme (Senior Lecturer in Educational Technology) and Lesley Shield (Senior Lecturer in Language Learning and Technology) at the Open University.

Background to the Survey

For several years, researchers at the Open University have been investigating aspects of pedagogical usability, that is, usability as this affects educational website design and development, particularly in the context of supported open and distance learning [3,5]. The research has involved work ranging from questionnaire analysis and interviews with both educational website developers and content providers and end-users to developing a theoretical model for educational usability [3] and an agenda for future investigations [4].

Research Activities

A survey of the literature in the areas of generic and educational usability led to the development of the notion of usability comprising several different layers, technical, general, academic and context-specific (see [3] for more details). One practical outcome of this review was a list of ten “Challenges” for those involved in the development of educational websites (see [2]). At the same time, an analysis was carried out of responses to a questionnaire administered every year to obtain student feedback about different aspects of Open University courses. Languages students returned the lowest satisfaction ratings for electronic resources accessed via their course websites, leading the researchers to question whether there was some aspect of the websites provided for language learners that influenced this outcome. The researchers were then invited by an academic team involved in developing an Open University Languages website to evaluate their web-materials. This evaluation revealed several generic usability issues, ranging from navigation (e.g. insufficient differentiation between graphical links and graphics used as non-clickable backgrounds) to organisation of information (e.g. random insertion of new information making it difficult for the user to find). Following this, Languages students at the Open University were interviewed about their experience of their course websites. Analysis of those discussions suggested that there may also be deeper issues involved in the design and development of educational websites than those that can be addressed by generic usability guidelines of the sort commonly adopted by website designers and developers; an example of such issues includes user expectations of their course website, and this may be based upon a number of variables, including experience of other (educational) websites or of the pedagogy of the discipline itself.
Taken together these findings raised the question of whether there are aspects of pedagogical usability that are discipline-specific. As Jones, Zenios & Griffiths (2004: 1) point out this is not a well-understood area: 

"Research investigating disciplinary differences has not been fully developed to explore whether such disciplinary and subject differences affect the ways in which digital resources are conceptualized and used."

Using Languages as an example, the researchers next carried out a review of how usability is addressed in this discipline. It emerged that for language learning websites usability appears to be a recognised area that has been somewhat explored primarily from the technical point of view but that there are also areas that may well be discipline-specific. These include: pedagogical usability, intercultural usability and website evaluation (see [4] for more details).

As a result of these findings, the web-based survey mentioned above was designed in an attempt to seek answers to the question, “Are there generic guidelines for the good design of educational websites, or are these discipline-specific?”

If you would like to read about the outcomes of the survey so far, you can do so at: http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/document.cfm?docid=6724. However, if you intend to complete the survey (located at http://elsa.open.ac.uk/usability.survey) we would be grateful if you would do so before reading the summary report.

References


