



Heuristic Evaluation Report

Exploring Online Research Methods
A virtual Training Environment

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1.Executive Summary

This section provides an overview of the comments made by the team of evaluators; they have been presented under a series of general headings. A short description of issues raised and suggestions for possible changes are presented. This is an overview and each of the evaluation reports should also be looked at in detail.

Quotes from the evaluators are used to illustrate points and the colour coding next to the item highlights which evaluators drew attention to the issue.

1.1 Page Design

There was a positive response to the “look and feel” of the site.

“The website is generally well designed and attractive, with appropriate navigation and accessibility features” (Evaluator One)

“I liked very much the colours, the way you arranged the pictures with the text underneath, the organisation of the site map”. (Evaluator Two)

“This is visually a pleasing Web site to visit” (Evaluator Three)

“The general look and feel of the site and use of colour was good” (Evaluator Four)

1.2 Navigation

All evaluators have highlighted navigation as a key issue; the evaluation reports should be reviewed in detail to find all instances. The major occurrences of navigational inconsistency are highlighted here.

- There are several means of navigating through the site; top menu bar, side menu bar, hot links in the text, bottom menu bar. The side menu bar is only activated when you click on the option of the home page. Several of the evaluators drew attention to this and felt that it should be permanently available and that the normal position for a menu bar is the left hand side of the screen not the right.
- Two evaluators (Three and Four) drew attention to the links within the text: *“Hyperlinks: Generally, there are simply TOO MANY of these, which is (a) distracting and (b) disorienting if one follows them. For example, the “Context” page doesn’t need all those links to the ESRC RM pages/documents”* (Evaluator Three)
- *“Consistency between the top and the right menu. You don’t use the order of the links (e.g. intro, modules, resources, contact us v.s. intro, resources, modules, help, contact us, site map).On the top part of the site there are two menus: are they really needed?”* (Evaluator Two)
- In the “Module” section “Go>>” buttons appear, this is not consistent with the rest of the site and it was generally felt unnecessary.

Navigation is the major issue from the evaluation; a consistent approach to navigation throughout is essential.

1.3 Content Design

All evaluators highlight the organisation of the content; the general feeling is that there is an abundance of information about the “Project”, which comes first and dominates the site. There is much less information about the actual “Training Package” and learning material. This is because the project development is at a very early stage and the modules are still being developed. The weighting of information on the site should change as more material is added and the emphasis should move away from the “Project” (as this really isn’t of relevance to the learner) and concentrate on the “Training” material. The comments of the evaluators should be reviewed and kept in mind for the longer-term development of the site. Some specific issues related to content are outlined below.

1.3.1 Quotes:

Three evaluators drew attention to the quotes on the home page, Evaluator One suggested the “video” buttons were unnecessary and the quotes should scroll, Evaluator Four suggested one method of quotes appearing (fade in and out) and Evaluator Three commented “*Either make them cycle automatically without the SFX, or present them as a static list*”. One method of the quotes appearing should be selected; the use of scroll or fade is acceptable.

1.3.2 Text

“TEXT: has not been designed for reading online. Many sentences are long and convoluted”
(Evaluator Three)

1.3.3 Photo’s

Evaluators Three and Four draw attention to the use of photos. They suggest that fewer photos are used and better quality images are selected.

1.4 Problem links

- Search facility not functioning.
- Questionnaire module: link to advantages/disadvantages doesn’t work
- Home > modules > online questionnaire > introduction. Clicking “next” gives missing page error
- Site Map - Incorrect link – The Process of Carrying out the Project

NB: All evaluators were using Internet Explorer, running on high specification PC’s. The website should be looked at through different browsers to ensure that the functionality of the site is maintained.

2. Heuristic Evaluation Background

Heuristic evaluation is a method developed by Nielsen and Molich (1990) for finding usability problems in the design of a computer interface. A group of evaluators (three to five recommended) review an interface referring to a set of specified heuristics. The evaluators are experienced in interface design or human computer interaction.

The evaluators are presented with a scenario of use, each evaluator inspects the interface and produce a written log of their findings. They allocate each problem a severity rating. The severity rating, the scale outlined by Nielsen (1994) is below,

- 0** I don't agree that this is a usability problem at all
- 1** cosmetic problem only (need not be fixed unless extra time is available)
- 2** minor usability problems (fixing this should be given low priority)
- 3** Major usability problem (important to fix, should be given high priority)
- 4** Usability catastrophe (imperative to fix this before product can be released)

2.1 Heuristic Evaluation Process

Four evaluators conducted a heuristic evaluation, they were asked to review the website and to highlight any usability problems, considering the set of heuristics (Beale and Sharples, 2002).

As the web site is designed for distance learning and the evaluators were geographically dispersed they were asked to review the site from their own computers and feed the reports back to the evaluation consultant.

3.1 Report from Evaluator One ■

“The website is generally well designed and attractive, with appropriate navigation and accessibility features. I've only tested it on Explorer, and haven't tested it for accessibility (it needs to be checked on a text-only browser)”.

Description of the problem	Where did the problem occur	Severity rating
Not clear where to go from the Welcome page – too many options	Welcome	2
“Click here for main menu” – main menu should be permanently available, and normal position is on LHS not RHS – visibility of status/consistency	Welcome	2
Quotes – the “video” buttons are unnecessary and confusing, The quotes should just cycle.	Welcome	2
Go >> button is unnecessary and confusing. Should be able to navigate by clicking contents list	Home > modules > online questionnaire	2
Clicking “next” gives missing page error	Home > modules > online questionnaire > introduction	4
Incorrect link – The Process of Carrying out the Project	Site map	3
Search not functioning	Search > Go	4

3.2 Report from Evaluator Two ■

Description of the problem	Where did the problem occur	Severity rating
Lack of consistency because there is no menu on the right	The page 'Contact us'	4
I would expect the first page to be more informative about the aims of the project than the people.	'Project Info'	3
There is no page to the link The name could be consistent to 'contact us' If you want to be specific to the web master I would suggest adding an extra link to the 'contact us' page.	'Contact web manager' on the bottom menu	4
The search facility does not work	Top / bottom menus	4
Simple design I liked very much the colours, the way you arranged the pictures with the text underneath, the organisation of the site map. Regarding the appearance of the menu : I would expect the menu to be on the left hand side (this is what happens usually) I don't see the box of the menu necessary. There are too many boxes on each screen and I think the menu box is the least needed=> it could be avoided It might also be nice instead of white background to use the background colour (light green)	All pages	3
There is a line behind the menu box	Introduction>>process>> planning	2
Consistency between the top and the right menu You don't use the order of the links (e.g. intro, modules, resources, contact us v.s. intro, resources, modules, help, contact us, site map) On the top part of the site there are two menus: are they really needed?	All pages	4
There is no menu on the right	'Help' on top and bottom menu	4

There could be the same links on bottom menu as on the top: why there is only a part of it?	Bottom menu	3
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3.3 Report from Evaluator Three ■

Report From 5/11/04.

The evaluation was conducted on a stand-alone PC with 17" monitor (window maximised) and 56K modem (i.e. not broadband) during morning peak time (i.e. 9.15-9.45). Download times were acceptable, apart from some photographs.

General comments:

This is visually a pleasing Web site to visit, but it's let down (i) by the hyper abundance of links and (ii) by the text, which is not well written for reading online. I'm also unsure what its overall purpose is: viz. a site providing training or a site documenting the process of designing a particular piece of training. If it's the first, then the authors need to cut drastically the amount of project-related documentation before the site goes live, as learners are unlikely to be interested in the who, why, when and how that lie behind the course they're taking (and I must confess to being bored by these sections). Specifically, the aims, process, management and team sections are just too verbose, and I am unclear how pictures of the team in action, their sketches and screenshots of their management tool are intended to enhance the *learner's* experience of the online research methods course. After all, remote collaboration in software development is hardly revolutionary!

To gain a better impression of the pedagogical usability of this site, I would like to see a more representative portion of the actual training modules.

Specific comments:

Description of the problem	Where did the problem occur	Severity rating
A. ISSUES:		
TEXT: has not been designed for reading online. Many sentences are long and convoluted, esp. on RM Festival page and in the actual training module (where the text <i>must</i> be easily digestible). For an example, see the Introduction to the questionnaire module; para 2, sentence 2 (beginning "The aim of the module..."). I would need to print off all the instructional text in order to read (and hence absorb) it more easily.	All	4
Links in top portion of screen: if this is a site offering training, then the "modules" and "resources" links should precede the project-related sections.	All	4
Hyperlinks: Generally, there are simply TOO MANY of these, which is (a) distracting and (b) disorienting if one follows them. For example, the "Context" page doesn't need all those links to the ESRC RM pages/documents.	Various, esp. "context"	4
Bulleted list of links at bottom of screens (i.e. "for more details, click on the following	Bottom of every screen	2

links..."): I kept getting lost as these links can take one to a completely different part of the site, and even with the useful "Where you are" panel, one wasn't too sure where one was. I think these could be dropped without compromising on navigability.		
Site map: this is helpful, but doesn't have the modules on it.	Site map	3
Menu at RHS of screen. The panel "Main menu" looks like the title of the menu. In fact, it's a hyperlink, so should perhaps have the text "click for main menu" as on the Welcome screen	All except Welcome screen	1
"Welcome" screen: clicking the "main menu" option changes the main display. This is a little disorienting	"Welcome" screen	1
Animated quotations. These are distracting, esp. the animation of no. 1. Also, I cannot see the point of giving the user control over the display — it distracts from the main task at hand. Either make them cycle automatically without the SFX, or present them as a static list.	"Welcome" screen	2
Clicking "Home" can display two different screens — Welcome or Main menu intro — depending on where you are in the site. Keep it consistent!	Various	1
"Team" information. Photos took a long time to load — use thumbnails? Also, the information is not particularly interesting to the reader. Links to the members' academic homepages would be far more relevant.	"Team"	2
Research Methods Festival: graphics showing the first slide of presentations do not add anything to the content. If kept, they should perhaps become hyperlinks to the presentations themselves. Also, omit some of the photos — they are dark and not too flattering to their subjects!	Research Methods Festival	1
Project process: management. Photos, graphics and screenshots don't enhance the text. Omit them?	Project process: management	2
Project introduction: the information on the evaluation should be in the process section. Also, there is no link to this detailed evaluation info it from the process → evaluation screen itself.	Project introduction: evaluation Project process: evaluation	3
Project process: evaluation. The timeline would work better if presented vertically.	Project process: evaluation	2

Interestingly, the information is easier to read in the HTML version, although that does need a better visual design e.g. formatted subheadings!		
Project process: evaluation. On the timeline, should “dissemination” take place in 2006, not 2005?	Project process: evaluation	2
Modules Introduction screen: graphic is distracting and doesn’t support the text in any way.	Modules Introduction	2
Modules Introduction screen: graphic has spelling mistake: “Advanatages”	Modules Introduction	2
Modules Introduction screen: order of modules on graphic doesn’t reflect the list in the text	Modules Introduction	2
Questionnaire module: link to advantages/disadvantages doesn’t work (where a page has yet to be written, please insert a “work in progress”-type placeholder.	Questionnaire	4
Questionnaire module: there is no follow-up to the reading activity. What is the learner supposed to do after reading the comments? Indeed, how is the learner to post his/her comments to the site?	Questionnaire	4
B. APPRECIATION/SUGGESTIONS:		
Generally: a nice “clean” design, with very few bugs in the navigation — CONGRATULATIONS!		N/A
“Where you are” panel in top part of screen is EXCELLENT, especially with the hyper abundance of hyperlinks	N/A	N/A
Animated quotations: please remember to include the sources of the quotes in the “Resources” section!		N/A

3.4 Report from Evaluator Four ■

This evaluation was conducted on a on a stand alone PC running Windows XP and Internet Explorer, using a 56k modem.

General comments

The general look and feel of the site and use of colour was good. There was a lot of information on the site about the Project (Team, Background ESRC funding etc), is it necessary to have this level of detail when the main purpose of the site is the training package, does the “learner” need this level of information about the project, could it be in a separate section?

Description of the problem	Where did the problem occur	Severity rating
Clearer distinction between – The project (information) and the Training package (learning content). So the user can go straight to the Training package.	Home	3
Consistency in how quotes appear. Personal preference would be fade in and out.	Home	2
You have to click to see the Main menu, could it be permanently there, the LHS is usually the norm for menus.	Home	3
Like the use of photos to break up the text but having a group of photos takes up a lot of the screen and you have to scroll to see the text, also some are very dark. One good photo may work better.	Home: Main menu	2
The first page you see is called “Home” but when you click to see the “Main menu” you are taken to another page named “Home”. Only one of the pages should have the title “Home”	Home	
Content Ordering of the content areas. As the main objective of the site is as a training package I’d suggest “Modules” is placed before “Resources”.	Home	1
Navigation; there are several ways of navigating through the site, menu (top, side, bottom) and hot links. This was a bit confusing, initially used links in text but found I was jumping about too much. The menu proved more useful, perhaps reduce of remove the links in the text. .	General	3
Content. Took a long time to work through the content and actually get to the modules (this could have been that as a first time user and evaluator I was reading everything). As the primarily aim of the	General	2

site is a training package, the modules could have a more prominent position.		
Navigation This page had a <back> button at the top and base, this was a new form of navigation, which does not appear on other pages, it should either be consistent throughout or removed.	Help	4
Navigation. Use of “Go>>” does not appear elsewhere, other links are shown by underlined text.	Home: Modules: online questionnaire	4
Navigation. <<Back: Up: Next>> appears on this page but not used elsewhere, consistency in navigation.	Home: Modules: online questionnaire	4
Navigation. <<Back appears on this screen.	Contact us.	
The site map could be more presented more visually as a diagram.	Site Map	
Search not functioning	Search > Go	4