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Information Interactions

Users thought the site held “products”. They clued into any evidence that supported the idea of things to buy or take away. Those who learn on a “need-to-know” basis are more likely to treat learning as an act of consumption. Product orientations signify a need to consume information like classes, seminars and books that can be pointed at to say, “I learned that.” For this reason, the pedagogy of Autodidact would position the process as a product in itself.

Section and feature titles do not relate to the cultural educational vocabulary, per se. This is a semantic issue that affects site usability. For example, while a graduate student may attend a *Forum*, few make *Annotations*. Taking notes is much more common in the act of learning. “*Trails*” is an analogy deserving significant up-front coaching to replace familiar synonyms like “themes” and “subjects”.

Labeling needs to reflect a consistent frame of reference. Currently *Topics - Trails - Stories - Forum - Explore* are the taxonomic drivers of the site. As such, they come from different metaphor “families” and so may not leverage their relationships at a conceptual level. Rich meaning and insight stems from use of one metaphorical principle, like a school or a book club.

Dots lack immediate relevance. In the absence of a carrying narrative, users made up explanations for the signifiers. Some thought that the “colorful icon” indicated a “Week 3” Forum. Another said, “The big circle swallows the small circles.” For nearly all, the dots indicated that trails are more specific than stories. That is, the story has one dot and trails have three, suggesting that trails are two levels below the story in generality.

Gray colored text is harder to see than darker font contrast. The grainy resolution of computer monitors increases significantly with a low-contrast, gray font. Combined with the light that is effectively pouring into users’ eyes when peering into a computer monitor, font contrast is essential for readability.

Sans serif is harder to read than serif fonts. The serif attribute helps the eye more quickly distinguish letters from each other. As a principle of usability, sans serif font slows down the use of a site because it increases the amount of concentration necessary to read a text.

Type point influences the desire to read online. For many reasons, users squint when they read from a computer screen. If the type is set to a font that is readable when printed, but not on a screen, users will print pages out. In doing so, however, they act in reference to a product-orientation, treating the site as an archive. The experience of Autodidact is thus diminished.

Features

Trails / Stories / Explore

Users toyed with synonyms for *trails*. “Chronology”, “timeline” and “leading lines” made sense of the visual display. For example, users assumed the information was sequenced as an historical review. If trails develop the evolution of an idea, visual cues would suggest this.

Greater visibility of the “trail line” could be more visible and valued. Users were hesitant to click on the trail line because they lacked a full appreciation of what it represented. The importance of trails to the overall user experience of Autodidact, indeed to Autodidact itself, means that trail lines need more character. For example, some users treated trail lines as a form of search results after selecting a topic from one column.

By widening the clickable space around the directional buttons, users can click faster. The fewer pixels a link consumes, the more concentration a user must bring to the task. In this case, the arrows directing trail lines are close together, increasing the likelihood of an incorrect selection.

Visual cues would distinguish stories from trails. The size and boldness of the font at the *Search Results* page strongly suggests that the story is a larger subject, under which trails provide alternative but equivalent perspectives. Stories expose and expand the user experience. The visual cues would leverage the user’s responses to stories by offering alternative trails to users according to the aspect of the story that most moved them. Stories would show new paths through the forest, with a signpost at each indicating the direction.

Many were frustrated that they could not narrow their search in Explore. Ironically, several participants thought that their final results came from “going down levels”. The cross-association of overlapping themes delivers on a qualitatively different kind of goal than a drill-down “need-to-know” model of information use. This hierarchical model of information use resists.

In the Explore interface, users want column headers to signal next steps. The interface is challenged by the requirement to contextualize the features unique to Autodidact. Putting a number and a noun in the column header begins to construct needed logic for users. Otherwise, they do not know how the second column relates to the first.

Topic selections are a part of the user history, and would be saved as such. Users want to revisit the list of stories that result from selected topics in each column. Currently, the pull-down columns of topics reset to zero. These participants would choose to hold the selections for retrieval via back button or at a later visit to the site.