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3° InfoDesign | Congresso Nacional de Design da Informação
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Karen Schriver

Information Design in Transition: Evolving Conceptions of Expertise

Professionally trained information designers know that they bring special insights to solving problems of communication. After all, their approach is based on years of practice, experience, and research. Experienced information designers know that to solve what some have called “wicked problems” of writing and design requires more than skill in the latest version of Photoshop or InDesign. While experienced information designers would vigorously argue against the reductive “tools jockey” representation of what they do, information designers often have trouble articulating just what their expertise entails. They fall short in being able to say just what they “bring to the table” that is different and better than those who bring merely “tools experience.” This is a problem not only for individual information designers but also for the field itself.

The inability of information designers to position their work and characterize it in ways that professionals in other domains can readily understand and embrace represents a significant challenge. Indeed, our inability as a field to cogently articulate “who we are” has important theoretical, practical, and educational implications. First, defining expertise represents a theoretical challenge because it calls on us to specify the knowledge, sensitivities, skills, perceptual abilities, and experiences that underlie expert performance in information design. As of now, we do not have a good sense of how, for example, experienced information designers think and their ways of knowing. With a theory of information design expertise, we could lay the groundwork for depicting how expertise is acquired. Second, our failure to make tacit knowledge about information design explicit is a practical problem. Many people who hire information designers cannot distinguish between a good information designer and a mediocre one. Moreover, many people tend to believe that a person using Dreamweaver who can follow a template to get a website up and running in a day is better than someone who begins by analyzing the nature of the content and the people who will be using the site. Thus, the added value of good design is misunderstood. A common assumption is that “if you can speak, you can write,” and “if you can use software, you can design.” While those of us in the field view these beliefs as preposterous, we have done little to change people's minds. Third, understanding expertise is an educational problem because many colleges and universities around the world are developing academic programs at the undergraduate, masters, and PhD levels without an adequate framework of what students who graduate from these programs should know. Teachers need an explicit idea of how expertise develops if they are to design appropriate curricula and sequence their courses in ways that add up to give students the “best shot” toward developing expertise.

In this paper, I present the highlights of my ongoing research into the nature of expertise in information design. In particular, I examine expertise as a hybrid cognitive, social, and cultural act. I first overview the challenges of defining expertise in information design and argue for why we need this type of research. Then I'll explore what we already know about expertise by drawing on empirical research from a variety of domains that shed light on how people develop their expertise generally. Finally, I'll present some hypotheses about key features of expertise in professional writing and design and will conclude with some ideas about ways to nurture expertise.