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# Can Collaboration Help Redefine Usability?

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*Sonia is a product manager interested in improving usability and customer experiences. She is familiar with many of the techniques of market research such as surveys and focus groups but wants to understand how the usability approach differs.*

*Robert is a usability researcher. He wants to identify research projects that reflect issues facing practitioners and facilitate the transfer of research findings into practice.*

*Linda is a highly-skilled usability practitioner with over 20 years of front-line experience. She has a wealth of techniques and useful knowledge to share but no easy way to do it.*

*Carl is new to the field. He is hoping to jumpstart his career by learning as much as possible but has a hard time identifying what information is most important.*

Imagine if these individuals could go to a web site that served as a single point of entry to a rich, ever-evolving knowledge base reflecting the current state of the field. This knowledge base would incorporate both formal and tacit knowledge. It would integrate empirical findings with practical techniques. It would include theory and opinion. All the information would be organized for easy retrieval, appropriately tagged and presented so that the reader could easily distinguish between generally accepted ideas and more speculative ones. Readers could add comments in a way that preserved the integrity and usability of the information. Editors would monitor and summarize these comments so that they did not clutter up the articles and would aggregate and link them so that ideas from diverse sources were easily accessible. Over time, these comments from readers could inspire research, serve as the foundations for documenting best practices and help refine the organization of the knowledge base.

Today, pieces of such a knowledge base exist. There is a small but interesting HCI/usability section of Wikipedia (Wikipedia Contributors, 2006b). The Usability Professionals Association has recently launched its Body of Knowledge (BoK) project (<http://www.usabilitybok.org/>). There are countless usability blogs, message boards and listservers. But to my knowledge, no one has attempted to integrate all this information into a single, collaborative knowledge space. I believe that creating such a knowledge space would be of immense benefit to the usability profession and would be a wonderful platform on which to refine our understanding of social computing and knowledge management.

## Why Now?

After years of struggling for recognition, the field of usability is finally becoming accepted as an essential component of interactive products. As information technology shifts to a web-centric paradigm, it has become clear to the technical and business communities that usability matters a great deal. Yet the field often presents itself as fragmented. Topics like HCI, interaction design, information architecture, usability research, customer experience engineering and visual design – all related aspects of optimizing interactive performance -- are often treated as if they were separate fields. There remains a gap between research and practice. And increasingly people from allied fields such as anthropology and marketing are engaging in usability activities. This is a good time for the profession to reconsider the scope and definition of usability as a field. I believe that a collaborative knowledge space offers an exciting opportunity to accomplish this.

## Why Consider a Collaborative Knowledge Space?

We already have textbooks, journals, and conference proceedings that report usability-related information. Much of this is indexed and available on the web today. Why then should we consider creating a collaborative space?

A collaborative knowledge space offers usability several advantages:

1. It has the potential to tap the great store of usability-related experiential and tacit knowledge that exists among usability practitioners.
2. It will encourage the integration of research and practice and would encourage interactions across-disciplines.
3. It can serve as a platform for research on social computing and knowledge management.
4. It can be updated quickly to reflect the dynamism of the field.

## Lessons from Wikipedia

The first reaction to the suggestion of using collaborative tools like message boards and wikis is likely to be concern about the quality of the data. This concern is well-founded. One of the most interesting collaborative knowledge communities is Wikipedia. In March 2006, Wikipedia's well-known knowledge base had over 1 million contributors and more than 3,800,000 articles in 200 languages (Wikipedia contributors, 2006a). Wikipedia has also had serious questions raised about the integrity of its content. It has been used for hoaxes and to promote political viewpoints. In fact, "revisions made by Capitol Hill staffers became so frequent and disruptive earlier this year that Wikipedia temporarily blocked access to the site from some Congressional Internet addresses (New York Times, 2006).

Perhaps any encyclopedia constructed by a "natural, spontaneous, and self-directed" community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002, p.51) can never be as reliable as one based on a formal editorial process. However, there is risk that the formality will lead to rigidity and rejection of innovative approaches that are not widely accepted. Formal approaches are, by their nature, slow and this may be incompatible with a fast changing field.

The idea I am proposing would attempt to blend formal and collaborative approaches in a way that leverages the strengths of both.

## Planning a Usability Collaborative Space

Wikipedia derives value from its vastness and openness. A collaborative space for usability would need to be more focused. It must make it easy for the reader to distinguish ideas that are generally accepted from those that are speculative. With such clarity the knowledge space could become an "ever-evolving repository of the community's knowledge that members actively discuss and use in everyday tasks and regularly update." (Bieber *et al*, 2002).

The five points discussed below are intended to provoke discussion:

1. **Governance:** An editorial board composed of researchers and practitioners would be responsible for providing oversight and maintaining content quality while encouraging innovation and responsible dissent. The editorial board would oversee a group of volunteer authors and editors who would have responsibility for managing specific content areas.
2. **Encyclopedia:** The core knowledge would be organized around an encyclopedia. Initially, the editors would "seed" the encyclopedia using a set of articles. These could come from the Body of Knowledge project or other sources and would be used to "jump start" the collaborative process.
3. **Articles:** Articles in the encyclopedia might be structured in three levels: (1) *formal articles* that reflect our best understanding of the current state of the art; (2) *practical articles* that address best practices, techniques and more speculative approaches. These would be authored by the content editors based on discussion threads; (3) *commentary on articles* provided by members of the community. Unlike Wikipedia, where any audience member can directly edit an article, commentary would be linked to, but not integrated into the encyclopedia articles. Commentary would be subject to editing and summarization by the content editors who would also determine when selected elements should migrate into the encyclopedia.

4. **Discussion Areas:** The site would support forums within which people could conduct wide-ranging, speculative, innovative and opinionated conversations. The content editors would serve as moderators. The value of such discussions has been demonstrated by UTEST, a usability discussion list supported by Clemson University since 1993. Under the direction of Tharon Howard and a volunteer advisory board, UTEST has become extremely and useful resource focused on solving real-world problems. Perhaps because of its strong policy board, there is very little flaming that goes on. Unfortunately, the discussions are neither archived nor summarized so value is lost when the threads end. In the proposed model threads would be summarized and indexed by the content editors so their value is maintained.

## Conclusion

A collaborative knowledge space would provide great value to the usability community. In particular it would:

- Help define the field and give it a presence that provides professionals and the public with a single source for theoretical, practical and speculative information about usability
- Encourage the integration of research and practice.
- Invite colleagues in related fields to participate and share their perspectives.
- Serve as a platform to advance our understanding of collaboration and knowledge management tools.

Most of the tools needed to implement a collaborative knowledge space are already available and there are a number of related activities already underway that could feed into this project. It would be a great deal of work but I believe it would also yield a great deal of benefit.

## References

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