

# Five Look and feel

## Creating a welcoming, inclusive online environment

This chapter looks at:

- what to consider in your choice of software
- designing the site

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### Choosing the software

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Whatever software you choose, you must approach it from a user's perspective rather than that of a software developer or an ICT guru who may have their own, very specific agendas.

The early pioneers of effective networking, collaboration and sharing on the internet were not put off by the awkwardness and unreliability of technology that hampered the early years of web development.

There is still a small minority who relish the mind-boggling challenges that working with technology can present. The majority of us, however, don't want to wrestle with code, endure lengthy waits for downloads or create all-singing, all-dancing animation. We simply want to get on with the job at hand.

The trick is to ensure that your software is easy to use for the latter group and not too boring for the former. To pull off this fine balancing act it's a good idea to **form a steering group** to oversee how the software is chosen, piloted and implemented. They should be enthusiasts and should constantly put themselves into the shoes of each group of users you are hoping to attract. They should always have at the back of their minds this question:

*Why would people use this system when they have intuitively networked in other ways for as long as they can remember?*

#### Toolkit

Basic facilitator skills

Community page design and accessibility

Tools - creating activities

#### Toolkit

User participation

## Learning message

Spell out how e-learning can support your organisation's ambitions.

This process needs to continue long after the software has been bought and loaded on to your systems. Doing so at the earliest stages, however, is critical to your future success and will make life easier later on.

If your software is too slow or cumbersome, your users will try it once and then you won't see them for dust. It should be simple, easy and intuitive but you'll also have to use some gentle persuasion and stress the benefits to coax people into embracing it.

It should work alongside the communications systems you already have in place so there is a familiar look to the whole operation. Conferencing software companies, for example, are beginning to marry their packages with Microsoft Outlook and Microsoft Messenger so that users can **move seamlessly** between them.

Presenting people with a whole new set of processes (menu commands, shortcuts etc) to learn is another way to turn them off, so make your interface and procedures as close to common web practice as possible.

There should be a wide choice of **software tools** to satisfy the different preferences, learning needs and skills of your users. It is worth including audio and video capability for use in communications and messaging. Consider how to appeal to people who find large slabs of text off-putting or who are not competent typists and wordsmiths. (Given that so much ICT-based work now depends on keyboard skills, it is worth thinking about providing everyone with a way to improve their touch-typing skills online.)

You must also consider the **scale** of the enterprise. Just how many potential users will there be?

And don't forget that buying your system is only the beginning. Besides the initial costs, there is the cost of ownership to consider and, at some stage, you might want to look into the possibilities of purchasing with other schools or organisations. Other cost issues to look at include annual licences, support and maintenance as well as training.

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## Designing the online community

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You will want to:

- keep participants uppermost in mind
- make the most important content immediately visible on the home page
- make links to other pages or external sites prominent
- limit use of colour
- use easy-to-read fonts
- use images sparingly
- bear in mind that users' knowledge of technology may be less sophisticated than yours and that their systems may be slower
- consider users with special needs

Toolkit

Basic facilitator skills

Community page design  
and accessibility

NCSL design guide

Online community pages should be designed to create a **welcoming, inclusive and pleasing environment** where users can find what they need simply and quickly. It's important to think about the visitors to a community and to predict what they need. Answers to these questions should form the basis for all design decisions.

The most important page within a community is the front or **home page** where items should be arranged in a logical manner. Generally speaking, the upper left-hand quadrant of a page is the hot zone, where the most important identification and navigation information should appear. For example will your online environment allow for messages from mobile devices - consider who can access the system and when.

After the hot zone, the rest of the visible area of the content (ie what you can see on the full screen without scrolling down) is the place where the most important and up-to-date items should be. New forums, major meeting points (such as community bulletin boards), introductory information, announcements and navigation links are the sort of items that should be immediately visible when the front page is called up by users and Microsoft themselves have introduced conferencing software as part of their new Vista windows system.

The bottom of a long page will be seen only by people willing to make the effort to scroll around. Keep this in mind and place items further down the page in accordance with their importance, while avoiding the need to scroll sideways as much as possible.

On talk2learn pages, we publish items by inserting them into template boxes called containers so there's a certain amount of **uniformity** built into the system. We have control over what goes into these page panels, whether there's a border around them, how many forum contributions appear and how many panels go on the page.

Overall, the main thing is to get the right balance between white space and content. Make sure information is well-organised in logical and succinct chunks on the page and offer clear headers and signposting. Short sentences, short paragraphs, white space and bulleted lists also assist with the difficult task of reading on-screen.

Links to other pages in the community or site or to external websites should always be labelled clearly. Put the name of the page, website, file or item in the link itself rather than 'Click here'. Links should be prominent, so avoid burying a one-word link in a long paragraph of text.

When you are linking to an external site that will not have a link back to your own site, use a **separate window**. Similarly, when you want your users to be able to open another resource such as a think piece or a hotseat-type forum without having to move away from that item, use another window. But don't go window-crazy since too many open windows can be confusing to the user.

Use a limited number of **colours** and vary them only to draw attention to important items and navigational links. Be sensitive to colour-blind users and don't make colour the only distinguishing factor for anything essential to the user. Black or dark-coloured text on a white or light background is the norm but you can invert this rule for logos and banners. Use easy-to-read **fonts** such as Arial and Verdana and never mix fonts within a single text box or paragraph.

Remember that **images** can take time to load, so don't over-burden your page with them. They may look pretty but waiting for them to appear can try the user's patience so use them only when they add real value to the page, and keep them small. Remember you can compress image files to reduce the amount of time they take to load but you need to strike a balance between image quality and file size (bigger files mean better quality).

Improve poor photographs but avoid distracting animations.

Don't forget that text and images on websites are subject to **copyright**. Ideally, choose images that are labelled as free to use or get permission from the copyright-holder. You can, of course, create your own with a digital camera and imaging software.

There are other technical considerations to bear in mind. Not everyone will have the same technology as you, for example. Visitors using slower internet connections will have to wait a long time for images and files to load, so try to get the same information or ideas across in a modest way before resorting to hi-tech solutions.

Visitors with smaller, older monitors might need to scroll sideways to see a whole page which is **disorienting** for them. On talk2learn, we found it best to minimise the need for scrolling by placing no more than two activities side-by-side on a community page.

Remember that some visitors may have special needs. Sight-impaired users read web pages with large font, magnifying screens, Braille or speech-based browsers. The recommendations for fonts above will also help these users. Blind users require text-based alternatives for pictures and other graphic elements. Otherwise, all visible content is lost to them, including buttons and other image-based navigational links.

talk2learn was designed with accessibility issues in mind, allowing the use of screen readers to interpret the content of a page. The Disability Discrimination Act/Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (DDA/SENDA) Part 4 sets out **guidelines on access** and there are other design specifics that aid accessibility (please see references and resources below).

To conform to internet safety standards, images of children used on the internet must be from a distance, in groups, from behind or with facial features otherwise obscured.

#### Toolkit

##### Basic facilitator skills

For further information, references and guidance, go to [www.ncsl.org.uk/elearningfacilitationtoolkit](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/elearningfacilitationtoolkit)