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Subject: Reflection on the ARA Document Design Project

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Introduction

As part of the ENGL 7080 Document Design course with Dr. Ross, I collaborated with a team to develop communication materials for the Alabama River Alliance (ARA), a nonprofit advocating for protection and sustainable management of Alabama's freshwater resources. This project focused on creating user-centered deliverables that addressed ARA's communication challenges and addressed the specific needs of its diverse audiences through targeted design strategies and usability principles.

In this reflection memo, I assess my role in the project, including design contributions, problem-solving strategies, and lessons learned. I also examine how this experience enhanced my technical communication, design, and project management skills, particularly in addressing real-world organizational needs.

Project Overview

The ARA Client Project involved the creation of three deliverables: a brochure, rack card, and infographic. We designed each piece to meet specific communication objectives while adhering to ARA's branding and style guidelines. The brochure provided a comprehensive overview of ARA's mission, goals, and advocacy initiatives, targeting stakeholders and community partners. The rack card offered clear, actionable instructions for accessing pollution records, emphasizing tools like ADEM e-file and EPA ECHO databases. The infographic highlighted water pollution's environmental and societal impacts, presenting complex data in an accessible and visually engaging format.

These deliverables were designed to address the needs of ARA's key audiences, including policymakers, environmental advocates, and local communities. By focusing on usability, accessibility, and alignment with ARA's goals, the project demonstrated the power of effective design in advancing organizational advocacy and raising public awareness.

Contribution and Team Collaboration

As a team member, I co-designed the rack card and brochure, collaborating with teammates to conceptualize layouts, ensure adherence to ARA's style guide, and incorporate usability principles. My contributions included creating low-fidelity sketches, refining the document through iterative feedback, editing the documents and ensuring the final design was accessible and visually cohesive. Usability testing (Kimball & Hawkins, 2007; Barnum & Palmer, 2010)

informed the iterative review process, helping us prioritize user-centric designs aligned with ARA's advocacy goals.

Usability and Accessibility Practices

Our work emphasized creating documents that balanced aesthetics with functionality, guided by theoretical frameworks such as the Gestalt Principles (Kimball & Hawkins, 2007). For instance, the rack card used proximity and alignment to clearly group content, such as explaining pollution records, agency contact information, and guidance on tools like ADEM e-file and EPA ECHO databases, improving readability for users seeking pollution records. Additionally, the infographic adhered to the constructivist approach to visual design, ensuring users could comprehend complex information through intuitive graphics (Cairo, 2013). Integrating ARA's branding elements further aligned the deliverables with their organizational identity, enhancing usability and ethos.

Challenges and Solutions

One key challenge was balancing compliance with ARA's style guide while integrating innovative design elements to meet their evolving communication goals. Regular client meetings and usability testing allowed us to address these challenges and provided a valuable learning experience. Applying **heuristic evaluation principles** (Barnum & Palmer, 2010), we systematically assessed readability, contrast, and information hierarchy to ensure the design met usability standards. For example, feedback from the high-fidelity testing phase prompted revisions in color contrast and font size, improving accessibility for diverse audiences, including those with visual impairments. This iterative process underscored the importance of client collaboration and expert evaluation in achieving functional and inclusive designs.

Professional Development

This project solidified my understanding of the Planned Rapid Document Development (PRDD) model (Kimball & Hawkins, 2007), which combines the structured stages of the waterfall model with iterative prototyping, allowing for flexibility and refinement within a finite timeline while maintaining quality and clear communication. It also reinforced technical communicators' role as advocates for organizational goals and user needs. Engaging with real-world stakeholders provided insight into navigating client relationships and translating feedback into actionable improvements.

Work Cited

- Barnum, C. M., & Palmer, L. A. (2010). More than a feeling: Understanding the desirability factor in user experience. *CHI'10 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 4703–4716.
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- Kimball, M. A., & Hawkins, A. R. (2007). *Document design: A guide for technical communicators*. Bedford/St. Martin's.