



## A Tipping Point Perspective on Minimalism



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Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* (Little, Brown 2000), and John Carroll, author of *The Nurnberg Funnel* (MIT 1990) and champion of minimalism, may seem to have little in common, but their books have a common theme: both have identified context as a primary determinant of outcomes.

Carroll proposed matching the design of performance support materials to the way software users choose to learn. He rejected the conventional and entrenched systems approach to design because he saw the stark results of ignoring the user's activity drivers and learning preferences: users either ignored or misused the performance support artifacts that were intended to help them develop their skills.

Gladwell coined the phrase “the power of context”<sup>1</sup> to describe the momentary interaction between people and their environment when they cross a behavioral threshold and “tip.” His book is full of events and research about tipping points, such as the sales explosion of Hush Puppies or the response of the Lexington communities to Paul Revere's alarm.

What does the common thread of context offer to designers of information and training, and in particular, designers who have accepted and responded to the challenge that minimalist principles present?

Do we simply recognize the synergies in the thinking of Gladwell and Carroll, nod, and move on, or do we draw upon Gladwell's insights to enrich minimalist practices?

The answer lies in the nature of minimalism itself. In this article, I explore how we can apply Gladwell's insights to designing information and training products that do the following:

- ◆ engage our users
- ◆ catch them when they enter our space
- ◆ pull them through to information that can really make a difference to their performance

### GLADWELL'S POWER OF CONTEXT

It is worth revisiting one of the experiments that Gladwell recounts in *The Tipping Point* to demonstrate the power of context.

Two Princeton University psychologists, Darley and Batson, set up a behavioral study of a group of seminarians. The psychologists invited each of the seminarians to give a talk on campus. Some were asked to speak about religious vocation and some about the parable of the Good Samaritan.

As the seminarians left to go to their talks, some were told that they were late and some that they had plenty of time. On the way to the talk, each seminarian was confronted by a man in agony and distress. Of the group who thought they were late, only 10 percent stopped to help the man in distress. Of the group who were told they had plenty of time, 63 percent stopped to help.

So many elements were at play in the engagement context: motivation for joining the priesthood; the compelling parable of the Good Samaritan, who put himself in danger to help someone in distress; and the emotional sight of another human being in agony.

In the context of one group of seminarians, the mix of behavioral drivers and their social and physical environment included a tipping behavioral driver, “you are late.” The “you are late” trigger tipped their behavior and caused them to step over or pass by a human being, whom, in another context (“you are early”), they are likely to have helped.

The experiment may provide comments on social behavior, but more important, it points to a mechanism that information designers can exploit: the contextual trigger that tips.

### MINIMALISM AND THE POWER OF CONTEXT

John Carroll does not explicitly refer to context, but he acknowledges it implicitly.

The user's context is real and persuasive.

“The problem is not that people cannot follow simple steps; it is that they do not.... People are situated in a world that is much more real to them than a series of steps, a world that provides rich context and convention for everything they do.” And their “personal agenda of goals and concerns... can structure their use” of our products.

<sup>1</sup>“The three rules of the Tipping Point - the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, the Power of Context... provide us with direction for how we go about reaching a Tipping Point.” *The Tipping Point*, page 29.

“Learners, however, don’t seem to appreciate overviews, reviews, and previews, they want to do their work. They come to the learning task with a personal agenda of goals and concerns that can structure their use of training materials.”

Carroll and his team saw users who wanted to make sense of what they were doing without undertaking the rigorous reading and study that might have empowered them. He also recognized the users’ desire to get started quickly and to perform meaningful tasks, their preference to learn by exploring, and their frustration at losing control when they made errors.

The guided exploration cards and the minimal manual that Carroll describes in his book are specific solutions for specific user contexts. They are a design response to the users’ context, and if we want to gain greater design leverage from context, we must understand more about the beast.

### CONTEXT, CONTEXT, WHAT IS CONTEXT?

The stories and commentary in *The Tipping Point* propose context as a momentary combination of elements from the individual’s set of conscious and subconscious drivers, and from their social and physical environment.

When products or events tipped, the product or event introduced something new into that momentary combination of elements. In the seminar research, the new element was an unsettling driver, “you are late.” In the famous broken windows experiment,<sup>2</sup> the new element was part of the physical environment, damage to a parked car.

When users reach for information or training products, the product becomes part of the user’s context, with the potential to tip behavior—that is, engage the user and contribute to the user’s knowledge and skill growth.

As designers of information and training products, we have to explore context; but the context attribute, momentary, is the key to our exploration.

Context is not a general set of user attributes, such as we see defined in audience profiles and personas. Contexts are bound to user activities and encompass the following:

- ◆ our product
- ◆ the user’s momentary agenda (drivers)
- ◆ the physical and social environment within which the user’s actions take place

#### Our product

Our product could be anything: information, a tutorial, or a marketing message delivered by email—an information or

<sup>2</sup>“In a famous experiment conducted twenty-seven years ago by the Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo, a car was parked on a street in Palo Alto, where it sat untouched for a week. At the same time, Zimbardo had an identical car parked in a roughly comparable neighborhood in the Bronx, only in this case the license plates were removed and the hood was propped open. Within a day, it was stripped. Then, in a final twist, Zimbardo smashed one of the Palo Alto car’s windows with a sledgehammer. Within a few hours, that car, too, was destroyed.... The broken window was the tipping point.” Malcolm Gladwell. “The Tipping Point.” *The New Yorker*, June 3, 1996.

training deliverable that only succeeds if users take it up and engage.

#### The user’s agenda

In 2001, I used the term user agenda (*Best Practices* October 2001) to define the user’s conscious and subconscious drivers: a set of interacting priorities, expectations, assumptions, concerns, and reservations.

The user agenda is aggressive and cannot be ignored. It produces reactions like “I used online help once but never again,” “This Web site is hopeless, I’m out of here,” “Don’t these people know anything!” and “They can have this user guide. I’m calling the help desk.”

When my clients and I look for user agendas, we don’t look at the user. We look at the user’s task—the meaningful activity that the user performs and that is enriched by particular objectives and priorities.

We don’t ask users about their agendas. We mine a business’s customer knowledge because a business makes constant observations over an extended time about the what, why, when, and where of customer behavior. After all, they know that it is their customers who enable them to achieve their business objectives.

#### The user’s environment

In today’s world of lean organizations, most of our users confront our products under the pressures of strong environmental forces. Their performance is under constant scrutiny, their remuneration is tied to performance, they are time-poor, their employment situation is often uncertain, and the organization’s support infrastructures are shrinking.

### USING INFORMATION—A CHEMICAL REACTION

The interplay between environmental forces and the user agenda creates its own chemistry.

If your user is time-poor, what resentment, urgency, willingness to compromise, or other drivers bubble to the surface, and what happens when the same user reaches for information that presumes pre-reading? We can pose this question in a different way. Can we really design performance support to take in the complexity of context?

My answer is yes. Whether someone is time-poor or unstressed by time pressures, their information priorities for a particular activity will be similar. One of them will simply be less patient and less tolerant of our inability to design to his or her agenda.

This is exactly the challenge that I believe John Carroll took up in *The Nurnberg Funnel* and that other innovative people addressed in *Minimalism Beyond the Nurnberg Funnel* (MIT 1998), which Carroll edited.

Carroll and his team drew upon their observation of users and their agendas. They dared to suggest that *less* information could deliver *more* effective performance support by complementing the way software users preferred to learn.

Alas, minimalism, the term that was used to encapsulate their approach, with its connotation of breadth and depth, is always used as an attribute of the deliverable rather than as an attribute of the learning experience that users demand.

John Carroll and his team recognized that their software users tolerated *minimal* reading and learning to support task performance. Carroll and his team recognized the power of the users' context: their preemptive desire to do, their intolerance of reading and learning outside their activity focus, their frustration at making mistakes, and their natural affinity with the opportunity to explore.

The team's observations are supported by research and anecdote. Candice Harp's research confirms the same information-use behaviors that underpin solutions in the two Carroll books. Harp's study involved 263 participants who were interviewed about their strategies for learning "all types and brands of office automation software." The most useful learning strategy was "experimenting." Reference manuals came in 9th; third-party books, 13th; and using online help, 14th (*Computerworld* October 1996).

Perhaps we should ask why we haven't always designed for context. Surely most of us will see ourselves in the pre-eminence of learning by experimenting and in the performance behaviors that Carroll and his team observed.

### USING CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS TO DESIGN FOR ENGAGEMENT

Despite the fact that very few people have a desire to read and learn as preparation for tackling their daily tasks, and despite the fact that most people would love the no-effort option of a funnel that poured knowledge into their heads, we constantly see that users *do* exhibit the following behaviors:

- ◆ Task performers *do* see reading as an option, even if they aren't always prepared to work hard to process our information.
- ◆ They *do* reach for tutorials and start them, though perhaps don't advance very far through them.
- ◆ They *do* visit Web sites to compare products, even if they leave very quickly.
- ◆ They *do* open user guides, though not at the beginning.

Our users knock on our information doors. The problem is that so often when our users start to read, they disengage. Disengagement is a problem that minimalism recognized and attempted to address.

#### Managers who reached for information but disengaged

In 2003, I conducted a number of workshops with middle-level managers in a large Australian bank. The workshops were part of a project that aimed to increase the use of online policy and system documentation during the resolution of personnel-related management issues.

In the workshops, managers worked in pairs to document two things:

- ◆ their problem contexts (when they reached for information)
- ◆ the questions they sought to answer (the target information)

When we analyzed the output of the workshops, we discovered that managers *did* reach for online information and usually found what they thought would be an appropriate topic to read. However, they rarely engaged sufficiently to resolve their management issue.

#### Why didn't managers engage successfully?

The organization had readability concerns about the policy and system documentation, which was poorly structured and very formal in style. Was readability the issue? No, it was just an accepted pain and lamented by all.

The issue was much more interesting. Managers who were trying to resolve a complex personnel management problem were entering the information domain at a point that dealt with only one aspect of the problem.

For example, a staff member's request for extended leave required more than just a technical decision about the legitimacy of the request. That was simply a starting point. The manager's real decision involved assessing whether the request was genuine, how to balance team resources to fill the absence, and whether a decision to deny the request would be considered unfair and would be challenged.

The manager who entered the policy and system documentation through the "leave" door would find only the silo of information that described leave. We were confronted by the simple fact that nothing in the design of the information base reflected the complex contexts of managers seeking to address personnel management issues.

#### A MINIMALIST SOLUTION THAT ADDRESSED CONTEXT

For me, minimalism is about designing to the requirements of the user context and leveraging that context to trigger engagement.

For the bank's policy and system solution, there was never a question of shrinking the information base. We had to bring users into the information through doors that prompted them to explore other potential issues, and we also had to pull them into reading what would be relevant to their decision.

#### ONLINE—A REAL OPPORTUNITY FOR DESIGN

Am I blind, or do I see a world that has largely ignored the opportunities that online delivery offers information design? Yes, online means instant availability and currency. Yes, online reduces information distribution costs. But why do we see so much online content that fails to exploit its delivery platform?

Why do I encounter Web sites that do not layer the reading task? For example, many Web sites promote multiple

options but present their information online as if they were delivering information on paper.

Such Web sites may hide the detail of the multiple options at the end of links, but they require the reader to link through to each option, read about the option in depth, link back to the next option, and continue until they've processed all options before they can make a decision.

Nothing about the design reduces the cognitive overheads that are inherent in processing linear information, yet online users that I observe aggressively reject information models that demand that they read to decide what they need to read next. They want to decide first *before* they plunge into the detail.

#### **An example: effective information layering online**

The Web site of my rugby league football team, the Roosters, provides a perfect example of simple layering. It presents a comparison table of membership options. The table contains the information that the marketing team has determined usually drives membership decisions. The table enables the potential member to select which detailed membership description to read.

#### **An example: no information layering and an online reading disaster**

On the other hand, the content design of the Australian Taxation Office's (ATO) Web site fails miserably to exploit online delivery.

Ironically, the ATO made an enormous effort to improve their Web site. They invested heavily in focus groups involving user audiences: taxpayers who prepared their own tax returns and accountants who prepared tax returns for taxpayers. They hired specialists to design the Web site's information architecture.

The new information architecture reflects the importance taxpayers place on information about claiming tax deductions, which, when successful, give the taxpayer a refund from taxes already paid.

"Deduction checklist" is a link on the "For Individuals" fly-out menu at the home page. The checklist link leads to a page that presents a short, processible list of the deduction claims that taxpayers can make. One deduction type is car expenses, an important but very confusing deductions area.

A taxpayer moving through the site to this point would feel comfortable and in control. Agenda priorities are being met at each step. But the poor taxpayer who expands the car expenses list would be overwhelmed: the dense list of links that has many items beginning with the same phrase (claiming a deduction for car expenses), sends the message, "Get ready for some hard brain work; you *will* read."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Explore the user's experience for yourself. Visit the Australian Tax Office's Web site at <www.ato.gov.au> choose "Deductions checklist" from the "For individuals" menu and expand the "Car expenses" section.

## **EXPLOITING ONLINE DELIVERY**

In the bank's policy and system documentation project, we recognized that online delivery provided great opportunities for leveraging the manager's context in our design: rich entry points and layering combined with "unsettling" links.

### **Rich entry points**

We provided rich entry points into the information domain. The rich entry points were simply landing pages that supported the complex contexts that workshop analysis had revealed.

For example, the short Leave entry page provided links to primary leave topics but also prompted users to link through to selected information about potential issues around leave.

On the landing page, we restricted information about destination pages, only providing the information required for the user to make their selection but including, where appropriate, unsettling links to encourage link throughs.

We drew upon the detailed workshop analysis of performance contexts to identify selection information and unsettling strategies.

### **Unsettling links**

"Unsettlers" are statements that are not overtly manipulative or threatening but encourage the reader to think that they should link through, that they cannot risk not linking through, or that maybe there is something to gain by linking through.

We looked at the managers' contexts to find the triggers to leverage for unsettlers.

Regarding the issue of leave, we could see that no one had the time or desire to let situations escalate and create team disharmony or management overheads. We therefore used unsettling headings like "Be prepared. Could <your concern> become an issue?" to introduce links to information about issues that may also have been at play.

We also applied our unsettlers strategy in the policy and system artifacts: we used unsettlers to pull people through to particular information that they often ignored but that they needed to read to perform their task correctly.

### **An unsettler example**

From time to time, senior managers needed to create new positions in a department for which they were responsible. Very few were reading guidelines about creating new staff positions, yet every one had to complete a complex form that specified position requirements. Managers found the form difficult to complete without help. They either copied and cloned a previous form or asked human resources staff for guidance.

The form was our opportunity. We created a checklist. Of course, checklists are part of the information developer's stock in trade, but this checklist was designed to do more than just explain data entry requirements. We wanted to use the checklist to encourage managers to perform the task with a full understanding of the business requirements.

In the checklist, we planted unsettlers to prompt managers to review further information. We tapped into a manager's


desire to comply and get form requests signed off, using unsettling prompts like “Will the title you specify for the position comply with HR guidelines?”

### **BALANCING NEED-TO-KNOW AND CONTEXT**

Where is the balance in information design between user need-to-know and user context? Does a recognition of the power of context sweep away current practices?

Not at all. What the user needs to know determines the scope and depth of the learning domain, but need-to-know will never give us the strategies we need to design the content for engagement.

How we organize and layer the domain must be driven by that much more complex ingredient, context, because context determines whether users engage with what we produce.

Even more exciting is the fact that, miraculously, context, and in particular, user agenda, can be mined for innovative design strategies—as John Carroll showed, as many other innovators have demonstrated, and as I and my clients have discovered. 

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