CDLR User Interface & Website Redesign Brief

This brief is designed for the CDLR management and programming teams to understand the modern web design paradigm, and how it will translate to the proposed CDLR website redesign. A website’s layout and navigation are the most critical usability factors. A proper design should make it quick and straightforward for a person to find the information they are looking for. This report outlines some of the strengths and weaknesses of four popular designs, and proposes website design changes for Center of Distance Learning Research.

The Toolbar

*The toolbar consists of a single highlighted row that contains links to the site’s pages.*

**Pros:** The toolbar provides simple, uncluttered navigation for sites that have only a few pages. Users can immediately identify what they are looking for, and find the appropriate link.

**Cons:** Due to the limitation of horizontal space, this layout is not good for sites with many pages. The width of the toolbar must be formatted to fit the smallest screen you would expect your users to have. The toolbar’s size at different screen resolutions must also be taken into consideration. Large toolbars can behave unpredictably when allowed to expand to the size of the user’s window. For this reason, they are usually reserved for fixed-width designs.
Dual Toolbars

The dual toolbar layout contains two highlighted rows for navigation. The first row contains the master categories of links, while the second row shows links to individual pages.

**Pros:** This navigation works well for sites that have clearly defined categories of content, and a few web pages for each category. Dual toolbars provide a visual cue for this organization concept.

**Cons:** Again, due to the limitation of horizontal space, this layout is not good for sites with many pages in each category. If the site only has a few pages or a poorly defined categories, the extra unnecessary navigation can frustrate users. The width of the toolbars must be formatted to fit the smallest screen you would expect your users to have. The size of the toolbars at different screen resolutions must also be taken into consideration. Large toolbars can behave unpredictably when allowed to expand to the size of the user's window. For this reason, they are usually reserved for fixed-width designs.
The Sidebar

The sidebar layout consists of a floating left pane that contains links to site’s pages.

**Pros:** This navigation style works well for sites that have many pages and links, as there is no limitation to the size of the sidebar. By having all of the links listed, users can quickly find the name of a specific link. The vertical nature of the toolbar allows it behave predictably in both fixed-width, and window-filling web designs.

**Cons:** The sidebar can be an unwise use of space if there are only a few links, as it constrains the width of your content. If there are too many links, it can be difficult for users to find information, unless they know the specific name of the link they’re looking for. Too many links can also increase visual clutter.
The Accordion

The Accordion consists of a floating left pane, with links grouped into categorical tabs. When a tab is clicked, the links belonging to that tab expand into view. At the same time, links from other tabs are hidden from view.

**Pros:** The Accordion is a very dynamic navigation method that works very well for websites that have a very clear organization, with lots of categories and links. Hiding the non-selected categories reduces user intimidation, and reduces visual clutter. The vertical nature of the toolbar allows it to behave predictably in both fixed-width, and window-filling web designs.

**Cons:** If the website only has a few links or has poorly defined structure, the extra navigation can make it difficult for users to find information.
Current CDLR Design

The current CDLR website uses both a toolbar and sidebar to organize the site’s links.

The CDLR website has a clear structure hierarchy. A toolbar is used to display the categories of links, while a sidebar displays the links associated with the selected category.
Current Design’s Toolbar with Sidebar

The toolbar and the sidebar have completely unassociated designs. There is no visual connecting element, and the styles and colors used are completely unrelated. There are no visual elements that link the toolbar with the sidebar.

The sidebar’s visual anchor is a graphic using the CDLR, A&M, and Verizon logos. This visual anchor provides no cue as to the category these links share.

CDLR Site Navigation Requirements

• The Center of Distance Learning Research has a very clear organization structure, consisting of many categories, with many links in each category.

• The new website should allow new and experienced users to quickly find information. These users should be able to properly view the site from all popular web browsers.

• Each page contains a considerable amount of text and graphics. The new site should be able to expand to the size of the user’s window, in order to display a comfortable amount of information across many different screen sizes.

• The Center of Distance Learning Research is a part of Texas A&M University, and is required to use Aggie Maroon #500000, and the Texas A&M University text at the top of each page.
Proposed CDLR Redesign

The proposed CDLR redesign uses an accordion for navigation, and expands to fill the browser window.

The top header bar uses Aggie Maroon #500000 as its primary color. Texas A&M University appears in the top left corner, just above the Center for Distance Learning Research.

The Accordion tabs are anchored by the header graphic, making it clearly identifiable as the site’s navigational component. The first tab is selected by default when the page loads, and is identified by its maroon color. The inactive tabs appear sage, and change to ecru as the mouse hovers over them. When a user experiences this interactivity, it reinforces the idea that the accordion is the navigation element.

The page stretches to the size of the browser window, making it accessible to those with low resolution displays, and useful to people with large displays.

In order to load incredibly quickly, this design has been created using very clean code, and only five image files. The end result of this zenlike minimalism, is a design that fits in just 84KB of disk space (only 8% of a MB). It loads in a fraction of a second with a broadband connection, and in just 15 seconds using an old dialup connection.
Modern Code Structure

This design is created using modern css+html standards. It displays properly in all popular browsers.

By placing the style data in css, and the raw text information in html, the site is easier for developers to work with, and accessible to more people on different platforms.

- The plain text and links are still perfectly accessible without the css style data, making the site accessible from pda's and mobile phones.
- With the plain text and site links clearly defined in the html, people using handicap accessibility software (such as screen readers) can easily navigate the site.
- With highly structured, simple and commented html code, developers can easily make modifications, without worrying about styling, or breaking the design.

Design for “X”

This modern design proposal for the Center of Distance Learning Research meets all of the site requirements listed on page 6. If there are changes that need to be made to these requirements, a new design can be created to meet them.

A complete list of site requirements will include five parts:

1. Hardware
   - Will the site be accessed from a desktop computer, tablet computer, pda, or smartphone?

2. Software
   - Which operating systems will the site be accessed from? (ex: Windows, Mac, Linux)
   - Which web browsers will the site be access from? (ex: Internet Explorer, Safari, Firefox)

3. Data
   - What information will be on the site?

4. Procedures
   - Is this site public or private? What policies must the site adhere to?

5. People
   - How will people use this site? What will their workflow look like?

Listing requirements allows the entire web development team to work together to create the ideal solution that meets the needs of the organization.

Contact

This brief is designed for the CDLR management and programming teams to understand the modern web design paradigm, and how it will translate to the proposed CDLR website redesign. If anyone should have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

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