

Drupal 7 Usability Study at Google

Building a Drupal website for the first time is like playing connect the dots. But some dots are invisible, most are not numbered, and you have no idea how many dots there are.

Objectives

We want to bring Drupal 7 usability issues to a wider audience to galvanize the community into improving the new user experience.

Additionally, we want to report usability data on popular contributed modules, because they are as much a part of the Drupal experience as Core.

Procedure

We recruited eight tech-savvy Google employees for one hour usability sessions on February 1 and 3, 2012. Our research script for February 1st focused on assessing new users' comprehension of fundamental Drupal concepts like content creation. On February 3rd, we put users in front of integral Drupal interfaces like Views and Image Styles to get specific feedback on interface usability. All usability studies were livestreamed through Google+ and livestream.com in tandem with active discussion in the #drupal-usability IRC channel.

Detailed findings are available at drupal.org/node/1427940.
Videos are available at youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1B7D6E805CE3A5A0.

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Report by @technicka and @garencheckley.



“For users to feel good about an application, they need to feel as if they understand it.”

Robert Hoekman Jr.,
Designing the Obvious

What does it feel like to be a new Drupal user?

A new user feels...

confused and overwhelmed by Drupal’s presentation of features/options.

alienated by unexplained terminology throughout Drupal.

helpless because of a perceived lack of support.

in the dark about the extent of Drupal’s capabilities.

uncertain about his/her progress while performing tasks.

stupid because they assume they are using Drupal “incorrectly.”

From our detailed findings, we created four layers that encompass the issues study participants faced:

1. **Conceptual**
2. **Flow**
3. **Terminology**
4. **Interface**

The Conceptual Layer

Most problems that new users encounter boil down to a missing understanding of how Drupal works.

Users conceptually understand blogs; they feel comfortable when Drupal acts like a blog. Drupal is more than just a blog, but it never explains its modus operandi.

“Why do I have to create a new content type for an event, because it just ends up on a webpage anyway?”

USER 4

Examples:

New users are not exposed to the idea of content types and how they relate to pieces of content, which causes significant confusion when managing content creation.

“ I don’t understand how you can publish a photo without it being on a page ”

USER 5

New users do not understand what a field is and how it relates to a content type.

“ I have no clue ”
response when asked, “What do you think fields are?”

USER 2

New users are not aware that Drupal is extensible and can be enhanced with modules. When looking to add new functionality, users do not think of modules.

“ I guess my first instinct here would just be to do a text input and then I would type in the date ”
response when asked to add date functionality

USER 4

We think that if users are given a basic primer that teaches them how Drupal thinks, it would prevent much of the frustration that our participants experienced.

The Flow Layer

New users need more handholding to become proficient faster.

New users feel lost inside Drupal because they can't tell what they are looking at, how they got there, or where they are supposed to go next to complete tasks. Their mental models often conflict with how Drupal is actually implemented.

Examples:

New users expect to be able to add a new image style from the same place they apply image styles.

“Why wouldn't it just be there!?”
looking for Image Styles under Display Fields

USER 5

After adding a new module via the link in the modules page, it is not obvious that it must be enabled or configured.

“Oh...? This is disabled??”
User realizes installing a module does not also enable it

USER 4

New users are confused by text formatting options on the create content page. Either they don't know what they mean, or they misinterpret their function.

“That's what I'm intending to do, I don't know if that's what I'm actually doing... I just don't understand what all this stuff is.”

USER 6

We think there needs to be a more conscious effort of how and when information and options are exposed to users. Users need to be given more feedback and guidance as they move through Drupal interfaces.

The Terminology Layer

Drupalese is not an easy language to learn, especially without a dictionary.

Drupal is filled with terminology that just doesn't make sense to new users, especially non-technical ones.

“I don't know these words in the context of websites”

USER 3

Examples:

The words used to describe field widgets or types are not understood by new users.

“ Term reference, what does that mean? ”

USER 4

A user is unable to find the Pathauto module from the modules page (preinstalled), because she doesn't look for the word “path”.

“ I'm looking for a place that says URL and automation. ”

USER 7

New users do not understand the concept of a “teaser” as a display or formatting type.

“ Can I look at a manual? ”
while trying to understand what a teaser means

USER 5

The best way to confuse users is to use words they don't understand and never explain them. The Drupal community should strive to use logical names. When that isn't possible, help users start speaking Drupalese.

The Interface Layer

New users don't trust Drupal.

Bad experiences with interfaces leave users uncertain about what will result from their actions.

“Oh yes, that finally worked. I don't know why it didn't work the other two times.”

USER 4

Examples:

Users do not realize they need to save an image style after updating it, resulting in confusion and lost changes.

“ Is it really because I'm not hitting save down here!?”

USER 8

When users preview a node, the interface does not make it apparent what the “trimmed” and “full” versions are and leaves users confused about how their post will appear.

“ Uhh, it's really confusing... ”
response when asked, “What is this interface showing you?”

USER 1

Users assume the “Add Content” link in the left-hand navigation block will add content that appears in that block.

“ An editor for the left nav...? ”
response when asked, “So where do you think that link would take you?”

USER 1

It should be a top priority to fix obvious interface fails (detailed in the [drupal.org handbook page](#)). Interface elements that are not broken yet consistently confuse users should be examined and improved .

Conclusion

Even though Drupal frustrates new users, it isn't all bad. Once they understand how it works, new users are impressed by the power and extensibility that Drupal offers. This study demonstrates that Drupal 7 brought significant usability improvements over Drupal 6. We think the following are notable improvements:

The presence of the toolbar menu gives users an easy way to directly access administration task screens.

The administration overlay enables intuitive switching between administrative tasks and the public-facing site.

Users exiting the administration overlay find themselves on a refreshed version of where they started, which is helpful when updating pages.

The Views creation wizard enabled users to quickly build views with relative ease.

The fact remains that Drupal does have a steep learning curve. As witnessed in this study, new users struggle to perform even basic tasks and often feel confused by underlying concepts. **Drupal's learning curve doesn't have to be this steep; let's shape Drupal to become more helpful and supportive for new users.**

Our Proposal

We propose that a new installation welcome users with a quick, digestible introduction of how to begin using Drupal. This would cover fundamental concepts like how Drupal manages content (content types and fields), modules and themes. Arming new users with this information would allow them to progress faster and make them more educated members of the Drupal community.

