What Sticks: Reflections from 15 Years as an IA Instructor
by Thom Haller

EDITOR’S SUMMARY
In his 15 years of teaching information architecture classes, Thom Haller’s aim for students was to identify their goals and help them work toward them. His 10-week courses focused on useful knowledge about how humans think and use information and how good information architecture can facilitate the process. The courses covered visual thinking, user actions, interconnections between information items and navigating mental models. From the theories and techniques introduced in the course, the most important points would continually surface when the class considered the question, “What sticks?” Weekly and at the end of a course, the students reflected on lessons with lasting value about the field, user experience and the practice of information architecture. In recent discussions with Haller, former students reported on enduring principles that stuck, resonating through their daily work. They agreed that the core tenet of information architecture – that making things simple and understandable creates the best user experience – is equally true in other domains. The concept is graphically represented by a triangle of connected fingers, symbolizing audience, goals and success metrics around a communication product.

KEYWORDS
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For 15 years, I taught information architecture classes to “graduate students” in Washington, D.C. Unlike most graduate students – people pursuing an advanced degree – these students enrolled in 10-week classes to explore new ideas and interact with others interested in the same subject matter.

I began teaching the class in the fall of 1998 with colleague Steve Ritchey (@steveritchey). We shared a passion for making the complex clear, buoyed by the emerging Internet and web structure we believed could improve. At the time, web resources were few. Web Pages That Suck topped the web geek’s best-seller list. But from the very beginning, we were armed with a text – Rosenfeld and Morville’s Information Architecture for the World Wide Web (the so-called “Polar Bear book,” from the illustration on its cover) – a resource to which we were able to refer for the entire 15 years of the course.

Performance Focus
From the beginning the course was structured in a performance-focused framework. Students identified goals for the class and worked to accomplish them. Goals, like students, differed. Flipping through a list of goals, I note that some were very focused:

- Gain an understanding of the principles of IA and their various manifestations in the world around me
- Determine if this is a career direction I would like to pursue
- Apply principles of information architecture outside of websites – for example, print documents, airports, cubicles, etc.

Other goals were more immediate:
Instructional Challenges

My instructional challenge was to provide content in coherent wholes that built upon previous lessons learned. I always reserved our final class in Week 10 for student presentations. Students would often present a research idea they were exploring, synthesize a practical assignment they were accomplishing – often for the employer who was funding the class – or report back on a class (group) project exploring real-world architectural challenges and providing recommendations or solutions.

How could we all travel effectively from Week 1 (introductions and overview) to Week 10 (final presentations and a class party)? We used the syllabus to guide our journey, and we used a class conversation we called “What sticks?” to serve as glue from week to week.

The syllabus always began with an opportunity for students to interact and explore their perceptions of the field. Obviously, this exploration incorporated reading from texts (a variety of recommended texts supporting the Polar Bear book), but also included interviews with information architects. It was not uncommon for guest speakers – frequently a panel – to visit with us early in the course to talk about their experiences as information architecture professionals.

I framed the class as a quest for useful knowledge: What happens in humans’ heads when we use information? What are strategies for helping them out? What framework can we adopt for envisioning users? What research techniques can we adopt? What political hurdles do we cross? What enables humans to get their jobs done? The class provided a link between information structure and human experience.

During the early weeks of class, we spent a good bit of time talking about humans – we’d explore what happens in their heads as they use information and make their way through the world.

I clustered content using the mnemonic GAIN (humans think Graphically, they seek to Act, they look for Interconnections and they try to Navigate). Students explored each concept – getting lost in visual information, trying to accomplish tasks in think-aloud protocols, articulating different organizational relationships and exploring mental models and patterns.

I was fortunate to come upon a quote by Albert Einstein that helped frame my thinking for the class. Apparently, a colleague asked him why Einstein was asking students the same question in the final exam that he had asked the year before. “Because the answer has now changed,” he responded. Similarly, IA conversations constantly changed, and I often benefitted from guest speakers following (or leading) these changes.

Guests took on different topics: incorporating cognitive research, developing search systems, communicating design, identifying and using patterns, developing intranet systems, using different research methods, conducting card sorts, sketching, running usability tests, using remote testing tools, comparing research methodologies and practices, designing a content strategy, developing responsible design, optimizing search results with metadata, incorporating accessibility thought – I would thank all our guests by name, but I’m not prepared to leave anyone out.

You may wonder how students could maintain focus in a class with such disparate topics. I owe a lot of our camaraderie and success that emerged from a beginning-of- class conversation in which we discussed “what sticks.”

For our “graduate” (work-world adult) classes, folks would arrive in class harried from a long day at the office. To help reacclimatize students to the lesson topics of the day, I would begin by asking, “What sticks from your reading?” “What sticks from your individual study or project work?” “What sticks from your real-world job experiences this week?”

Students had to synthesize their week-gone-by experiences or relate an “aha moment.” Some classes turned into therapy encounters. Students would face obstacles on the job, take a lesson from class back into the workplace and emerge with new installments in their experience.
At the conclusion of our 10 weeks together (if time allowed), we would reflect on “what sticks” from the entire course. Here’s an example of a class summary:

About the field:
- Integrated field with no discrete boundaries.
- There is value in being a generalist (and the UX community offers that option).
- Work offers silos. The class provides community and breaks down the walls.
  - You might spend all your time working on something, but it may be useful.
  - Community helps.

About user experience:
- The user experience touches every aspect of your life.
- Content plus structure = communication.
- We need to be the user’s voice — so we need to understand who our audience is and what they want to do.

About our practice:
- We must think about context and politics as we look for solutions.
- Everything on the website matters.
- There is an art in the presentation of information and the amount of detail and placement of information matters to users.
- We can highlight those topics/areas that matter to others.
- Patterns, patterns, patterns.
- Many opportunities for continued learning (this is exciting).
- Breadth is good – the label “IA” can be narrow. But the skills are broad (they matter).
- Tools, thinking, approaches all come together.
- We have an opportunity to present and refine stories.
- Having this knowledge is power (makes projects successful).
- We have the power to articulate what we feel about design and interaction.
- Finding vocabulary, finding research, matters.
- Thinking matters.

What Sticks Now

In assembling this article for the Bulletin, I reached out to some former students and asked them “what sticks” from having participated in the class.

- More than anything, what sticks for me – as one who hasn’t been a part of the professional online world for several years – is how relevant IA/UX principles are to my work. As a writer and editor, I’m equally concerned with my audience and how I can provide an experience that makes them receptive to what we ask them to read and hope they’ll do. Every day, I think about those principles, use them in my work and try to instill them in my colleagues.
- What sticks for me? I’m still going with the Remove, Organize, Hide, Displace advice from Giles Colborne’s book, Simple and Usable. I’ve been doing a lot of mockup work lately, and those four directives are often on my mind as I’m working through the process of developing those. That book was also the first thing that sprang to mind at a meet-up I attended last week when someone in the group asked the panel to name the book that really got them interested in doing UX – the book that they recommend others to read about UX.
- As an archivist (during the class and since), I deal with IA/UX in the context of making information accessible to users through catalogs, websites, brochures, and also interacting directly with patrons’ reference requests. What sticks for me is everything. At the recent national archivist conference, I attended a session on UX with digital primary sources and the theme for students of information architecture. I am currently working with a sizable oral history collection, designing our publicly available information in such a way that our cultural wealth reaches its audience. All my work relates [to] what I learned in my information architecture course.
- IA and UX are not an exact science; they very much depend on the human context, a context that is ever evolving. Our role as IA and UX professionals is to bring knowledge of how humans understand and interact with information – and apply that knowledge to the evolving context of ever-changing technology. Technology will change, but human needs to understand information won’t.
I recently attended a happy hour gathering organized by a former student. She invited all the attendees from our Fall 2012 class to meet for a chance to catch up and share stories. I handed each student a button (Figure 1) that shows fingers connected in a triangle. In class, we used the triangle as a focusing strategy. The corners encouraged us to consider who our audience is, what they want and how they (and you) measure success. The triangle helped us think about content we would put in a communication product and content we would leave out.

After accepting the button, one former student placed it on her lapel saying, “This sticks….This definitely sticks.”