

Creating a Webmagazine

Report on the course

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Introduction - Why I suggested to work with a “familiar brand”

At the beginning of the academic year (2007) I’ve been offered to be the tutor in the Argonaut course “Creating a (Multicultural) Webmagazine”, under the careful sight of Yonca Ermutlu. I thought that it could be an interesting experience and given the fact that I had some previous experience in creating a webmagazine I was also intrigued by the challenge of working into a multicultural environment.

Checking the previous iterations of the course’s outcomes, I however had the feeling there where some things that we could improve from the very beginning of the course, specially in the “planning phase”. Some of the previous issues of the magazine were good looking but somehow lacking, from my point of view, of coherence and compactness. In a way, I had this feeling that people were writing of different issues without a common thread or editorial line, and then trying to put them together at the end of the process, squeezing and stretching their articles to make them fit under a common logo or idea.

This problem come into being due the practical difficulties of putting fifteen people who do not know each other together and demand them to reach an agreement on a common editorial line. It’s a goal hard to achieve even in groups of people familiar to each other, and hence even harder in our specific case. I suppose it’s just a matter of chemistry, depending of the year and on the variety of people that meet at the course, and should not be forced from above. Giving them complete freedom can give life to a beautiful product but even to a really dull one. Also, in real life very seldom happens that you have complete editorial freedom from the beginning to the end of the process of creation, so the idea was also to shape the course in a way that resembled a real job.

From these considerations came the idea of starting the course giving them already some guidelines, some “borders” and a framework to help them focus on what matters more, that is

the content of the webmagazine. This framework was *Groteski*, the printed magazine of the media department. *Groteski* has various characteristics that were fitting the needs of the course:

- a) *Groteski* has already a name, or a “brand”. We could avoid the struggle to have one name instead of the another. However, we decided to twist it a little to make it look more international, so the final version was *Groteski International Edition* or *Grotesque*.
- b) *Groteski* has a really specific philosophy on how an article should be written. They start from a weird perspective and try to develop a discussion that is not predictable or boring. This seemed to me a really good “editorial line” to start with.
- c) *Groteski* has a very coherent visual style. We later decided that on this issue we could make some changes, to make it more colorful than the black and white printed magazine. Still, I think we achieved some good degree of stylistic coherence.
- d) *Groteski* is in Finnish, hence most of the foreign students cannot read it. I was thinking that joining efforts could strengthen the cohesion of the Media Department, of the brand *Groteski* and also create the first issue ever completely in English, in the hope that the experience will be replicated in the next years.

These are the points on which I based my suggestion of adopting *Groteski* as a basis for this year course. It was not imposed to the students - they could still create a webmagazine from the very beginning - but the idea was widely accepted, so we decided to stick to it just after the first lesson.

First part of the course

The first part of the course, that I would identify as the first two lessons, was more practical and focused on explaining ideas and the tools we were going to use. On the first day we hosted Jussi Pålmen and Henna Raatikainen, both in the board of *Groteski*, to explain to the students what is *Groteski* and how it's made. It was a really interesting lesson, full of details and hints on how to organize the group, unfortunately spoiled by the scarce numeric participation of students due the overlapping of another course. In a way I think that the non-participation to this specific lesson slowed down the process of defining roles later on, so I would suggest for the next year compulsory presence to the introductory class. The result of

missing the first day was that still at the 3rd or 4th meeting some people didn't know about *Groteski*.

On the second meeting Jere Majava explained how to create blogs in WordPress. WordPress is also the platform we used to publish our version of *Groteski*. It seemed a good idea in the beginning, due to the handy way you can publish articles and write comments, but in the late stages of creation it proved very limiting for most of the layouts we were examining. I think that next year it would be better to buy a domain and some space and build a website from the very start. Possibilities are much wider especially if some of the students are gifted in graphic/programming (and some were this year). Also, I have perplexities on the efficiency of forcing them to open a blog that it's unlikely they will ever use after the course (who wants one already have it's own, the others know that it will be closed when they leave Finland). So, I feel like suggesting some alternatives:

- a) If they go for the website option, they could have a personal file directly on the website, with their picture, quotes and info. Also, if they do own a blog, a link to their blog.
- b) If it's preferred that they stick to the blog formula, it's convenient that they open their blog on a platform that they can access even once they are not students at the University of Helsinki anymore. In this way they can continue to develop their own blog independently from the course.

Second part of the course

I would call the second part "Defining the team". It started from the 3rd lesson with my presentation about Ring, a webmagazine I was shaping with some friends about gaming culture. I think that the history and the inner dynamics of Ring are still very up-to-date and useful to understand what kind of problems a magazine can face during its creation. Even though it was first published in 2002, and some tools developed since that time, things like the team dynamics, the distribution of roles and responsibilities and the process of defining an editorial line are archetypal. For the next year, if required, I will be able to provide new examples, because in these days I am working on another webmagazine, called Babel, that absorbs the legacy of Ring to create a project which is exploiting the web's potential better. Also, the structure of Babel is far more dynamic and eventually unconstrained by the editorial obligations that brought to Ring's collapse.

On the 3rd lesson there was also had the presentation of a document that listed all the roles needed to create *Groteski International Edition*. On this last issue I have some comments to make: it took several extra sessions (2 or 3 at least) for the students to decide in what role they were feeling suitable. In a way this is normal, but on the other side some of them were just joining more than one group (e.g. being in the Journalists Team, in the Language Checking Team and also in the Editorial Team) and then working actively in just one of them. I suggest to put a limit in the number of roles you can accept from now on. Besides, I noticed that if some groups grow too much, some of the members end up to be unemployed. I think that the right amount of people would be:

5 people in the Editorial Team

3 people in the Visual / Programming Team (often they are the same persons)

4 people in the Language Checking Team

All the rest should be in the Journalists Team.

This year there was overabundance especially in the Visual / Programming Team (according to Moodle, 8 people in total), and the outcome was that one guy worked a lot, two worked fairly and the rest barely participated.

The discussion on the theme lasted approximately for 3 more meetings. It was supposed to be decided between the 4th and 5th lesson, but there were three different proposals (one Consumer Group, one Creative Group - with a mixed bag of ideas - and the Underground Group). It took a while but at the end we were able to find a synthesis in the concept "Hidden". Reading the outcome I can say I'm quite satisfied with the articles because most of them are trying to deal with this "hidden" concept in a way or another, with the exception of *The Invisible People of the Occupied Territories*, which I personally find well written but out of topic.

From the 6th meeting the group was supposed to meet without the supervision of the teacher, but it took at least another session before they were able to organize themselves.

Third part of the course

The third part of the course is the one where the various teams were meeting independently. Most of the journalists were writing from home, while the Editorial, Visual and Programming

Team were meeting on a regular basis in the classroom. I think that in this phase something went wrong on the communicative level between the various teams.

First of all, some of the journalists were not giving feedback on the status of their work even when solicited by the Editorial Team. This was due other courses deadlines, not reading emails or not checking Moodle on a regular basis. I'm perfectly fine with the idea that people can work from home but not if this means do not respect the work of the others. The problem caused the Editorial Team to work sometimes in slow motion, waiting to get info and articles from the journalists. For this reason, I suggest for next year live report of the situation: meeting regularly in the class would have proved really useful for the Editorial Team to coordinate better the various teams.

In a second instance, communication between the Editorial Team and the Visual Team was somehow failing until the later stages of the creation of the webmagazine. This led the team to decide upon the graphical layout when the time was already running out. Even though the final result is quite nice, it would be important in the future to encourage the two teams to meet more and exchange frankly each other ideas (especially on the dichotomy "what will be nice to do" / "what we can achieve with our tools and knowledge"). It's important to add that in this part of the process the choice of using a blog system proved quite limiting.

Articles layout problems

On one issue the Editorial Team needs to be much more clear the next time: the template of the articles, meaning number of characters, indentation, characters of the header and requirements of the sub header. This time too many articles at their first submission were missing the requirements, causing some argument and putting the Editorial Team out of whack. There is also to say that the Editorial Team *was* actually specifying some guiding lines, but for the reasons explained in the *Third part of the course* paragraph they were not always understood.

Language checking

The language checking worked 50% well and 50% bad, according to who was checking the articles. The main problem was that there were far too many passages of the same article between the author and the checker, and when the time came to publish them, some articles were still unpolished from red-pen corrections. This problem is also related to the difficulty to identify the version of the document one is working on.

This could be easily avoided using Google Docs as suggested in the 4th lesson, but the idea was discarded because some students thought they could manage through Moodle or by email. Anyway, Google Docs allows you to work on just one single document, without creating confusion with several different drafts and sparing you the pain to locate the right one on your hard drive. This experience should be shared with the students before letting them say “no” to such a useful tool.

Finishing the webmagazine

The webmagazine was completed the very last day available. Still some pictures were missing (the fact of not having an “official photographer” was in my opinion a blank that should be filled in the next courses), the graphic layout was to fix and most of the articles had to be uploaded. In this sense I think that some of the people in the Visual Team were trying to avoid to work until the very last, leaving most of the job to one or two persons. Also, using the blog system, it would have been better if every journalist would have had uploaded its own article independently, for reasons connected to the name displaying on the screen (but we realized about this problem a bit too late). Even though the outcome is quite positive, some glitches are still to fix by now (technical and related to the contents, such as grammar mistakes and the like). Useless to say that without rushing to complete the issue the team could spend some more time polishing up the final product.

Grading System

As already expressed during the progression of the course, I think that the Passed/Failed system is not fair to evaluate the amount of work carried out during the development of the webmagazine. Some of the roles are really demanding, some are much more easy going. Moreover, I guess that the possibility to get a better grade would push people to be more responsible and even propose themselves for the more challenging roles. The problem with this Passed/Failed system is that some people, feeling that they would pass in any case, did not carried out their work properly and left others into troubles. This was perceived very clearly by the Editorial Team (about missed deadlines and unfinished articles) and by the Visual Team (about the pictures they were supposed to use/take for the articles), and was contributing to create some negative tension between team members.

Conclusion

To be the first attempt to give *Groteski* an international version, I think we were overall quite successful. Said this, the experience was really useful to understand how to improve the course in the case the experiment will be replicated next year, starting from the very beginning with an efficient and productive organization of the available resources.