From Concept to Creation: Exploring Student Perspectives on Figma's Prototyping Tools

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Introduction and Need for Innovation

Effectively communicating through online channels, especially on websites, is an essential skill for agricultural communicators as they enter the workforce (Irlbeck & Akers, 2009; Leal et al., 2020). Building a website is not as simple as it may sound, as there are many procedures to accomplish before attaining a successful, accessible website. Web design requires steps to plan, create, assess, test, launch, and maintain a website (Jolaoso & Main, 2023; Schäferhoff, 2023). In the planning process, web designers emphasize user-experience design standards (Laubheimer, 2024), and they indicate the importance of the prototyping and testing stages (Manhas, 2017). A prototype is a functioning, interactive version of a website that stimulates the look and feel of a website prior to coding and development (Figma Learn, n.d.). It has become an "obvious and unquestionable" necessity in planning and testing in web design (Lim et al., 2008, p. 2) and allows designers to identify user priorities (Andrews et al., 2012). Figma is a popular program for creating prototypes for websites because it offers tools to create design elements like shapes, vectors, animations, and icons (Figma Learn, n.d.). It also supports features like collaboration, components, code inspection, wireframing, and website preview (Figma Learn, n.d.). As web design turns toward a user-centered design approach, prototyping websites has become an essential step in ensuring designers create effective websites (Kinzie et al., 2002). Therefore, this project implemented a class assignment where students created a website prototype to better understand the planning required for a successful user-centered portfolio design.

How it Works

Throughout a semester-long web design course, students utilized each step of the user-centered design process to create a personal portfolio site. Before building their final websites, students were tasked with building a prototype of their portfolio using Figma. The prototyping process had three phases that were built on each other: wireframe sketch, mockup, and prototype. Students began by brainstorming their layout in a basic wireframe sketch on paper, showing the overall layout of portfolio site sections. To mockup their designs, students built these sketches in Figma and added color and font styles. Afterward, students were tasked with developing the prototype. Here, they finalized the layout of their portfolio site including all pages, copy, images, buttons, and colors. Following, they applied prototyping techniques, providing links and working navigation as it would appear on their final portfolio site. At the conclusion of the prototyping assignment, students were asked questions to understand how prototyping in Figma impacted their strategic design process. Students were asked five questions: 1) what did you learn about strategic website planning by completing your prototype?, 2) how did knowing your audience impact your prototype design?, 3) how do you describe your thoughts about working in Figma?, 4) how did previous class content help you strategically build your prototype?, and 5) how will you apply this prototype to your final portfolio site? Results for this innovative poster are derived from students' responses to the reflection questions during the spring 2024 and fall 2025 semesters. To analyze the data, we conducted a thematic analysis (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Results to Date/Implications

Student responses revealed prototyping their portfolio site helped them bring all of their website pieces together and made them confident in the next steps of their website creation. Specifically,

students shared how *prototyping helped them focus on user- and client-centered design,* the *importance of laying out their websites*, and their *desire for more time in Figma*.

Overall, the students expressed a positive impression of working in Figma. The students expressed *prototyping helped them focus on user- and client-centered design*. For example, one student described, "Designing with this perspective helped guide my design when it came to layout, visuals, and general flow." Another student explained that user-centered design helped them "know what [users] are looking for" and "prioritize that content." Another shared, "having a plan for the website allows the designer and the client to clearly understand what the site should look like before it goes live." Another positive theme emerged, *the importance of laying out your website.* Students expressed the prototype in Figma was similar to a writing outline. For example, "If I were to make my final portfolio without a planning phase, many elements would likely slip through the cracks." Another student said, "It began to make sense why web designers break the process down into so many steps rather than just starting in Wix and making their site."

For the remaining students who were less positive in their opinion of the program, they expressed a *desire for more time in Figma.* One student shared, "Figma is very helpful, I just think it would take many projects for me to get familiar with it to the point where I recommend it." Other students expressed how Figma did not have all the tools of web design platforms, like Wix. For example, a student said, "However, I can foresee making a few changes on Wix and utilizing features I could not replicate on Figma."

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Creating prototypes, or web design layouts, is a critical component in the web design process. This assignment showed prototyping as a useful tool for brainstorming layouts before website creation, and it provided an essential planning step to identify changes for effective user experience. To teach prototyping skills, instructors in university-level web design courses in agricultural communications should use prototyping tools, like Figma, to give students real-life experience creating prototypes for web design. After implementing this in a classroom setting, we recommend this activity be a part of curriculum that emphasizes other steps in web design planning (i.e., outlines, website copy, visual style guides) before prototyping. Additionally, instructors should break down the prototyping steps (i.e., wireframe, mockup, prototype) in a class activity and have multiple examples of each step. This activity works best with instruction time devoted to learning Figma and in-class worktime to troubleshoot the program. To wrap up the project, students should be given time after the assignment to reflect on the prototype creation process, its application to their final portfolio site, and complete peer reviews. We also recommend including a redesign challenge assignment, where students are given an existing website to analyze and redesign using Figma's features.

Cost/Resources Needed

Figma provides a free "professional team" account for educators and students. Therefore, there is no subscription cost to access advanced features on Figma. Laptops and internet access are essential to creating these prototypes. Though minimal physical or financial resources are needed, adequate instructional time should be allocated to teach students the basics of this new program. Additionally, instructors will need additional time to build their personal knowledge of the program in order to successful teach others.

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