

Design for Purpose

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Designing for a Purpose: Translating Cultural Concepts into Learning and Research Tools

The *Sights and Voices of Dispossession* website is a bilingual showcase for over 550 resources from and about the culture of landlessness in Brazil. Photographs, films, poems, songs, essays, murals and drawings produced by landless rural workers in Brazil and collected by academics based in the United States, Brazil and the UK are supplemented in the archive by studies and statements, by intellectuals and artists, about the culture of landlessness. Reference materials, including a bibliography, glossary and cartography, and photographs by the internationally renowned photographer Sebastião Salgado complete the collection. Brazilian academic Else R P Vieira orchestrated this international and transdisciplinary project, acting as Project Director and Academic Editor.

Vieira's role of making possible this unique collection of resources, not least in the sheer amount of time and effort spent, should not be underestimated. This is an important point with regard to designing the archive's web presence. Simply entering resource details into a generic database and displaying a standard, alphabetised list of authors and titles on a web page would hardly do justice to the time spent accessing and collecting resources which are from a rural population dispersed across a country of continental dimensions. Moreover, to produce a standard, 'mediation neutral' archive would constitute a missed opportunity given Vieira's ambition of creating learning and research tools which contribute to our understanding of landlessness. Simply put, in the same way that an online book store, such as Amazon, would not be viable if their web presence consisted of a library-style, alphabetised list of books, Vieira's archive would not fulfil its purpose if the resources were handed over to technologists for standardised processing and display.

Instead of solely performing a technical role, the work of the designer and producer of the website thus becomes that of, firstly, an enabler and secondly, a collaborator in the research process. For the former, an iterative software development process was employed. Iteration involves a continual moving forward and going back over development stages, gradually working towards the end product through re-working and re-designing the software. Iteration served as an enabling schema in this project, which allowed Else Vieira to intervene in and contribute to the technical development process so that culture rather than technology began as, and remained, the project's

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primary concern. For the latter, collaborative role, exploring and exploiting a synergy between the project's purposes and the mediative potential of web technologies proved useful.

The archive provides multiple routes to each resource, rather than one, set way of accessing each resource. For example, the drawing *Brazil cries over its 500 years of history* by Fábio Junior de Lima is situated within three contexts. The resource is accessible, firstly, within the 'Children's drawings' section of the 'Emerging culture by media type' web page, and secondly as part of 'The revision of history' sub-section of 'Culture' within the 'Emerging culture by categories' page. Lastly, the resource is cross-referenced on the 'Media specificity' page under the 'Children's drawings' media listing, within the 'Culture' category sub-heading of 'The revision of history'. Although textual descriptions of multiple routes are troublesome, within a web environment providing many routes to each resource works to foreground interconnections across resources: the above resource is found among other children's drawings in the first route and among drawings, murals and lyrics in the second route. Instead of (with)holding each resource within a set place, thus stating definitively 'here is the resource, in its place' (and tending to be an arbitrary place such as an alphabetical list of authors or resource titles), the archive works to prompt reflection, to prompt an openness to the positioning and context, and thus the meaning, of each resource. As such, within the technical structuring of the archive there is a confluence of acknowledging multiple learning modes or styles and recognising multiple meanings of the culture of landlessness.

Two key themes for producing successful web projects have emerged here. Recognising that websites inevitably constitute a lens, a form of mediation, which can serve project aims is a first step for successful projects. A corollary is that meaningful collaboration between subject and technical experts is critical if projects are to fulfil intended aims and objectives, if projects are to be successfully designed for purpose. The *Sights and Voices of Dispossession* website is an example of these themes in action: the site's end value is to function as a trigger within the wider, ongoing process of attempting to understand landlessness.

Project website: <http://www.landless-voices.org/vieira/>

Dr John Walsh
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