

Mental Models: Aligning Design Strategy with Human Behavior

By Indi Young

(Rosenfeld Media, 2008) - available in both paperback and digital (PDF) form

Review by Ross Gagliano

Indi got her BS in Computer Science from Cal Poly and began her master's at Colorado State. She then worked as a software engineer, later managing Web applications that focused on the user. Her concepts in mental models derive from attempting to bridge the developer-user gap. Her expertise ranges from structuring cross-functional teams, to managing participant recruiting, and conducting user interviews, thereby creating effective tools for exchanging results.

This book summarizes the entire development process in a rigorous way, explaining the application of models for design and testing. At Adaptive Path, a company she co-founded, her teams worked with such clients as Agilent, Dow-Corning, Charles Schwab, Microsoft, PeopleSoft, Sybase, and Visa. In over 30 interview-based projects, her mental models were involved in 22 of them.

So, you are asking: what exactly are mental models; how can they be employed in the design process; and how should data be collected to create such models? These seem like tough questions, and they are fully answered in the book. Some may still resist as it seems like it involves a lot of talking before the start of the usual designing, coding, and installing.

Basically, mental models include various graphical representations of the objects, relationships, and dynamics of the development process. Useful forms that include diagrams (Affinity, XML Visio, and Omnigraffle) and templates (patterns and transcripts in Excel and Word formats) can be found at: <http://www.rosenfeldmedia.com/books/mental-models>. An informative interview with Ms. Young can also be found at: <http://www.bboxesandarrows.com/view/what-is-your-mental>.

Ross Gagliano is a retired professor and co-founder of the Computer Science Department at Georgia State University. Previously, he was a senior researcher at the Georgia Tech Research Institute.