Change, Caps Lock, and Creativity

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Recently I attended a meeting in Brussels that was arranged to provide a forum for discussion about the guidelines for children's use of ICT that are being prepared by the ETSI organization. The guidelines that are being produced cover a range of areas including service providers, content providers, interface design and the physical design of input and output tools.

Anyone that attended the panel that I participated in at Leeds will no doubt be aware that I have an uneasy relationship with guidelines, especially when applied to products for children. There is a delicate balance to be trod between prescription and possibilities and although most guideline creators are motivated by all the right reasons, the products of their endeavours are all too often taken out of context and applied in a cavalier way.

Software developers like to have guidelines, students like to have guidelines, and organizations like to have guidelines. Each of these stakeholders has a slightly different reason for their affinity to guidelines. For software developers, guidelines make design and implementation easier and quicker and avoid costly mistakes. Students are similarly motivated; they also like guidelines as they perceive them to be in some way 'trustworthy' and they provide them with a feeling of security about their design and development activities. Organizations like guidelines because they are enforceable and the application of them can be measured and monitored. In some instances (and I make the point that ETSI is **not** one of these) the guidelines can be sold for profit.

Some guidelines, as a result of their prolonged application become almost de-facto standards. I recall only a week ago, being told that animation is bad on websites. When I asked why, the individual replied 'because Nielsen says it is'. In this respect, guidelines become the enemy of creativity and they put brick walls in front of designers.

It is the case that well constructed guidelines can result in better-designed products; a guideline for the design of children's products that is well known is '*use language that the child can understand*'. It is unlikely that anyone would claim that this is a bad guideline, and it is equally unlikely that this guideline would really get in the way of creative design.

There is a renewed interest in the usability of the QWERTY keyboard for child users and most experts will argue that children would do better with child sized keyboards. When you watch children at keyboards, one feature that is noted is their reliance on the Caps Lock key to change the case of characters that they type; they turn on capitals, and they then turn off capitals. The use of the shift key comes quite late in a child's keyboarding apprenticeship and one might ask the question 'Do children need the caps lock key?' and more to the point, 'Does anyone need the caps lock key?'

Guidelines might propose that keyboards be made smaller and that children should know when Caps Lock is on, or off (System status!). What if, instead of trying to make adult devices fit children, we tried to make devices that children could use? Would our keyboards still have a Caps Lock key? Would they have both Del and Backspace (another confusing area for children), and would we label keys Shift and AltGr? More to the point, would our keyboard look the way it does, in fact, would we have a keyboard at all?

Attempts to make the QWERTY keyboard into a more useable device have generally focused on the production of new layouts and the use of prediction for faster text input and have been tested on adults that have already become conditioned to use the QWERTY keyboard.

Technology for children should be technology that is designed for them. The easy option is to take technology that has been designed (sometimes (as with the QWERTY keyboard) less designed than developed!) for

children, make some small adaptations and feel good that the adaptation has been made. The hard option is to try and forge a creative change, and to realize that with new populations come new opportunities.