



July 29, 2021

Why do whiteboards still exist?

BEST PRACTICES

Written by: Max Hoaglund, Senior Technical Lead

Every time I design a software system, a project plan, or a coffee table, I remember how blissfully fast, expansive, and satisfying the first few steps in an initiative can be. I get the brief privilege of asking lots of questions without being too burdened by the details, and making decisions that feel important and energetic. Hand-waving and glossing-over are, for a short time, an acceptable and responsible part of my work. The 'speed' in this early phase of your average project has an immediacy to it- you get to feel it. You might enjoy this speed enough to imprint strongly on it and seek it out! This mode of working wouldn't be possible without tools which encourage and enable rapid, highly-visible, easily-reversible collaboration. That's why we still have whiteboards, answer given, article over.

But naturally it's not that simple. The whiteboard is often the first step on a long walk- the first tool in a long series of fairly crummy, cheap tools which open and enliven your workflow in

an irreplaceable way. All of these tools demand that you pay the same toll- stop, for a moment, using your finely-tuned IDE on your perfectly-angled, over-powered laptop. Abandon your godlike querying, filtering, and exporting capacities. Distance yourself from ordered, diagrammatic worlds of predefined shapes and styles, and go find a marker or pen that works.

This is not about screen time, eye strain, or technological detoxing. When you use a whiteboard with your colleagues, a pen and legal pad alone (poor you), or even when you crack open MSPaint on a conference call with a customer, you are probably doing so because you need to go fast. You need to communicate, sketch, and erase whole ideas and components quickly and you don't want to worry about all the specifics. Being willing to get out of your code, schema, diagram, user story, gantt chart world is a key quality to cultivate if you want to be a good designer, planner, or developer. You've probably heard that before.

But... it's not that simple either. Until now, I've only mentioned literal tools- things you can buy, build fluency in, and pick up and put down. For every moment where such a tool is used to speed up your process there are dozens more where a communication posture, a moment of patience, or a small intervention is what's accelerating you and your project. These non-tools are harder to identify and list, but the key is that they ask the same thing of you, the designer/planner/ developer. They ask that you deliberately break from a place of empowered deliberation, and go zoom around in open space, abstraction, and emotion. Here are some non-tools that have substantially sped up my work over the years.

- *Scope control during design and implementation discussions.* It's hard to know what not to discuss, especially with a bunch of nerds in the room. The person who knows what not to devote time to and can gently express guidance around that is a massive asset in any project. The benefit of this person and their action is something you can observe but not measure- but think of how many of your 30-minute meetings would swell to 90 minutes without judiciously-applied limitations.

- *Holding thoughts and images loosely.* This one may sound odd, but reflect on how often teammates and colleagues talk past one another and fail to productively agree or disagree on a given issue, merely because they stubbornly grasp incompatible mental images of the project/subject. Thoughts are cheap and you'll manufacture better ones in the future, so let go of your baggage and run ahead.
- *Tolerating or welcoming (when possible) the idiosyncratic ways your colleagues and customers deliver their points of view.* Frustration and even anger can be expressed safely- and they show motivation and conviction. An irate client or colleague is playing with a full deck, and they may be sharing a thought or feeling that, once received and addressed, will propel your project forward. A vague or confusing presentation of a design or concept can be frustrating to follow- but sometimes you can't wait for the confidence or detail you might prefer.

Patiently listening to your supervisor's gripes feels like it takes an eternity. Letting go of the thought of getting another architect to just understand why your way is better for these five specific reasons feels like giving up and abandoning the time you've already spent. When a planner on your project politely stops you from diving into implementation during a grooming meeting, you feel a loss of momentum. In this way, these non-tools feel nothing like the whiteboard but they speed up your projects in the same way. Are you using them often enough?

Of course, all of these non-tools demand that you identify the moment when you must use them- squashing a technical discussion at the wrong moment is just as bad as writing your whole implementation out on a whiteboard.

Working fast really isn't about getting into an ideal groove and staying in it, undisturbed, for as long as possible. It's about, at the very least, deploying small interventions, safely and mindfully disagreeing with your teammates, and not treating your ideas like exquisite glass elephants.

CONTACT US

