

How General Assembly designs cutting-edge learning experiences

The pioneering education company talks about discovering Abstract during ‘desperate times’ while hunting for a Git-based design tool.



General Assembly is a pioneer in education and career transformation, specializing in today’s most in-demand skills with 20 worldwide campuses and 40,000 alumni. General Assembly employs a blended learning model to teach cutting-edge skills in design, marketing, and technology. Students can learn on campus, online, and also in a virtual campus that’s a hybrid of the two. They needed a solution to manage a large, constantly evolving design library so they could consistently, stay on brand across their three platforms.

Designing an effective blended learning experience is not easy

A big area of focus for General Assembly is creating and versioning content to deliver a consistent learning experience across different teaching modalities. They had three applications delivering educational content on the web: an enterprise product, an assessment tool, and an online consumer platform. They all delivered content but were styled differently. “They all used different colors, font stacks, line heights, alignment. It was a nightmare to manage and consistency was lacking,” says Bryan Berger, Product Design Manager, who manages a team of product designers. His goal was to combine those different elements into one design library so the company has a consistent brand and design foundation across modalities.

“With Abstract, we can all work on the same file across multiple teams. A year ago, it was impossible to do this in a seamless way.”

Bryan Berger | Product Design Manager



Design review session

“If I were to put Abstract down as a card in a card game it would be the ace in my deck.”

Bryan Berger | Product Design Manager

Before Abstract

“This problem was as bad as you can imagine,” says Bryan, who is also a frontend developer and was familiar with Git. The team experimented with Git, but not everyone was comfortable using low-level command lines. They switched to the Git Sketch Plugin, but it turned out to be too technical and rigid for the team. Then they tried using templates with Dropbox, but that system lacked true version control. They even looked at Craft Library by InVision. “None of these addressed the core problem of accountability — who changed what, when, and where. I was starting to get desperate,” he laughs. “It was sheer luck that I found Abstract and it was perfect for what we needed.”

Getting up and running on Abstract

Bryan and two other designers got moving on Abstract quickly. They started by taking an atomic design approach to organizing their design patterns (colors, typography, spacing, grid, etc.) and began uploading those files into Abstract.

Since Bryan was familiar with Git and the terminology of [Branching](#), [Merging](#), and [Commits](#), he was able to train his team quickly on how to effectively use Abstract. Since Abstract controls a user’s flow through Sketch with a sequence of steps, providing a lightweight workflow, it was not only functional, but also easy to maintain consistency in the work product.

Right solution at the right time

Abstract solved a pernicious problem of Sketch file management and versioning. It saved General Assembly’s design team significant time and helped them become more efficient. “But most of all, they had this feeling of safety using Abstract,” said Bryan. Abstract helped reduce anxiety and nervousness that comes from contributing to a massive Library they had built over months, by multiple designers, with different levels of experience. “They can create a Branch and totally rearrange everything without having to worry about impacting someone else’s workflow.”

Abstract’s Slack integration was a great way to keep everyone in the loop, and keep the momentum going on projects. “I try to instill a mandate of sharing works-in-progress and Abstract fits right into that paradigm,” adds Bryan. The tool also helped bridge gaps and break down silos that exist between marketing design and product design. Now, they can all use Abstract and it’s easy for other designers to contribute their ideas by simply creating Branches and iterating on the design.

“We also now use it to onboard new designers,” he says. New designers to the team can see the entire progression of the team’s design library. They can open up Sketch files directly from Abstract, create Branches, and explore how to design at General Assembly.

Kasey Fleisher Hickey

Director of Brand Marketing and Communications at Abstract