

James Dishman

UX 605041

Evaluation Fundamentals

Cognitive Walkthrough

Cognitive Walkthrough:

learningsynths.ableton.com/en

I selected this site because it attempts *to* break down a complex topic (basic subtractive synthesis) for users with no prior knowledge. Learning Synths is particularly well-suited for cognitive walkthrough evaluation because it teaches abstract technical concepts, like envelopes, oscillators, and filters, using unfamiliar terminology that novices must learn to navigate. This unfamiliarity creates genuine learning challenges, as users, particularly total novices to music production, cannot rely on existing mental models. Learning about sound is also inherently multi-modal, complex, and interactive, which adds to the complexity of delivering this material.

I am conducting this cognitive walkthrough as a UX researcher, from the perspective of an aspiring music producer who is just getting started, with no equipment, no production software, and no understanding of synthesis terminology or concepts. This evaluation will identify specific points at which users encounter barriers to discovering and completing relevant lessons, particularly

when they lack technical vocabulary. This evaluation will assess whether this user can learn to approximate a sound they have heard in a song, particularly a West Coast-style synth lead ([example](#)), even when they lack the technical vocabulary to describe or identify it.

Learning Synths has already launched, so we are reviewing the site's effectiveness to see if anything needs redesign. Results may inform improvements to navigation labels, lesson sequencing, or the introduction of terminology to support novice users' discovery. I can share this report with stakeholders in the Education, UX, and Web outreach departments at Ableton.

The site succeeds at sequential learning but creates discovery barriers for the target novice user who is motivated by specific musical outcomes rather than technical theory. The site is quite linear, so the user should understand how to progress through the pages, sequentially adding new knowledge on top of the knowledge that came before. Buttons are consistent and easy to identify, and they follow standard interaction design conventions. Interactions clearly relate the concepts to audio, which accelerates learnability.

The situation is different if the user navigates directly to the West Coast Lead page rather than sequentially. First, the topic is hidden in the menu hierarchy; the user must open the "Recipes" section to access the "West Coast Lead" page. The information presented within the lesson would be too complex for the user to understand without working through the prior lessons. This creates a Question 3 failure (associating actions with results): users scanning the menu cannot connect technical labels like "Envelopes: CHANGE OVER TIME" to their goal of making legato lead sounds. The site would benefit from outcome-oriented labels or preview signifiers that connect foundational concepts to recipe outcomes. Despite these discovery barriers, the site's interactive audio-visual feedback and progressive learning structure make it highly effective for users who commit to sequential learning.

References

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