Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

User Experience Research Techniques Facilitate Improvements for Access and Discovery Tools Managed by Technical Services Librarians

Hill, K. (2020). Usability beyond the home page: Bringing usability into the technical services workflow. The Serials Librarian, 78 (1–4), 173–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2020.1702857

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

Objective – To demonstrate how user experience research techniques can be incorporated into technical services work. As proof of this concept, the author describes a case wherein a team of librarians, including one in a technical services role, deployed a user experience study to determine if students were able to successfully use LibGuides and the A-Z Database List to find subject-specific resources. The study also aimed to gauge the potential for several A-Z Database List interface redesign options.

Design – A case study of user experience techniques applied to technical services projects, including a classic usability test of existing tools and an A/B/C comparison of potential interface redesigns.

Setting – The library at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG), a public R2 university (doctoral university with high research activity).

Subjects – Eleven student participants recruited through convenience sampling.

Methods – The research team recruited study participants who were in the library at the time of the study, deselecting students from UNCG's library school and those who were not currently affiliated with the university through an initial questionnaire. Eleven student participants were ultimately selected and led through a series of tasks related to finding subject-specific databases using the A-Z Database List and LibGuides. After the tasks for the A-Z Database List were completed, students were asked for their impression of two additional database list interfaces. Students were recorded throughout the tasks using the "talk aloud" method to provide researchers with insights on their thought processes and preferences. Following the study, researchers listened to the recordings, coding them as successful or incomplete and noting their observations for use in generalized findings.

Main Results – Eight of eleven participants used the library's main search box to locate a general resource for their major on the library's homepage. When shown the A-Z Database List, ten out of eleven participants used the list to find a database for their major, while one used the link to "Research guides by subject" from that page. Comparisons of three A-Z Database List interfaces showed that most students preferred the Springshare Content Management System that allowed for filtering by subject area. When asked to find a research guide for their subject or major from the library's homepage, nine out of eleven students clicked on the link labeled "Research guides by subject." Starting from their subject guide, ten out of eleven could find a tab listing article databases. Nine participants noted that the number of databases listed on the guides was daunting.

Conclusion – Results from the user experience study were used to support a redesign of the A-Z Database List using the Springshare Content Management System. The author regarded the experience as a whole as demonstrating how technical services librarians can become involved in user experience work and incorporate findings from usability studies into their management and design of tools that promote access and discoverability.

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – To demonstrate how user experience research techniques can be incorporated into technical services work. As proof of this concept, the author describes a case wherein a team of librarians, including one in a technical services role, deployed a user experience study to determine if students were able to successfully use LibGuides and the A-Z Database List to find subject-specific resources. The study also aimed to gauge the potential for several A-Z Database List interface redesign options.

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Commentary

As the author of the current study notes, "The idea of bringing usability into technical services is not unique to this paper" (Hill, 2020, p. 174). In performing their work, technical services librarians shape users' routes to resources. Greater direct knowledge of users' information-seeking behaviours and perceptions can inform improvements to access and discovery tools (Cross & Gullikson, 2020). This creates an opportunity to bridge "two seemingly disparate areas of library work… when staff expertise is recognized and valued" (Madden, 2020, p. 145). This case study demonstrates a pathway for technical services librarians to engage in usability research in ways that positively influence the library's ability to meet user needs through the tools and resources that technical services librarians already manage.

The *CRiSTaL Checklist for Appraising a User Study* (n.d.) is used to assess the current study. As part of the consideration of a study's validity, the checklist asks if researchers collecting data are also those responsible for delivering the service under examination. While this can create a conflict of interest, it can also allow those with the best technical knowledge of a service to rethink its delivery in light of user needs and experiences. This mirrors a point made by the author throughout the study: technical services librarians, as those responsible for the maintenance and development of access and discovery tools, are best positioned to resolve issues with those tools that are identified through user experience research (Hill, 2020). Also, regarding the *CRiSTaL Checklist*'s assessment of a study's validity, the author makes a strong justification for undertaking this research, noting a previous survey that uncovered difficulties in discovering subject-specific resources among distance education students.

However, this marks a disconnect between the population where the issue was first identified (distance education students) and the population under study. Recruiting students passing through the library is ostensibly unlikely to yield participants from that population. Still, the use of these tools extends beyond distance education students, making the findings from a more general and convenient

population of students in the library still useful for determining common information-seeking behaviours and pitfalls. Pre-screening questions were used to filter out those unaffiliated with the university or students in UNCG's library and information science graduate program, appropriately balancing considerations for convenience and relevant representation of the user population.

The author provides the success rates for students who were able to complete the tasks and adequately details the difficulties they encountered that led to failed tasks. Students were sometimes able to complete tasks, albeit inefficiently, by using tools in manners other than those intended (i.e., using an A-Z Database List for subject browsing). These situations are described as well, illuminating the decisions behind some of the interface redesign choices that were influenced by the study. Finally, the script used for guiding students through the tasks is provided as an appendix, showing clear, simple tasks that are good representations of the ways librarians expect subject-specific resource needs to be filled. The tasks can ultimately point to discrepancies in the ways that librarians and users view resource discovery. The author helpfully points out that while students might be able to find a link to subject-specific guides when asked directly, seeking out those guides does not always occur to students when they are presented with a less precise request, such as finding a general resource for their major.

While the user experience study itself yielded helpful findings for improving the ways that students discover subject-specific databases, it is important to note that the study's greatest contribution is through recommendations for technical services librarians who wish to incorporate these techniques into their own practice. In addition to relating the findings back to the reconfiguration of technical services tools, the author provides a helpful and concise primer on usability methodology and offers best practices for collaborating with other teams within the library. This extends the applicability of the study far beyond the exact methods, tools, and user populations explored here and presents a broader view for technical services librarians to consider the scope of their work.

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