

Usability Team Focus Group

The Focus Group

Introduction

Western Libraries' Usability Team held a focus group designed to give the Usability Team a better understanding of some of the library issues our users have, primarily but not exclusively about our website. The focus group was held on Thursday evening, 5/26/05 from 5:30-7:00pm, in WL676. Pizza, drinks and dessert were served. The students also received a \$5 gift certificate to Mallard's Ice Cream Parlor to thank them for their participation.

Method

Participants were recruited from among those who completed the library's online student survey and answered "Yes" to the question, "Would you like to assist us with future testing of the site?" These students were contacted by phone or email to ask them to participate in the group. No demographic filtering or other selection criteria were employed.

Make-up of the focus group

- 8 participants
- Predominantly upper-division students: 5 seniors, 1 junior, 1 sophomore, 1 "other" (part-time older student)
- 7 female, 1 male
- 2 participants were older students, attending part-time; 1 of these was also an extended education student
- All participants were relatively experienced researchers, the majority of whom had spent considerable time using the library resources and web site for their research.

The makeup of the group gave us an opportunity to delve into the website more than we had originally anticipated. Many of the comments were general in nature, such as about doing research or using the library.

Findings

HELP

- All the participants expressed a desire for more types of help, either online, as handouts, or tutorials.
- Participants also stressed the need for both general help (here's how you locate a journal article) and subject specific help. They also would like to see more help in context and the opportunity to get help from any page on the website.
- Examples of desired "help" items included:
 - Online versions of the "colored handouts". The students like the screen shots and step-by-step guidance.
 - An online library tutorial (both general and more discipline specific).

- Subject or discipline based guides that list the most useful databases, journals and other recommended resources for the subject. (None of the students had used the subject drop-down. They all went straight to the alphabetical list for databases).
- A suggestion box.
- Most, if not all, of these “help” items already exist and are available on the library web site. It seems clear that, in most cases, these are rather deeply imbedded in the site and not readily apparent to even experienced users.
- Students do not understand what the link “research assistance” is, and therefore don’t try it. Students think research assistance means that you can make an appointment with a librarian or send an email.

Comments from students:

- *And so for us maybe if we just had a side page that says hey we’re trying to teach you how to do [research] and as you do library searching if you’re a psychology major click here, here are some journals you might use, here is something that might be related to psychology, here are some resources - things like that.*
- *[Referring to the Research Assistance link] it sounds like you’re emailing someone and you’re not going to get an answer. ...or you’re going to sign up for an appointment.*
- *Yeah, I mean I’ve gotten really great research assistance person to person in the library, but if it’s the night before your paper’s due then you don’t want [to have to come into the library].*
- *One of the things that I see is true for me is that I don’t learn it and I don’t notice it until I need it.*

WEB SITE ORGANIZATION AND NAVIGATION

- Streamlining the website came up several times. Too many good resources are embedded someplace deep on the website and the students are not getting to them.
- The alphabetical list of databases is overwhelming. The students seem to know that these databases exist but don’t really understand why there are so many and how to select the right one.
- They don’t want to have to read a whole document before being able to use the resource (referring to the interlibrary loan page).
- The students are not using the subject drop-down pages. The alphabetical list is right in the middle of the page and draws the eye.
- The website is not useful for someone new coming to it. It does not direct them anywhere.

- Find It! opens a lot of windows which confuses some of the students. They would like to have "go" buttons change color or some other indication if they have already selected that link to help them keep track of where they have been. Students just start over because following the path back is too difficult.
- Many students don't know they can click on the links on the home page and get more options.
- The lists are long. The students suggested combining topics and using more color or images.

Comments from students:

- *The way those boxes are set up right now [on the search databases page, referring to the MetaSearch and Citation Linker], they resemble advertisements that we're trained to ignore and [used] on other sites to announce [things] so we're likely not to look at it.*
- *It sounds like this might not be technically possible but in my dream world what I want this page to look like [referring to the search databases page] is just a field where you type something in and a submit button and that's all and it searches all the databases.*
- *On a list that's all the same color that kind of makes you go 'what is this list?' If it were a little more spread out, maybe categories, maybe some colors, maybe some shapes - something that kind of keeps you more awake through it. The monochromatic nature of the whole web site is a little [hard to read].*
- *Well you know what I find funny is that here we are looking at a list and we're writing every day and we're reading every day and we're looking at syllabus and handouts and **everything** is in this format.*
- *Yeah, I'm not trying to push my way on you guys [laughter] [but if] there were like 12 little funny pictures I would rather click the computer - no not that, that's wrong - go back - click the book - no that's wrong - go back - click the picture of the car - no, that's wrong - go back [than have to read a list].*

TERMINOLOGY

- Site index is often confused with a site map. Students don't know when to use it.
- ILLiad and interlibrary loan: students don't understand the difference. They think ILLiad is another database to search.
- ILLiad and Summit: students don't understand the difference between the two services.
- Database names are not helpful in determining which database is good to use for their topic.
- Students do not understand the difference between 'databases' and 'indexes and abstracts'.

Comments from students:

- [Referring to the Browse by type page] *But these are abstracts and indexes, not databases. Right?*
- *...I hate to put more words on the website but I guess we need more of an explanation of what things really are.*

JOURNALS & NEWSPAPERS

- Students have a hard time finding newspapers or articles in newspapers, although they are familiar with databases. One student had figured out how to remove newspapers from a ProQuest search.
- They do not know how to find out if Western owns a particular journal or newspaper. They are unsure of how to find a specific article in a journal or newspaper if they have a print citation. When searching for articles in a specific journal, they have a tendency to search for the journal or newspaper in the library catalog and then try to figure out how to get to the article.
- Students would like to see a list of the journals included in each database and vice versa.

Comments from students:

- *I usually forget how to get to find the articles. 'Search databases' ... I think of that as books, not journal articles, so I don't go there first. I've been taking one class a quarter and so I tried research towards the end of the quarter and I think maybe I'll remember now after a year.*
- *I tried to research a really recent issue - language death - and so it was hard to find books or even journal articles about that issue because it was sort of a recent thing. But I knew there was a New York Times article about it so I started searching New York Times online and then realized you had to pay to get articles. For a moment I actually thought 'I'm sure that somewhere in the library they have that New York Times but on microfilm or something', but I just couldn't deal with trying to go find it and so I gave up on that thing altogether.*

SERVICES and ACCESS

- We asked the students which services they use the most in the library. The two most common answers were the reference desk and the computers.
- Having access to a computer is a priority for students and many come to the library either to use the computers, for research or to write papers. One student indicated the convenience of being able to access a computer and go into the stacks.
- Students are pressed for time. Convenience and time are a priority, especially for those who do not live on campus.

Comments from students:

- *Yeah, it just seems like I'm really busy and I'm always squeezing things in to my schedule, so a trip to the library is like a special event. The fact that I can renew stuff online is a huge benefit because if I had to make a special trip to the library to get those books rescanned, I would have to schedule that a couple weeks in advance.*

DATABASES & FIND IT

- Databases continue to be a source of confusion. Students don't understand that the online databases are not created by the library and are not under our control.
- They tend to choose the databases that are most prominently displayed, in our case, ProQuest and JSTOR, even though they are upper division students and know about more subject specific databases. Only one student mentioned a specific database (PsycINFO) by name. The students assume that ProQuest and JSTOR are displayed on the search databases roll-over because these are the most used databases.
- All of the participants expressed frustration when the Find It! page directed them to a link that then asks for a password or is somehow not accessible. If the library doesn't have it, they don't want a link. This includes the library catalog. If the journal is not available, they would prefer not to see the link to the catalog on the Find It! screen. Many students said that even if Find It! indicates WWU does not subscribe to the journal, they will still search all the databases to try and find the article.
- Students don't always understand the difference between getting an article online and getting it via ILLiad.
- The students want more guidance about selecting the right database for their subject area and more online guidance about how to search the databases.
- The process of finding articles in a specific journal or finding out if the library has a journal is very confusing to them. They all said they would like to have access to lists of journals included in each database. Several also requested lists of journals available for specific disciplines.
- Several students did not realize they could get to ILLiad from the Find It! page. In general students seem to be confused about the various choices on the Find It! page.
- The students almost always go straight to the alphabetical list. They don't use the "By Type" list because type does not mean anything to them. They do not use the subject drop-down either.
- They like the changes that have been made to Find It! lately but are confused about why some things are free (Google) and why they have to go to ILLiad for other things. The link to the library catalog is also unclear.
- Students prefer to be able to download articles directly.

- The students want the ability to search several databases at the same time. (None were aware of MetaSearch.) The ability to search across disciplines was mentioned several times.

Comments from students:

- *JSTOR comes up on the top of the page. I assume because it's most used so you can get to them the fastest.*
- *And it just said 3 dollars and it just seemed that there were 3 dollars between me and the article and I had to go. I was running out of time.*
- *I had that similar problem where just recently I knew there were articles about something that I was writing about in the New Yorker. I went online and couldn't search on their website and I was just like 'how do you search that, there's got to be some index somewhere. How do I search in the library instead through their website?'*
- *Well there are little ProQuest links - there's one that has all ProQuest databases and there's one for medical. I never looked at them so I'm not sure what they entail.*
- *I just feel ignorant. I feel like maybe the article is available through a different database and it's listed in the database that the library subscribes to but I don't know. Is the Find It! checking all the library databases? If I go in through ERIC and I find it and I keep going and I get to a subscription only database, then if I went to a different database would I find the article?*
- *I completely concur that you shouldn't get one result with ProQuest and different results with different databases.*
- *I think my problem with this page [the Findit! Page] is that once I start clicking through the different locations I start to forget what the pages looked liked that I was at just before. If there was a way to keep track of where you've been or a quicker way to start the search over...*
- *Sometimes things will be available in more than one place and so I'm trying to figure out what's the best place for me to get [this]. I mean, I'm pretty new at library research so I just sort of follow my nose.*
- *Well, let me say something about where I just got stuck recently. I was trying to find different magazines or journals and this is where I get stuck. I just want to be able to put in 'I want to get this article from this magazine' but then it comes up and it says it doesn't have it. But it seems like I have to go to 40 different databases and search each one individually to try and find that particular [item].*

INSTRUCTION

- Several of the students had received some library instruction from the reference and instruction department. All agreed that these sessions were very helpful.

- Two members of the group suggested that a 1 credit library GUR would be a good idea.
- All orientations should include a welcome to the library or something about the library and occasional workshops for people who are transferring in or need a refresher.
- Because some of our participants were transfer or returning older students, they felt they were falling through the cracks. There was a sense that the faculty assumed they were already familiar with research and libraries, but the students would have liked some guidance, specifically for their subject area.
- They want short tutorials, in modules, so they can take the specific module for the area they are interested in.

Comments from students:

- *I was a transfer student so I came in as a junior. I was familiar with library systems but not this library system. I actually got the most help from [a librarian] in the fall quarter. She taught our class 'this is how you do [research if] you were doing these big papers' and she said 'this is how you come to the library and these are the databases you want to look at and there's some books for reference.' That was actually really, really helpful and my use of the library website has significantly gone up. I find it much more useful and I think I'm using my time more wisely now because I know what I'm looking for, so that was very helpful.*

RESEARCH ISSUES

- Depending on the mode of access, searching the databases at home can take a long time, especially if they have dial-up access, so they tend to use the library or lab computers when they are on campus.
- When we asked the students to tell us the first thing that comes to mind when a professor assigns them a research paper, most answered either journal articles or ProQuest. Only one student said library catalog. One student mentioned the research process specifically (how to organize my research).
- Students want help at the point of need. They like having the human interface.
- Most students don't like to order from ILLiad because it costs the library money and they feel they don't have time.

Comments from students:

- *I know I usually start looking at journal articles. I come to the library to look for books as supplemental material, but I look for journal articles to explain*

the basics like what vocabulary we need to know and then I come and search for those titles.

- *That's funny because my style... is the opposite. At home I use the online articles a lot more because I have a cable modem, but then when I actually bother to come into the library in person I look up a book in the catalog and then just go to the shelf where it is. That whole shelf is usually [on] the same subject and then I just start browsing.*
- *[Referring to ordering materials via ILL] See, and then I would go back to feeling really guilty because I can't even see it. I mean, you really don't know anything from the title. You see a title you think is really interesting or whatever, but I would hate to order something and then be like 'this isn't what I needed'.*

OTHER

- Students would like to be able to see due dates of both ILL and Western/Summit books at the same time.
- Students expressed concern about the lack of easy parking, especially handicapped access.
- A book drop at the south end of campus and/or a drive-by book drop near the library would be very welcome.
- One student suggested mouse-overs or pop-ups to provide additional in-context explanations.
- They would like the ability to save a booklist in the catalog and searches in the databases in a library account so it will still be there when they log on again.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- All of the students said that there was a great deal of information on the website that they had never seen before.
- All the students said they really appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback and suggested having more regular focus groups.

This was a great learning experience for the Usability Team. Once we analyze the focus group transcript and the survey, we should have a lot of useful information that will help us in our redesign of the website.

NEXT STEPS

- Focus group of lower-division undergraduates who have little or no experience with the web site.
- Individual usability studies comparing different library web sites.

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