Overlapping Scopes: Capturing User Experience through Survey Design

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In the evolving landscape of librarianship, surveys efficiently capture patron thoughts and feelings on a large scale. However, many library surveys fail to evince the depth of library user experience, even though user feelings about one aspect of the library may be strongly influenced by another. This paper reports on the results of a survey instrument developed by the authors to explore the scopes of library space, services, collections, and communication and their overlapping influences.

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of librarianship, surveys efficiently capture patron thoughts and feelings on a large scale. However, many library surveys fail to evince depth user feelings about a library's key characteristics. Many library surveys focus on easily identifiable, often budgetary, aspects of library services, or they emphasize quality of service. Surveys commonly used by libraries often limit questions to three topics: library collections, customer service, and library buildings. These are essential elements of the library, but this line of questioning offers no insights about tacit elements of user experience, for example how a student feels when she spends hours studying in the library, or whether a faculty member is inclined to refer students to library services. Additionally, many surveys fail to elicit preferences about the library's communication strategy, though many librarians often meet with the refrain, "I didn't know the library…"

At the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire's McIntyre Library, librarians developed a survey instrument to explore library space, services, collections, and communication. This instrument customizes questions to the key profiles of students and employees, allowing subjects to respond authentically to their library experiences. Through the unique perspectives of major patron groups, this survey has gathered patron feelings about their localized experience with the library. Librarians have gained crucial insights qualities and services our patrons view as indispensable, absent, or in need of improvement, offering decision makers genuine and actionable information about the library's strengths and opportunities for change.

Literature Review

Much of the far reaching literature about library surveys is focused on surveys that have utilized large-scale survey models that enable libraries to benchmark service quality against peer institutions and national

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trends. Research about LibQual+, the well-known survey of library service quality, is widely available, including retrospective reports of LibQual+ data collection at one library[1] and national studies aggregating LibQual+ data about service quality.[2] As a standardized tool, LibQual+ offers little flexibility for libraries that wish to survey users about localized issues, though LibQual+ has offered libraries the option to add items from a supplementary pool of questions that may elicit responses to questions related to local interests.[3] LibQual+ can be deployed to both faculty and student library users. Results of LibQual+, specifically the Affect of Service dimension, have been found to be dependent on the length of use of a service.[4] Libraries can also avail themselves of the Ithaka S+R surveys of local faculty and students, with some customization options in addition to a standard set of questions. The Measuring Information Services Outcomes (MISO) survey is an alternative to LibQual+ or the Ithaka faculty and student surveys. MISO also offers perspectives on how library users, including both students and employees, view the library and, more broadly, information technology support.[5] These surveys offer libraries insights about their performance; however, they are not designed for extensive customization, particularly to address questions of user experience.

User experience (UX) is a growing field of inquiry in librarianship. Recognizing that "user experience is everywhere,"[6] the virtual and physical experience of using the library is a hot topic. Ultimately, user experience research in libraries, or anywhere, helps us to understand if the end user finds a service, product, environment, or interaction is useful, usable, and desirable.[7] Assessments of user feelings can help libraries understand how the use, usability, or desirability of any aspect of the library might be improved. As an additional focus of the survey, user feelings also serve in an explanatory or corroborative function.

While surveys are not the primary mode of gathering information about user experience, they belong to a toolbox of research methods including focus groups, interviews, observation, mapping, usability testing, and other ethnographic methods that UX researchers employ.[8] Coupled with smaller user experience research projects, large data sets gathered from surveys can help librarians to identify larger trends about user preferences.

Methods

Unlike surveys designed to collect data that can be benchmarked nationally, this survey was designed with local needs and characteristics in mind. In an effort to understand the whole user experience, the survey gathered questions of satisfaction, use of services, time spent using various spaces and services offered by the library, and feelings about tangible and intangible aspects of the library. The present study elicited library user feelings about four scopes of user experience: Space, services, collections, and communication. The survey was distributed to a random sample of 2,500 undergraduate students and 500 employees, representing 24% of the undergraduate student body, and 36% of employees. UW—Eau Claire is a four-year comprehensive university with a very small number of graduate students who were excluded from the pilot of this survey. Student contact information was generated by the Registrar's office, and employee contact information was generated by Human Resources. Each recipient received a unique link to the survey that could only be used once. Four Amazon gift cards were offered as an incentive for participating in the survey. With a 26% response rate, 572 undergraduate students responded to the survey and 228 employees (faculty, academic staff, and classified staff). 68% of respondents were female and 31% of respondents were male. In comparison, the campus population is 61% female and 39% male.

The survey was deployed with the Qualtrics web-based survey platform and included a total of 53 questions. The survey was designed with display logic, which allowed respondents to see questions based upon their self-identified user group and response to previous items. As a result, most respondents answered about 27 questions. Using display logic to create contingency questions enabled the authors to further tailor the survey to a user's authentic experience with the library.

All respondents identified their user group, answered some basic demographic questions, and responded to the same open ended questions. The survey was organized into four sections: Space, services, communication, and collections. Each section contained common questions about aspects of library experience that do not differ based on user profile. For example, students and faculty were both surveyed about frequency of library website use, satisfaction with the collection, and preferred ways to receive news about the library.

Interspersed throughout the survey were two kinds of contingent questions. Users responded to most satisfaction questions if they first indicated that they had used a specific library service or tool. Users also responded to questions based upon their user profile. Student respondents received a different set of options about the library services they use than employees because these two groups have access to different services. For example, students have access to equipment checkout and group study rooms, whereas faculty place material on reserve and arrange information literacy instruction for their classes.

Question models included yes or no answers, rankings, verbal scales, and Likert and semantic differential scales. The survey included a limited number of free form response questions. The range of question types was extensive in part because this was a pilot survey and the investigators hoped to understand what questions would elicit rich responses.

This survey offered several levels of analysis. Free-form questions were coded manually and the investigators established concordance through an independent review by three individuals. The authors analyzed descriptive statistics in order to understand basic use, satisfaction, and user feelings.

Community-specific Concerns

McIntyre Library conducted the LibQUAL+ survey in 2004 and 2008 which measures perceptions of service quality in relation to expectations in the Dimensions of Information Control, Library as Place, and Affect of Service. While LibQual+ was useful in benchmark-

ing perceptions of McIntyre library against that of its peers, it left many questions unanswered. One of the investigators' goals in designing the survey was to increase the granularity of its questions, asking about specific services and features of the library. This survey is by nature a local instrument, and while it serves no comparative function with similar institutions, it does provide the opportunity to assess over the years the initiatives that the staff develops in response to it. In designing it, the investigators also made it applicable to both new and long-time users.

The areas the investigators were most interested in delving into specifically were library space, methods of communication, and the local preferences for specific collection types (for example, eBooks versus print books). For example, in terms of space, users were asked questions about aspects of the library such as space for group projects, temperature, space for quiet study, and décor.

But the authors were also interested in the feelings elicited by the library as a place, as well as the feelings elicited by being in the library. The literature on measuring feeling and emotion (multimodal), found primarily in the social sciences and advertising, focuses on verbal self-reporting (free form) and observation,[9,10] as well as verbal scales.[11] For this survey, the authors created two verbal scales, reflecting an equal range of positive and negative emotions. These scales were placed in the context of more traditional contingent satisfaction questions related to space. The first asked users "How would you describe the library as a place? (click all that apply)" with responses 8 possible responses ranging from "depressing" to "tranquil" and the option to enter free-form text. The second question asked "Thinking of the last time you were in the library, how did you feel? (click all that apply)," with options ranging from "focused" to "slow" to "lost."

Results

Survey participants revealed distinct feelings about each scope of library experience: Space, services, communication, and collections. As a popular location for spending non-lecture, on-campus time, the investi-

gators wanted to understand first how library users feel when they use the library. Sixty-seven percent of survey respondents describe the library as a "relaxed" place, 48% describe the library as "friendly," and 45% describe it as "serious." Eight percent of respondents described the library as "depressing" or "tense," and 6% described the library as "uncomfortable." When asked how they feel when they're in the library, 59% of participants indicate they feel "focused," 51% feel "calm," and 48% feel "efficient."

While surveys are not ideal for gathering data about all aspects of user behavior, the survey collected valuable data about how library users say they spend time in the library which illuminated the findings of smaller ethnographic research projects and focus groups that have also been conducted about student use of library space at UW—Eau Claire. Studying and working with a group were the most popular reasons participants chose to spend time in the library. Sixty-three percent of respondents indicate that when they visit the library to study or to work in groups, they are in the building for one to four hours. Feeling focused, calm, and efficient becomes all the more important for users spending such significant time in a space.

Through survey comments, students commented about the qualities that make the library conducive to study. For example, 11% of free-form respondents made favorable comments about the library as a place to study or work productively. Five percent of free-form responses expressed positive feelings about the noise-level zones on the library's upper floors, and others urged improvements to key elements of user experience in library space, like electrical outlets, library décor and furniture, temperature, and lighting, pointing to action the library and campus facilities could take to improve the experience of using the library. Twelve percent of free form responses specifically addressed the dated appearance of the library interior, and 4% specifically mentioned the library's uncomfortable wooden chairs.

While the library's primary service points are demonstrably busy, the survey sought to gauge how and where users prefer to use the library. Predictably, 91%

of students report they have used the library website and 39% said they use the library reference desk "frequently" or "occasionally." When students have trouble finding what they need on the library website, 40% report they contact the library to ask for help. At the same time, when unable to locate an item from the library, 34% report they give up and try to find something else, indicating that patrons may still need assistance solving problems.

The survey suggests faculty value the library's curricular support. Fifty-eight percent of faculty have urged a student to visit the Reference Desk for assistance with research, and 37% of faculty have suggested that a student schedule a research consultation with a librarian. Thirty-four percent of faculty respondents have invited a librarian to a class and 38% of faculty have suggested or required students to take a library tour.

This survey's most unique area of investigation, communication, demonstrated strong links between use of the library and marketing. Forty-three percent of respondents report that they want more information about new library resources, suggesting an opportunity to quench a thirst for relevant news about the library. For example, 80% of faculty report they are "somewhat" or "not informed" about options for library instruction in their classes, suggesting opportunities to extend the library's reach into more classrooms on campus. However, faculty who indicate they are "well" or "somewhat" informed about information literacy instruction indicate they are "frequently" able to find what they need using the library website (p=.91); further study is warranted, but this may suggest that faculty who have been exposed to information literacy instruction possess greater knowledge about using the library than faculty who report they are poorly informed about instruction options. Faculty who indicate they are "well" or "somewhat" informed about methods for requesting new library materials are more likely to be able to find what they need using the library website (p=.83). Fifty-four percent of faculty report that they feel "somewhat informed" about changes in library services and scholarly subscriptions.

A comparison of website and electronic resource usage data easily demonstrates that virtual use is more common than use of the library's physical service points. However, self-reported data reveals how students and employees would prefer to communicate with and learn about the library. Students and faculty rely on the library website for information, with 71% of faculty and 59% of students indicating that they go to the library website for information about the library. Surprisingly, faculty and students both ranked e-mail and the library website as their most preferred methods of receiving information about the library. Survey results showed that the library's print and PDF newsletter, *Off the Shelf*, continues to serve an important purpose for a segment of users, primarily employees, as do plasma display screens in strategic locations.

Faculty and students value the library collection. Eighty-two percent of survey respondents believe the database collection meets their needs, 83% believe the book collection meets their needs, and 84% believe the journal collection meets their needs. Sixty-one percent of faculty respondents indicate that they value the library's collection for popular reading as well as scholarly material. Forty-two percent of students report that eBooks are "not applicable to my needs/interests," perhaps suggesting a lack of knowledge among students about eBook content.

Discussion

The findings resulting from the emotional verbal scales led the authors to a careful assessment of survey responses relating to space. Users largely associated the library space with positive terms like "friendly" and "serious" and their feelings in the library as "efficient" and "focused." These positive associations made the aspects of space that users deemed unsatisfactory stand out even more. While the library seemed useful to the users, it was clearly not always usable. At a time when the university has gone through a construction boom, with two large new campus buildings, librarians were especially concerned about maintaining the popularity of the library as a space to spend non-lecture time.

McIntyre Library's director used the specific findings from our survey to prioritize and document building needs, using survey data to chart both short-term improvements and for long-term planning. He was able to share our key findings with Physical Facilities and campus administrators. For example, comments from survey respondents and participants in a focus group conducted in the same semester indicated that students who live off-campus desired public transportation directly to the library in the evenings. The library director used this data to advocate for a new bus stop.

The survey also uncovered current services that students deemed indispensable to their success in the library: quiet floors and group study rooms. Students advocated in the comment sections that staff do more to "protect" the quiet zones. Having group study rooms was widely appreciated and comments were targeted at making them more visible and available.

Communication was one of the areas the staff knew least about when the investigators launched the survey. Having been part of numerous conversations with students and faculty that featured some variation on the line "I didn't know the library did…" the authors were looking for both how users learned about the library and also how they would prefer to learn about the library. As a result of the survey, librarians have begun a twice-a-semester newsletter to instructional staff with library news relating to research and teaching. The staff also learned about the relatively large importance of the library home page in conveying key news about the library, in contrast to the relative unimportance of the library's social media presence. The web task force will be using this information to advocate for which components should appear on the library homepage when the site goes through an institutionally driven redesign.

The survey has helped the library staff understand micro-trends that emerge from smaller ethnographic assessment projects. In partnership with the College of Business, marketing students ran three focus groups of library users eliciting data about library space and services. In addition, a student advisory board serves

as a panel of respondents for user interviews. There is a feedback loop between the survey and the library's biannual mapping of space use: the survey confirmed many of the patterns discovered in the mapping, but has also helped us to refine the goals of the mapping. Survey data has confirmed feelings expressed by students in these small research settings, and enabled the library to take action and make changes confidently.

Conclusion

Librarians are no strangers to surveys or the conventions of survey design. At our disposal, we have the tools to deploy surveys and the opportunity to use a variety of tools to gather data about our users. Through this survey, McIntyre Library explored our local community of users and we gained new insights about their daily experience in the library, going beyond the user preferences that can only be addressed through dwindling budgetary allocations. With some revision, this survey will be redistributed to a randomly selected population of students and faculty in spring 2015, enabling McIntyre Library to begin to collect longitudinal data about evolving user preferences and experiences.

Notes

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