



Shaping the Library to the Life of the User:

Adapting, Empowering, Partnering, Engaging

Merrilee Proffitt, James Michalko and Melissa Renspie

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INTRODUCTION

What began with a few libraries' early application of ethnographic methods to learn more about user behaviors and needs has grown to become a significant body of work done across many institutions using a broad range of methods. User-centered investigations are increasingly influential in discussions about the shape and future of the research library. User-centered design that builds on such work is becoming deeply embedded in library planning and service development in some research libraries.

To increase awareness of this work among leaders in the OCLC Research Library Partnership, OCLC Research sponsored the Library in the Life of the User meeting in Chicago, Illinois on 21-22 October 2015.¹ The meeting aimed to consolidate the insights into the life of the user outside of the library and to consider how we can provide more meaningful support based on what students, scholars and other library users really do. This brief report captures several topics covered at that meeting which include: environmental factors that are driving libraries to reconsider their role; the range of users served by libraries; the range of choices that will be made when undertaking user research; and achieving a balance between serving the needs of user communities and fulfilling institutional goals. Additionally, the report encapsulates considerations and guidelines for planning and conducting a study. Finally, the report records some core themes that flowed out of the meeting—the need to adapt, empower, partner and engage and concludes with some suggestions for future action.

Setting the Stage

Research and learning needs are changing. Higher education is reconfiguring. As a result of these massive changes, the library must pivot and adapt.

The chief dynamic underlying the reconfiguring of higher education and the library is the presence and growth of the networked world. It follows that the best service choices will build on the library's customer engagement and relationship strengths, and that the best implementations of those services will employ user-centered design. Libraries must recognize that users adopt behaviors that they believe will lead to success. It is imperative that libraries also understand the actual behaviors that users have adopted rather than relying on normative, idealized or outdated assumptions.

The ways in which universities are approaching teaching and research is beginning to diverge as institutions embrace the identity that defines their offering. Stark differentiation is occurring between and among research, land grant, career-oriented, liberal education, and continuing education institutions. The particularism that identifies an institution shapes the goals it sets and the value it aspires to deliver. An institution might seek to move up in global rankings, it might set goals for individual departments, it might want a particular community impact, or it might have graduation and retention targets. The library must identify the ways it can shape its services to help advance those institutional goals.

1. For more information about the Library in the Life of the User event, including a list of speakers and links to presentations and videos, see <http://www.oclc.org/research/events/2015/10-21.html>.

Users increasingly have choices outside the library, and those choices are both networked and social.

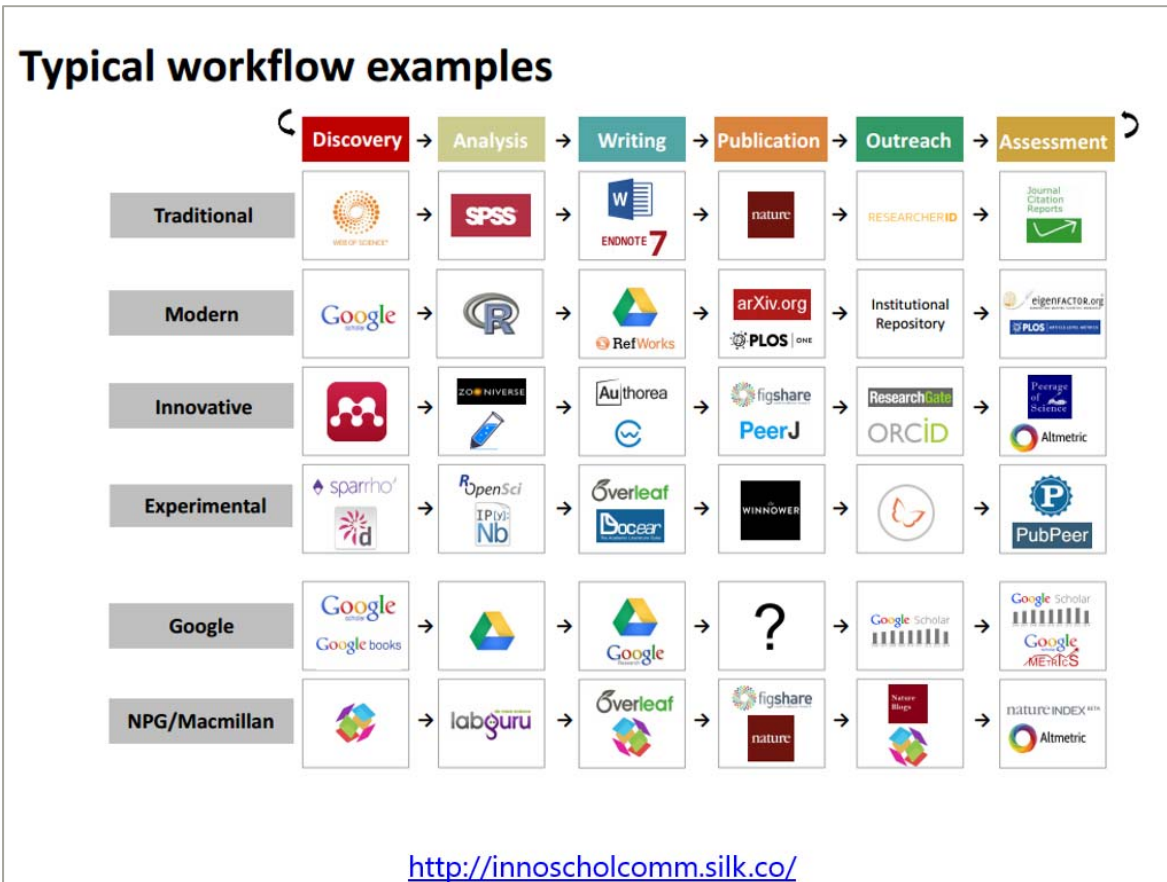


FIGURE 1. WORKFLOW EXAMPLES FROM “101 INNOVATIONS IN SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION.”²

Technological evolution, particularly the ascendance of consumer-oriented technologies, underpins changes in the behaviors and workflows of researchers and learners regardless of the type of institution with which they are affiliated. Library services need to incorporate the network and personal technologies that shape and influence the workflows and behaviors of the local constituency.

2. This project from University of Utrecht seeks to chart innovation in scholarly information and communication flows from evolutionary and network perspectives.

It is far too easy to make incorrect assumptions about users' needs and motives. Libraries need to step outside of their comfort zone in looking at the *user in the life of the library*, and look instead at the *library in the life of the user*.

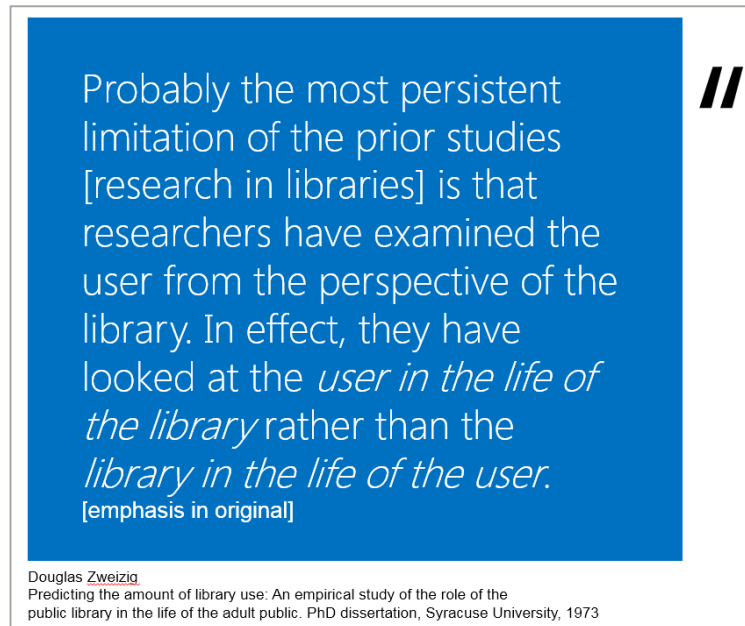


FIGURE 2. QUOTE FROM DOUGLAS ZWEIZIG'S PHD DISSERTATION FEATURED IN "THE LIBRARY IN THE LIFE OF THE USER" PRESENTATION BY LORCAN DEMPSEY

The phrase "the library in the life of the user" was used as early as 1973 and has been popularized by Lorcan Dempsey as a broad way to characterize the shift towards customer engagement and personalization of library services. Although it may not be new to focus on the user experience, it is only in the last decade or so that libraries have made it a common approach to designing and assessing their services.

Libraries serve a range of users with differing needs.

During the meeting, most of the speakers shared views influenced by their work in service to the research library sector. They spoke about a range of projects focused on understanding the needs of particular populations, such as dissertating graduate students in the humanities, undergraduates, and medical school students. Understanding the needs of specific groups, in contrast with attempting to satisfy broad requirements, is helpful in designing services that are tailored to meet particular needs.

“It’s clear from all the interviews that the research process follows the trajectory or path of a classic quest, or hero’s journey. The shape of the journey is not a circle, but a definite linear path from Point A to Point Z, with detours, obstacles and trials along the way.”

Margaret Burri, quoting a Johns Hopkins librarian

When choosing which users to study, it can be useful to study “typical” users, but don’t shy away from also studying “extreme users.” As Shirley Dugdale from Dugdale Strategy said, some of our power users may be ahead of the curve in ways that may be illuminating.

A broad range of choices must be made to shape research and design efforts.

Library researchers must decide which principles they will follow, which processes they will use, what questions they will ask and what methodologies they will employ. Many of the speakers explained the circumstances that dictated how they made these choices for their investigations. They also highlighted common success elements such as appropriate partnerships, agreed-upon assessment methodology, proper documentation, and broad internal and external communication. Given the investment necessary to conduct this type of work, libraries may decide that it’s effective and appropriate to rely on research findings from other institutions as a starting point.

Mixed methodologies help inform wise choices.

The application of ethnographic and anthropological methods offered some of the most intriguing examples of user studies shared in the meeting that had a big impact libraries’ understanding of their constituents. This approach has expanded rapidly over the last few years, and a growing number of libraries have undertaken some type of ethnographic study of its users.

The approach can vary, but some basic methodological components are standard. Users are engaged over a period of time as participants in a study. The goal is to understand users’ perspectives while avoiding assumptions or judgments about their approach. Users are permitted to use their own language, referents and tools. Collecting empirical data about real people in real situations helps to explain both why and how certain behaviors and processes occur. This qualitative understanding is reached by observation, by mapping and by interviewing. What is learned complements any quantitative data that are gathered using approaches such as surveys or censuses.

There is no one right or wrong way to collect data about how people operate their research and learning activities. Speakers made it clear that the best practice is to triangulate and use multiple methods for identifying how people work and learn. There is also not a right or wrong way to incorporate what is learned into library practice and process. There is, however, consensus that making incremental changes that can be iterated allows the library to be maximally responsive. In contrast, waiting to arrive at a perfected vision may be expensive, time consuming to implement in full, and feel like a top-down prescription when set in place.

Speakers shared perspectives on ethnography and design, as well as how they grappled with a range of important questions such as: What are the merits of using ethnography in the process of accurately describing users? In capturing their behavior? In identifying their needs? When does observational ethnography shift into needs assessment and service identification? How did the work or use cases presented illustrate this range of outcomes from an ethnological approach?

Put the pieces together to solve a larger puzzle.

Focusing on the intersections between user needs and campus goals can lead to amazing things. Speakers shared powerful stories that illustrated the possibilities. For example, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the library purposefully aligned its research with a campus initiative to increase student retention. It turned out that students were not leaving campus due to issues related to academia, but because they could not find a “home” on campus, so the library set about understanding what would inspire a sense of connection in undergraduates. The success of this project led to the implementation of two Student Success librarians, funded by the campus, as well as a more connected and engaged undergraduate cohort. Another example was Yale University’s study of the needs of dissertating graduate students in the humanities. A 2011 campus report had focused attention on the need to help doctoral students reach degree status more rapidly in order to both control the university’s costs and help the students reach their own goals. The library recognized that it could play a role in achieving the larger campus goals by recognizing and removing barriers for this group of students. Although the Yale and Tennessee examples focus on different groups of library users with quite different needs, both libraries were strategically focusing energy and attention that benefitted both users and the parent institution.

Insights from Planning and Conducting Research

Some highlights that flowed from the meeting presentations included the following insights:

1. **Watch with open eyes.** Ethnography teaches us to observe and shadow subjects in their habitat. Watch what they do and how they do it. Ask them to document their processes by keeping diaries or taking photographs. Be open to serendipitous findings. Many opportunities exist to discover the unexpected through the use of dynamic interviewing techniques (rather than a fixed one-size-fits-all survey) and dynamic observation. Listen to extreme users. Use findings to inform decisions around the design or modification of services. As Margaret Burri from Johns Hopkins University said, a central tenant of user centered design is getting users to tell us their stories: “If we don’t hear their stories, we will make up stories.”
2. **Design with a purpose.** Tapping into the field of design and drawing on its processes can help to turn opportunities into reality. Paul-Jervis Heath from Modern Human explained that design is a pervasive, multi-phase process, and outward appearance is only the tip of the iceberg. He noted that great products are indispensable, and that products that help to positively change and reset behavior have attained the “pinnacle of design.” Libraries have the opportunity to create services that are indispensable and that make members of the user community feel good about themselves and their work.
3. **See the world differently.** New mapping techniques and visual analytics help to reveal information about user-library interaction. Cognitive maps such as those presented by Andrew Asher can be rich sources of information about users’ mental models of libraries. The things that people most associate with their mental map of the library will appear as elements in the drawing, and the most important things will appear early. Classical visual analytics techniques such as heat mapping are finding their way into assessment of user behavior in libraries. In a similar vein, the Visitors and Residents mapping process can be used to reveal a user’s relationship to various online services and information sources.³

3. For more about the Visitors and Residents project, see <http://www.oclc.org/research/themes/user-studies/vandr.html>.

Kirsten Leonard

Private Academic Library Network of Indiana

@KristenLeonard



#orlp Need to beef up librarian research method and analysis skills so we can scale user-center design and start doing it every day

2:49 PM – 21 Oct 2015

Regardless of the discipline in which the methods are rooted, all of this work requires skills that are outside the usual range of librarians' expertise. To compensate for this, most libraries are relying on outside experts brought in as consultants to lead or participate. Discussions during the meeting made it clear that this practice is an opportunity for skill transfer from experts to librarians. If an expert is hired, part of her responsibility should be to diffuse her knowledge throughout the library staff. A core team can amplify impact by this kind of learning through practice.

Core Themes

After listening to the speakers describe methodologies and outcomes used in a range of projects at their own institutions, a number of cohesive themes flowed out of this meeting.

Nadaleen Tempelman-Kluit

New York University

@Nadaleen



#orlp Rather than have a UX dept, make user centered design the default process everyone uses to develop new services, etc
@pauljervisheath

2:37 PM – 21 Oct 2015

Empower users.

Embrace the goal of new service development and reconfiguration to empower the user. Empowering can mean both enabling users to do something they could not do (or not easily do) and giving users more agency in controlling and directing an important part of their life. Libraries can hold up the measuring stick of empowerment to filter their choices.

Implementing new services and support structures, as well as developing spaces that serve needs and fill gaps, can help to empower users. Examples of opportunities for user empowerment include reducing the distance/friction/inconvenience between them and the information that they need, ensuring ready access to resources, and being attentive and alert to responsive to their current needs. Ideally, libraries are enough in tune with the needs of their communities to be able to forecast what will be needed in the future.


In order to really be successful, those who work with communities need to move beyond access to empowerment. As Aaron Shaw from Northwestern University stated, "Access is just the beginning."

Empower the library.

In investigating the evolving needs of library users and rethinking services, libraries have a real opportunity to rethink workflows, staffing levels and staff roles. Paul-Jervis Heath of Modern Human characterized this as "choreographing" of services that more appropriately fit the needs of students and researchers.

Because the library serves the campus in a broad way and is not attached to a particular department, it is well positioned to develop unique intelligence about communities and needs on campus. Developing this capacity and serving as a repository for types of knowledge and insights possible only from this vantage point may prove to be very beneficial to the library. It also has an opportunity to shape investigations to help align with campus priorities.

Mary Marissen
Swarthmore College
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#orlp thought provoking UT finding that retention tied to student finding their place/feeling at home

8:25 AM – 22 Oct 2015

At the University of Tennessee, improving student retention was a campus goal, and a student survey found that students were leaving because they hadn't found a "home" on campus. The library embraced this goal as its own and worked towards creating a "wall of encouragement" and support for the student community, emphasizing student safety and health, particularly around the time of final exams.

Form partnerships.

Forging partnerships outside the library, whether on or beyond campus, may be critical to success. Most of the user-centered design stories shared during the meeting hinged on the participation of external partners. In some cases the partners permitted the work to go forward, in others they gave the work the necessary scope, in yet others collaborators were necessary for a solution to be successfully implemented.

How can the library foster relationships with faculty and others on campus who possess special skills and knowledge to help them with this important work? Key research partners with needed skills and fresh insights may be found in the library or information school on campus, or perhaps in a school of design. Joan Lippincott from the Coalition for Networked Information advised that it may be useful to ally and engage with faculty who are proactively looking at new ways of teaching.

Cass Kvenild

University of Wyoming

@cassk



Inspired by this university/ school libraries STEM literacies partnership! scidentity.umd.edu #orlp

6:38 AM – 22 Oct 2015

Partnerships may even be forged outside the boundaries of the institution. Shirley Dugdale observed the emergence of co-working spaces in local communities. What is, or could be, the library's role in these spaces?

As with any type of partnership or relationship, “fit” is important, as is full inclusion of all partners. As Mega Subramaniam from University of Maryland noted in regards to partnerships between library school researchers and librarian practitioners, it's important to make sure that both are fully a part of the team. She also emphasized the importance of picking partners whose interests are aligned around areas of mutual benefit.

Engage the campus community.

Studying users and working with partners can reveal a gap in what librarians do and which services libraries offer, and what user communities or other important stakeholders *think* that librarians and libraries do. In addition to changing and reshaping services, there may be room for improvement in the visibility of existing library services. Opportunities may exist to communicate in new ways about existing functionalities. For example, describing services using language that is “user friendly” for target audiences may increase the understanding and visibility of valuable services that they library has long offered.

Scott Walter

DePaul University

@swalter123



Shift toward engagement re-shapes what we mean by innovation in libraries. [@lorcanD](#) is singing my song #orlp

11:29 AM – 21 Oct 2015

Undertaking ethnographic approaches and other forms of service assessment can have immediate payoffs in terms of engagement. Teresa Walker from the University of Tennessee shared that the act of surveying faculty on their use of library services turned out to be a good way to promote those services.

Conclusion

Research libraries exist in an evolved and evolving environment, and are moving from offering a fixed set of services to a “constant beta” mode of service evolution. Ethnography and design can introduce effective tools for finding out how people really work and where they encounter barriers. Bringing in an ethnographer or a designer is only the first step, however: other members of the library staff need to engage and learn the relevant skills to help form a nimble team to do the research, analysis and implementation. Recording and analyzing ethnographic data is not, however, easy or straightforward. Coding of interviews, diary entries, or other data can be both challenging and expensive. Speakers described how the costs of interview transcription or the expense of professional tools for coding such as Nvivo can be impediments. Staff time is hugely expensive though, so investing in such services and tools pays off when compared to painstaking manual workarounds. In a similar vein, given the expense and time commitment required to undertake ethnographic work, institutions may consider pooling resources to do more (as illustrated in Andrea Twiss-Brooks’ presentation on the study of third-year medical students, conducted together by six Illinois institutions) or taking on board “lessons learned” from other, similar institutions.

Courtney McDonald

Indiana University Bloomington

@xocg



paraphrasing: so much progress in improving user experience in libraries cld be achieved by adopting holistic ‘ecosystem’ thinking
[#orlp](#)

2:48 PM – 21 Oct 2014

The meeting confirmed the importance of shaping future library services based on users’ needs and acknowledged that there are a variety of ways to do this. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution—the best way forward for any institution should be determined by its goals and resources—it is clear that many institutions are investing and will continue to invest in these methods. Finding ways to establish communities of practice—and to share tools, techniques and findings—will make libraries more successful in embedding libraries in the lives of their users.

RESOURCES

The resources included below were shared by speakers and others during the Library in the Life of the User meeting and may provide useful background for those seeking to learn more on this topic.

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For more information about the Library in
the Life of the User meeting, please visit:
oclc.org/LiLoU



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