
Volume 15
Number 1
Library Catalogs and Other Discovery Tools
(Spring 2009)

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Ramsey, E. (2014). Usability Survey and Keyword Searching. *OLA Quarterly*, 15(1), 36-38. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1237>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Usability Survey of Keyword Searching

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This usability survey was originally developed during a practicum at a small liberal arts university in Northeast Portland, Concordia University (CU), as part of my graduate studies at Emporia University. It was originally suggested as a project by my practicum supervisor and head of CU reference, Judy Anderson, as the first step toward creating an online tutorial on keyword searching aimed primarily at distance students. The goals of this project were to give me practical experience with the usability concepts I had been studying as well as giving CU librarians new insights into the needs of their users.

The first task was to identify what we hoped to learn about CU library users and their methods of finding resources. Judy Anderson and CU reference librarian Krista Reichard helped develop seven initial questions we wanted answered through the survey. These initial questions then guided the development of the survey's interview questions and tasks. We also looked at other library tutorials in use by libraries in the Orbis Cascade Alliance, and usability surveys conducted at other libraries. Resources that proved especially useful are listed in the references.

Additional support for this project was provided by Donna Bachard, Concordia University Research Committee Representative, who helped refine the Human Subjects Research Investigation Application and ensure confidentiality procedures. Molly Lee, an intranet communication manager for Daimler who is experienced in usability studies, also provided initial guidance in the possible processes and procedures for usability surveys.

Method

The survey was conducted from November 11 to 18, 2008, on the Concordia University campus and in the homes of subjects. The eight participants in the survey were selected

at random from CU library users who were present at those times I needed to complete the task. Although not a scientific sampling, those surveyed represented a broad range of CU library users, from a freshman completing his first semester in college to an English language learner with conditional admission to CU to a middle-aged student returning to complete her graduate studies after being out of school for over twenty years. After listening to a scripted introduction, each subject completed an informed consent form, answered preliminary questions, then attempted to complete eight tasks related to keyword searches using the Concordia University library catalog. Observations were recorded on a checklist with a number assigned to each subject to help ensure confidentiality. Each survey was completed in less than twenty minutes.

Initial Questions and Concomitant Survey Questions/Tasks

1. Do students understand when to use a keyword search?

Interview Question: When do you think you should use a keyword search?

Task: Perform a keyword search in the Concordia University library catalog for "adult education."

2. Do students know how to modify their search? (any field ... Boolean terms ...)

Task: Modify your search. Look for: "adult education" AND "literacy" print resources available in English at Concordia. How many results did you get?

3. Do students know what information they need to find an item on the shelf?



Interview Question: How would you find the text “Print literacy development” in the Concordia library?

4. **Do student know electronic books are available in the catalog, and how to access them?**

Interview Question: How would you access the resource “Review of adult learning and literacy?”

5. **Do students know where to find the contents of a book?**

Task: Find the contents of the book “Print literacy development: uniting cognitive and social practice theories”

6. **Do students know how to find similar items?**

Task: Find similar items on the topic Adult Education.

7. **Do students understand how to mark and save items?**

Task: Go back to your original search results. Mark and save: “Adult learning method: a guide for effective instructions.”

Task: Send the item you saved in a brief display format to the following e-mail address.

Discussion

During the preliminary interview all subjects reported that they had conducted keyword searches of some kind. However, only two subjects had done so using the CU library catalog (<http://catalog.cu-portland.edu/search-S2>). All had conducted keyword searches using Google, and said Google was the main place they conducted information

searches of any kind. Half of the subjects did not know when to use keyword searches in a library catalog, so an explanation of when to use this type of search would be an important introduction to a tutorial.

In the task requiring subjects to modify their searches, only one-quarter of the subjects used the “modify search” button at the top of the search results page. Most subjects knew to add terms to their original search to narrow their results and understood the Boolean method of adding AND between their terms. However, because subjects did not generally know how to get to the advanced search page through the “modify search” button, they missed the opportunity to narrow their searches in additional ways, such as by location, language, type of resource and year. Several comments were made that the type in the “modify search” button was so small as to be unnoticeable. The survey results and comments point to the importance of drawing attention to the “modify search” and other buttons at the top of the page in a tutorial.

Many of the participants were not entirely sure how to locate resources, whether they were traditional books or e-books. Because less than half of the subjects connected the call number with the location of an item on the shelves, this topic is also an important component in a tutorial. Only one participant had experience with Netlibrary and Ebrary, so resources should also include pointers to tutorials for these products.

Most subjects were able to eventually complete the tasks that required them to click on the item title and use the tabs marked “More Details”, “Find Similar Items” and “Full Records” (see Fig. 1). However, several expressed surprise at the information they could access there, so the uses of the tabs should also be clearly explained in a tutorial.



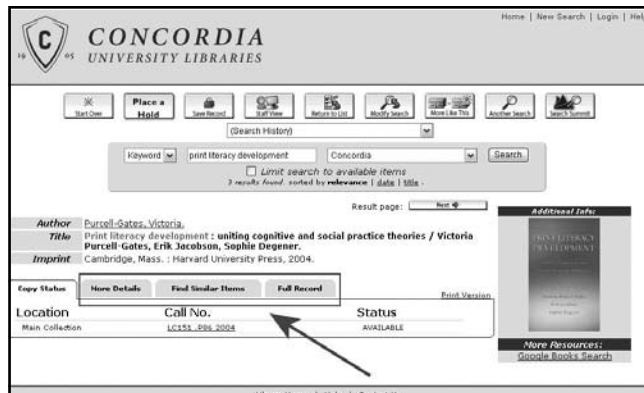


Fig. 1: Single item display in Concordia University catalog

The tasks which gave the subjects the most trouble were those connected with the use of the “Book Bag” button. Only one student understood that clicking on this button was the first step in being able to save and export an item from their initial search results, and this student had attended an informational lecture presented by a CU librarian. Only one student clicked on the item they wanted, then used the “Save Record” button at the top of the screen. When these two subjects did manage to save their records and view them, they complained that there was no clearly identified link to e-mailing their saved item, only the “View and Export” button. Another commented that when she accesses articles from databases there is always a clear method of saving and exporting items. Half of the subjects also asked how such a task could be useful in their future searches. These results indicate that users need clear instructions for saving and exporting items, and the “Book Bag” label does not adequately represent this feature.

The results of this usability survey appear to answer in the negative all the questions initially posed. Thus, all aspects of a keyword search present in the survey tasks should be addressed to some degree in a tutorial: when to initiate a keyword search,

how to modify search results, how to find an item on the CU shelves, how to use e-books, how to find the contents of a book, how to find similar items, and why and how to save and export items. While some subjects were able to find work-arounds which took them outside the library catalog, they will be able to perform much quicker, more accurate searches once they have a better understanding of all of the facets of the CU library catalog interface. A clear and detailed tutorial that includes comprehension checks such as a brief quiz may help them achieve that understanding. 🌸

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