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UX, It's Not a New State in the Union: User Experience Explained!

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UX, It's Not a New State in the Union: User Experience Explained!

Using user experience (UX) methodologies, libraries can improve their web site by identifying the tasks that their users need to accomplish, and then eliminate those barriers. This process sounds easy enough, but if your library makes web site decisions based on self-referential or anecdotal data, then it's not being geared towards user's tasks and goals. By following user experience principles, libraries can clearly identify problematic touchpoints, or expand upon touchpoints that users value the most. Here's a quick overview.

UX, if it's not a new State, then what is it?

User experience, or "UX" for short, is an iterative process that examines a user's tasks in relation to organizational goals and constraints. The goal of UX is to improve the users experience in completing a task by analyzing each step of their process through the lens of personas. This analysis informs which incremental changes will be made to the process of task completion.

The use of personas ensures design is driven by data, rather than being self-referential. In the past, design decisions were often based on excitement about the newest widget, and little regard was given to whether the widget actually satisfied a user's need (Gube, 2010). UX strives to investigate and question design decisions by thinking of them as "a" decision rather than "the" decision, meaning there is no final solution to a problem, as UX is an iterative process.

After data is analyzed and interpreted, a list of tasks is generated for each persona based on their needs. Each task is broken down further into the steps a user must go through to complete the task; this is called a journey map, and

includes the user's feelings about each step. This is where personas can really inform your analysis, and you can gain insight into how your users are interacting with your website. Once you have taken a critical look at your website, you are quite possibly going to be overwhelmed by the possibilities.

You might be tempted to make a number of changes all at once, but don't give in! You can still move fast, but by making minor, incremental changes, users are more likely to join you on your redesign journey (Whalen, 2013). Imagine a time a website you frequent did a huge redesign. How did you feel the first time you visited after that change? User experience implementation shouldn't be something that happens to your users, but with them! The goal is to make our users feel empowered to complete their tasks successfully.

User experience is how companies have been able to improve their services and web sites to be intuitive and easy to use, and now libraries are applying user experience methodologies to improve their web presence.

Amanda Etches and Aaron Schmidt, who are consultants that apply user experience in library settings, summarize user experience very succinctly by stating that "UX design incorporates the practical aspects of utility, ease of use and efficiency to make your web design and functionality decisions with patrons in mind. This results in a better design, a more intuitive interface, and a more enjoyable experience," (2012). We intend to make the use of our library web presence a more enjoyable experience for our users.

Why should libraries care about what Amazon is doing?

The reason might surprise you! But first, let's summarize the current state of why our users need libraries, and then compare that to Amazon and other big companies.

Libraries are incredibly relevant today because of the breadth of digital information that we now create and disseminate. Our users need our libraries because there is no other agency that provides these services: vetting information sources, helping people create new knowledge, and access information – based on tax dollars – for free – for anyone.

When you think big companies and their competition, they start to lose their

shape a bit because, let's face it! Technically we don't need Google. There are lots of ways to search for information and we know this, especially, as librarians.

Technically we don't need Amazon. There are lots of ways to buy goods, online, in person, or a person can barter and trade, and even find something for free on Craigslist.

These companies were able to achieve a dominant presence through constantly assessing and iterating their web presence. By employing user experience tools and iterative changes based on subsequent analysis these companies were able to tailor their website to provide exactly what users needed. The bottom line is this: these businesses know what their users want and provide it quickly.

Amazon was able to boost their user experience through understanding exactly why a user arrived at a web location, know exactly what the user wants, and then give it to them.

Can libraries understand why our users value us, why they arrive at our web site, how they use the space, and then improve upon that? We can, by using the same user experience tools that Amazon, Google, and other companies have.

The biggest companies aren't great because they are the greatest at what they do – they are the most successful at convincing you that they are the best. Many people believe that “Google has all the information” and that “Amazon has all of the things” – but Google only has a certain percentage of all web information! (Gil, 2013) These companies were able to make the experiences enjoyable for their users, and that is how they were able to secure such a large presence in our lives.

What do we want library users to feel when using our libraries? What services do we provide that are valued most, and how can we make them the most enjoyable? To begin, we are starting to identify what tasks our users need to accomplish and how they use the library to accomplish them. Do they need to: bake a cake, learn to read, learn to code, collect data, write a paper, build a rocket, and make a prototype? How can we help users best accomplish these tasks? “Ultimately that is what user experience design is about – it's about solving problems for users. It should empower users, making them feel they can do something that they were previously unable to do,” (Boag, 2014). So my question for you is this: what can libraries empower users to do that they were previously unable to do? How can

we make it a positive experience that they'll return to?

Limitations: Why Libraries Can't Play Like Amazon

Libraries are very proud of protecting privacy. According to the American Library Association, "Privacy is essential to the exercise of free speech," (ALA, 2002). While this is true in many respects, it limits our ability to understand exactly what our users are doing and what they need. We depend on usability interventions to determine what they believe to be true.

Another issue is we coordinate with so many vendors who don't provide data about what an individual user was downloading or using. And in the vendors that do provide this data, going back to privacy again, we don't analyze how they've used the information in their final products (ie: papers, videos, etc). We don't know if they found what they were looking for!

Online retailers, like Amazon, can see if someone liked what they bought based on ratings and purchases. They even go so far as to use predictive purchasing to determine what you need before you even know that you need it. How can libraries do the same thing? And for what? How can we save the time of the user and what problems can we solve for the user?

Libraries should have the goal of making their users feel able to find and access any piece of information that they might need. They should feel confident that, via the library, all of the data they need is accessible and can be found right away. In an ideal situation, our users won't feel anxiety if they can't find something immediately, because "do-it-yourself" style assistance is integrated at the point of need.

According to Dr. Villachica, an Instructional Design faculty member at Boise State University, one should design a website for the expert user where the path matches the "natural workflow and logic of the job," (Villachica, 2006, p. 546). The web builders must then provide digital job aids to help guide non-experts to learn the path. An example of this is that an expert user knows to search for a full text article by citation by starting with the journal title to locate the database or vendor that supplies the full text. A non-expert user would probably search in the search box and may or may not find it on the first try, then give up. How do libraries add digital job aids to assist them to find the article depending on their

user behavior?

In your everyday life you may run into this as a user yourself. Think about the last time you went grocery shopping. Was it easy to find what you were looking for? Now, imagine you've never been in a grocery store, but step into one and are really hungry. How would your experience be different? Where would you start? This is the difference between an expert and non-expert user, and though you're thinking about grocery stores, the same experiences can be translated to library resources.

The expert user feels comfortable navigating a variety of databases, because they possess a broad understanding of how databases work and the type of information available within. The non-expert user knows they have a need, and know where they are expected to go to fill it, but have no idea how to navigate through the resources. This is where user experience principles can step in and guide less experienced users to resources.

At Albertsons Library, we set have out to determine common tasks, and improve the user experience of our most prevalent user groups. Our goal is to determine their tasks and analyze how our library helps them to accomplish those tasks.

Albertsons Library's Process

The Digital Access Unit at Albertsons Library is initiating the application of user experience principles. We are primarily focusing on improving our web site and web presence in all ways, but also may improve other library touchpoints.

The first project step that we initiated was to create a spreadsheet of all of the ideas that came out of discussions and processes. Even as we discuss creating personas, we are noticing web issues and identifying potential solutions. However we don't want to act on any of those ideas yet, so we are capturing them in an organized manner, and will analyze later to determine if they are based on data, user testing, or if it is self-referential.

Frequently we hear that things like vendor interface "cannot be changed," but all of this is potentially changeable. If a vendor's user interface isn't user friendly, we can always switch vendors, or make the vendor aware of the issues, and see if they are open to changing their platform. Springshare is often very receptive and

responsive to making changes that benefit user experience.

Here are our steps thus far:

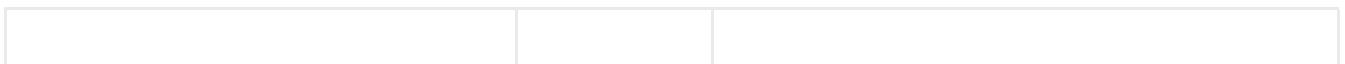


- Read research articles, attended presentations, and attend classes on user experience
- Consulted faculty user experience expert Dr. Steve Villachica
- Identified where our organization was in relation to the user experience maturity model keikendo n.d.
- Presented user experience concepts and related terms to library staff
- Persona development based on data
- Identifying their most common tasks
- Conducted user surveys to determine task priority
- We are currently in the process of creating journey maps for specific tasks

Lessons Learned

Here are a few things our team has discovered, and are sharing with the hope it will inform your own UX process and decisions:

- Persona creation based on data, though hard, is key to making the UX process a success. If you aren't basing your personas on data, then you're right back in that self-referential process that isn't truly addressing users' needs. Don't have any data? Collecting it can be as easy as creating an online survey to determine what your user's needs are, and how they are using your website. Here are examples of our personas and related tasks.



Role on Boise State Univ. campus	Number of Students/ Faculty	Examples of Tasks
Concurrent Enrollment students	2200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete their senior project • Find a peer reviewed journal article
Graduate Students	3021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete a literature review
Faculty	623	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find a permanent link to an article to place in Blackboard • Embed a video from Films on Demand in Blackboard • Find an exact citation
Undergraduates	18,900	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find a peer reviewed journal article

- Communicate along the way with stakeholders. Don't forget, your client isn't just the user, but your colleagues too. No one likes having big changes sprung on them, so keep them in the loop as you proceed. They might be able to provide valuable insight, and you don't want to cut that off by alienating them from the process. Communication can be done in a formal presentation, or one-on-one in casual conversations with colleagues. Explain why making changes, and provide data to back up those decisions. (Schmidt, A. 2012, p. 39)
- Working across departments will make the process more meaningful. You will be getting input from varied points of view, and have multiple paths to disseminate your findings. Also, you never know where a UX ally might be lurking!
- We have found coordination with vendors makes web analytics difficult to fully understand where our users go and what they do.
- It is easy to feel overwhelmed by all the possible changes your website needs. Keep in mind you aren't going to implement them all at once, and focus your

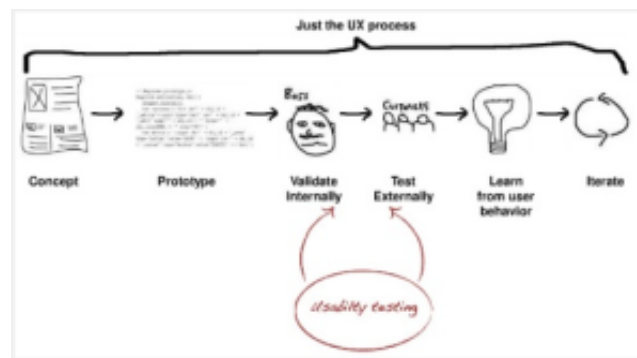
initial efforts on low hanging fruit that can be addressed with minimal expenditure of resources. This will give you a sense of accomplishment that will get your momentum going, and give you the confidence and experience to tackle larger changes.

Where We're Going

We are just finishing the persona creation stage of the process, and are looking forward to humanizing them. Our next step is to analyze a specific task with a journey map that breaks it down into steps. We have discussed a number of ways to choose our tasks. Whether it would be best to focus on the most common task, a different task for each persona, or the most problem ridden. We decided it would be most informative to analyze a common task from different viewpoints. We are hoping that focusing our energies on a single task will give us a clear goal and help us stay focused.

Once we have developed our journey maps, and identified exact user experiences (ie frustrated, happy, easy to use, confused), we will identify touchpoints. A touchpoint is any place the library has control over possible improvements. For example, a touchpoint we do not have control over are the color requirements for websites at our institution.

Then, we will prioritize improvements based on user needs, and how quickly a solution can be developed and implemented. Once we have a prioritized list, we will start wire framing solutions, test them, redesign based on testing, possibly retest, and redesign, and then launch. This Lean UX diagram from Josh Whalen, Founder of Brilliant Experience, is a good representation of this process.



It's all about you

Any library can implement user experience principles. Even if you have limited funds, you can still benefit from UX! There is always something you can do to add value regardless of the budget. You might have to use “guerilla” or “stealth” methods, but you can still implement UX (Jesmond, A., Chudley, J., 2012). Thinking like a user is the first step to user centered design. These principles are applicable to any area of a library to improve services (web, public services, etc).

Here’s our call to action to help you improve your library:

- Using a UX maturity model, determine where your organization is on the spectrum. We like this one from UX Mag: <http://uxmag.com/articles/how-mature-is-your-organization-when-it-comes-to-ux>
- Use this to have conversations at your library about user needs. When making decisions about projects and services, ask yourself what your users would want, and ask that question out loud.
- Think about the types of tasks your users need the library for to complete their tasks. What are they? Take steps to figure this out.

Contact us if you want to chat! We’re around on the internet and we would love to talk with you more. Amy is on twitter at @librarythinking or can be emailed at amyvecchione@boisestate.edu and amyvecchione@gmail.com! You can find Deana by emailing deanabrown@boisestate.edu! Let’s make libraries better together.

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Resources to learn more

Maturity of your organization with UX

<http://uxmag.com/articles/how-mature-is-your-organization-when-it-comes-to-ux>

Intro to Library UX by Aaron Schmidt

<http://vimeo.com/72766459>

Articles from Smashing Magazine, <http://www.smashingmagazine.com>

– “What is User Experience Design? Overview, Tools and Resources”

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/10/05/what-is-user-experience-design-overview-tools-and-resources/>

– “Effectively Planning UX Design Projects”

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2013/01/24/effectively-planning-ux-design-projects-2/>

Planning your UX strategy

<http://johnnyholland.org/2010/04/planning-your-ux-strategy/>

Mission Impossible: Shrinking the UX Process

<http://www.uxbooth.com/articles/mission-impossible-shrinking-the-ux-process/>

Influx – UX library consultants

<http://weareinflux.com/>

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<http://www.slideshare.net/johnwhalen/uxpa-2013-implementing-lean-ux>