Usability as a Method to Analyze a Library Search Box and Interfaces

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ABSTRACT

Usability testing is a valuable tool to measure the satisfaction and ease of use of a website or application. In the library setting, usability can be used to help librarians learn how easily patrons are able to navigate a library website. In a usability study on the library search function for an academic library, the researcher of this study conducted a task analysis and think-aloud interviews with 20 participants (10 undergraduates and 10 graduate students/faculty/staff) to measure the intuitive design, efficiency of use, and ease of learning of the search box and interfaces. Participants were asked to conduct a total of nine searches. The first six searches asked users to find a specific resource using the University Libraries search box. The last three searches asked users to search for topics of interest while thinking aloud, meaning they were encouraged to share their opinions on the search functionality and interfaces as well as anything pertaining to the University Libraries.

The goal of the study was to answer two research questions: 1) If unprompted, do participants use the existing tabs (QuickSearch, Journal Titles, Databases) in the existing default search box? 2) When prompted, do users understand and value additional search tabs in the existing default search box? After an initial analysis, the researcher was able to gain an idea of the searching habits of the students, faculty and staff and was able to draw three primary conclusions to help with the future design of a new search box. First, the students, faculty and staff rarely use the links located below the search box on all three tabs. Thus, these links should be revised or removed. Second, the students, faculty and staff rarely use the journal titles tab. Third, although students, faculty and staff use the databases tab more often than the journals tab, almost half of users had never or almost never clicked on the database tab.

Every library is unique and needs to take steps to understand the searching habits and information literacy abilities of its patrons. This study gave the researcher an understanding of the usability issues students, faculty, and staff encounter while searching for information on the University Libraries website. Thus, going forward the researcher can develop a library search box that is simplified and requires less understanding of scholarly communications.