

How Students Experience the Library

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I love that our librarians are invested in being part of a constructive learning environment for our students. They took great interest in my particular needs and goals as the instructor; they worked with me; and they tailored their workshop material to best suit my class content and learning goals.

— Faculty feedback on library instruction, 2019

Introduction

NEW LIBRARY PRACTICES in user experience (UX) research and data collection, coupled with years of informal observation, provide librarians with a holistic understanding of how Middlebury students experience the library. We've guided students through the anxieties and breakthroughs of the research process. We've followed them (with permission!) as they've honed their navigation skills in the library stacks. We've assessed their usage of the library website and databases. All this data has helped us to refine how we assist students and teach them about the universe of information.

This data isn't just helpful for us, though! We love to share what we know about students, and think it can help faculty design and structure assignments, as well as thinking of new ways to incorporate the Library and information literacy into courses. We'll talk about some of the ways we learn about students, some of the things we've learned, and have time for group brainstorming and discussion.

Instruction & Consultation

Our first interactions with students are often in-class instruction sessions or questions at the Research Desk. While our time with students is often short, librarians regularly do formative assessment in our workshops as well as collecting data for evaluation of these interactions. We ask questions and have students complete exercises in workshops, and observe their behavior and their discussions in these situations. We record data on the types and topics of questions we hear at the Research Desk, as well as when students come to our offices for one-on-one consultations. Finally, we also sometimes ask for students or faculty to evaluate our workshops, providing valuable data for improving them as we go forward.

'It's interesting that this library is so open. Librarians really want to help. I'm not used to that!' - Student, 2018

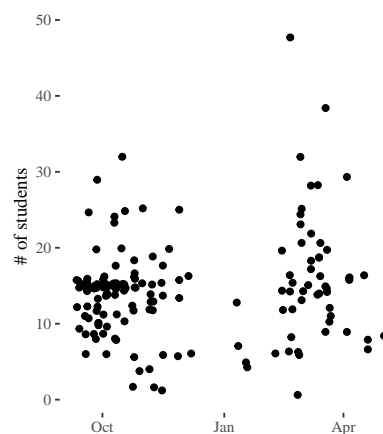


Figure 1: Number of students in each workshop (n = 169), 2018-2019 AY

Three big things we’ve learned about how students use the library from observing in them classes and during consultations:

1. Students are uncomfortable with uncertainty.
2. Students do not understand the systems that are used to organize information.
3. The ‘digital native’ is a myth, but the ‘digital divide’ is not.

Library spaces

In the library, we have a team of staff (including representatives from outside the library who work in the building) who look at our spaces and how they are used in order to improve our users experience and usage of them. We know that library spaces help students succeed, and we want those spaces to be designed so that students can make the best use of them.

The Davis Family Library was built in 2004. Student life and teaching have changed drastically since then. Some things we’ve learned about how students use the library:

1. Group projects have become increasingly common. The library needs to account for louder, more collaborative spaces.
2. Reliance on computers and specialized technology are increasing. All library seats must provide access to outlets and desktop computers must offer proprietary software (such as Adobe Creative Suite or Stata).
3. Our 2017 seating survey helped to identify problem areas to focus on with architects (as part of the library Master Plan process).

Library user experience

We don’t just focus on the physical space of the library, we also assess and evaluate in the digital spaces. Our Library User Experience (LUXE) team uses a variety of UX research methods to look at areas across our various web spaces.

Most of what we learn through UX research gets applied to our web design, other findings from these UX studies are applicable to those with an interest in student research:

1. Students show general insecurity about finding and using reference sources.
2. Students struggle to differentiate library catalogs from databases or search engines.
3. Students who have had one or more instructions sessions tend to be more confident in using the library.

“The Digital Native Is a Myth,” Nature 547, no. 7664 (July 2017): 380–380, <https://doi.org/10.1038/547380a>.

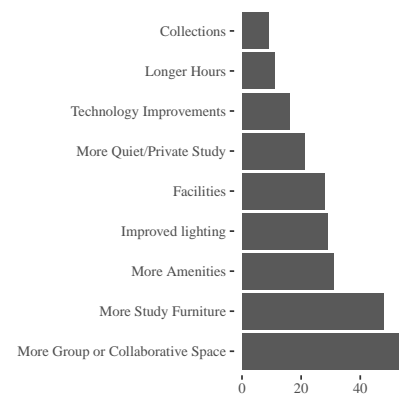


Figure 2: Categories of student response to the question ‘What would you like to change about the library?’, 2017 Library Space Team Survey

Christian Rohrer, “When to Use Which User-Experience Research Methods,” Nielsen Norman Group, October 12, 2014, <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/which-ux-research-methods/>.

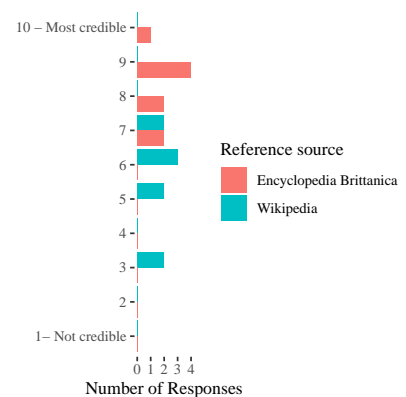


Figure 3: Student perceptions of trustworthiness of Wikipedia vs. Encyclopedia Britannica, LUXE Testing