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From Dandelion Seed to Cottage Garden: The Transformation of User Experience in the MSU Libraries

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From Dandelion Seed to Cottage Garden:

The Transformation of User Experience in the MSU Libraries

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Abstract

The user experience movement is gaining momentum in libraries, but its adoption and adaptation

into an organizational culture may present unexpected challenges. In June 2014, the Michigan

State University (MSU) Libraries created a User Experience unit and in a short time, established

a solid and reputable team of practitioners. This success, however, was not achieved overnight.

User experience work tends to be team-oriented and project-based, and initially, unit members

struggled to adapt their roles within the unit and the unit's role within the organization. To guide

the unit forward, an in-house retreat was held to give unit members an opportunity to better

understand each other as user experience professionals. Through a skills audit and a SWOT

(Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, respect for others' skills was gained

and a shared vision was established. The User Experience unit now effectively functions as a

productive, collaborative, synergistic change agent, holistically integrating user experience into

all services at the MSU Libraries.

Definition of User Experience

In order to talk about user experience in libraries, it is essential to provide some basic definitions.

According to the *Usability Body of Knowledge*, user experience refers to "every aspect of the

user's interaction with a product, service, or company that make up the user's perceptions of the

whole". As a discipline, user experience design holistically considers all the elements that make up an interface, including layout, visual design, text, brand, sound, and interaction. User experience works to coordinate these elements to allow for the best possible interaction by users.

Why should libraries care about user experience?

User experience in libraries is trending, but why? In the past, librarians were the keepers of information and users relied heavily on the specialized knowledge and expertise of librarians for access and retrieval. As the experts, librarians automatically assumed they knew what was best for users. With the advent of the digital age, information has become a ubiquitous commodity and the role of librarians has shifted from keeper to navigator as a means for making information accessible. The most recent generation of users, digital natives, have grown up accustomed to the ubiquity of information and have developed savvy information-seeking and technology skills. Due to this increased presence of digital services and information, libraries now have some stiff competition and are feeling pressured to adapt. The paradigm surrounding librarians' roles has shifted and in order to stay relevant, librarians must understand and accept the user as the core of the libraries' existence (Walton 2015). Without our users, our libraries would not have a reason to exist.

How does user experience translate for libraries?

User experience helps libraries stay relevant, particularly by filling the gap between users' needs and librarians' assumptions about users' needs. Libraries should interpret user experience in a broader, holistic approach, going beyond the design of digital products and incorporating user-centricity into physical spaces and service points. By observing users in the library environment,

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librarians can apply a data-influenced approach to development and design. Librarians should no longer make assumptions about how to best meet users' needs. Applying user experience principles lessens confusion, promotes an intuitive experience, and adds impact and value for the user, all important considerations when competing for users' time and attention (Walton 2015).

History of User Experience at the MSU Libraries

While user experience takes different forms across libraries, the MSU Libraries' approach is holistic, studying the interactions in our physical and digital spaces and services. User experience is a pioneered movement to transform our library, applying a grassroots approach to developing and sustaining a user-centric, evidence-based culture for continuous improvement of our spaces, services, and collections. Prior to the launch of the user experience movement in the MSU Libraries, solo, disparate, assessment projects were occurring throughout the library such as chat reference assessment, electronic resource usage analysis, collections analysis, and website usability testing. The librarian who handled chat reference assessment was also involved in usability testing as a means to develop an iterative web design process. The usability project was successful in bringing awareness to librarians about the need to observe users and use evidence to improve services on their behalf. Several librarians became interested in participating in similar user experience projects and to help break these efforts out of silos, the User Experience (UX) Work Group was formed in 2012. The UX Work Group acts to bring people working on user experience projects together for collaboration across library divisions and units. Through dotted line reporting to the Assistant Director to Public Services, librarians from Technical Services, Systems, and Collections were integrated to apply a holistic approach to user experience.

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Through the success of the usability testing efforts of the UX Work Group, the need to conduct user experience projects became more evident and the work load increased significantly for the group. In 2013, an additional User Experience Librarian was hired by the MSU Libraries and shortly after, in 2014, User Experience became an official unit under the Public Services division, reporting officially to the Assistant Director for Public Services. User Experience has continued to expand in the MSU Libraries and at the time of this writing, the newer unit consists of four librarians, one support staff member, and one student employee. User Experience is evolving holistically, assuming primary responsibility for UX issues throughout the organization, laying the foundation for establishing a user-centric, data-influenced culture for improvements. Of course, as a newly established unit in a large organization, the User Experience unit felt growing pains. Despite having job descriptions outlining each unit member's responsibilities, some unit members seemed to have difficulty adapting their roles within a team dynamic and understanding the expectations held by other units about the role of User Experience. In November 2014, the User Experience held a half-day, in-house retreat for the purpose of defining our roles and gaining awareness and respect for each other's skills and capabilities. Upon conducting a skills audit, it was confirmed that collectively, the User Experience unit held a diverse set of individual skills, expertise, and experiences and each member had something unique to offer to the unit. To further soothe growing pains, a SWOT analysis was conducted during the retreat. Through honest, direct, and sometimes difficult conversation, it was understood that while the User Experience unit had administrative support and buy-in from library staff, there were weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that had to be acknowledged and acted upon to move forward successfully.

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Table 1: MSU Libraries - User Experience Unit: SWOT Analysis (November 2014)

| |
|---|
| ***Strengths:*** |
| •   Diverse skill sets, expertise, and experiences |
| •   Administrative support and staff buy-in |
| ***Weaknesses:*** |
| •   New unit; new supervisor; lack of experience as formal unit |
| •   Unclear expectations from other units |
| ***Opportunities:*** |
| •   Promote collaboration on UX projects within unit and with other library units and divisions |
| •   Respect skills and experiences brought to table by all unit members |
| •   Develop new skills to enhance participation in UX projects |
| •   Continue to work with data to enhance holistic user experience for MSUL |
| ***Threats:*** |
| •   Territorial issues with other units |
| •   Political pushback: recommendations not acted on |

Once the User Experience unit identified and agreed upon its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, a list of action items was compiled as a means to resolve issues that could impede growth of the unit. For example, one issue that surfaced through the SWOT analysis was a sense of frustration due to the perceived lack of action taken on recommendations made by the User Experience unit, especially after considerable time and dedication had been given. It was resolved to increase the effort to involve stakeholders in user experience projects as

much as possible to give a greater sense of investment. A Consultation Request form (see

appendix) was developed to help establish guidelines and define expectations about the unit's

role in user experience projects involving other library units.

To define the role of the User Experience unit within the larger organization and to help build

reasonable expectations from other units, a mission statement with goals and objectives was

developed and posted on the unit's web page. For further definition of the unit's role in the MSU

Libraries, a work flow was developed, categorizing and explaining the different components of

the work involved, emphasizing a holistic approach in the efforts to build and sustain a culture of

talking (and listening) to our users (see Figure 1). This process increased awareness of the role of

User Experience within the MSU Libraries by helping other units understand the nature of the

work and the processes involved in the myriad of projects undertaken by the unit.

Figure 1: Defining the Role of User Experience in the MSU Libraries
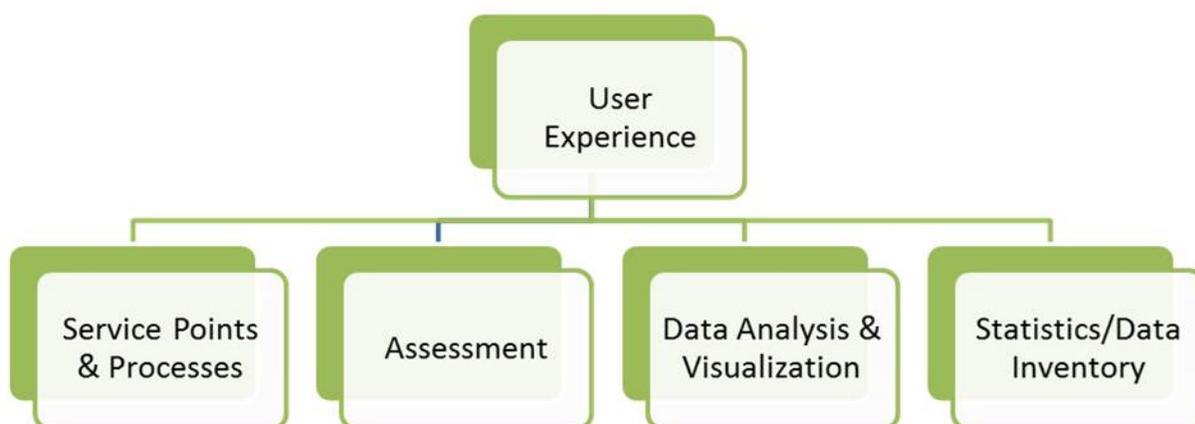
- *Service Points & Processes*: Evaluation of service and access points, both physical and virtual, for optimal user-centric design and continual improvement.

- *Assessment*: Measuring the impact/value of the MSU Libraries.

- *Data Analysis & Visualization*: Analysis of project-related data or data collected by other units in collaboration with UX; visualization of data to tell the story for data-influenced decision making.

- *Statistics/Data Inventory*: Systematic collection and reporting of library statistics; management of in-house data inventory.

How Has User Experience Affected Services at the MSU Libraries?

According to Bell (2014), as libraries attempt to apply user experience as a means for improving spaces and services, it is essential to remember that the design of the experience should be situational and should account for any number of possible ways in which users will interact with a space or service. As the MSU Libraries moves forward, it is important to understand that the User Experience unit has acted and will continue to act as a change agent for the continuous improvement of services and spaces. The effect of user experience on spaces and services in the MSU Libraries has been profound since its recent inception. In its short duration as a formal unit, the User Experience unit has successfully pioneered a movement and built a solid foundation of user experience principles and practice. For example, the library's website was improved by the incorporation of a discovery tool, reducing the number of search boxes on the website. Staff scheduling at the Main Library Reference Desk was adjusted based on the analysis of reference desk statistics collected in DeskTracker. A space study conducted in the MSU Main Library observed how users were using the space (i.e., group vs. solo; table vs. carrel; desktop computer

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and/or laptop) and made recommendations for more functional seating space and more power outlets to accommodate users' mobile technologies. A local, outdated database used for electronic resource access and record management was transitioned into LibGuides v2 A-Z Database List, offering a more intuitive front-end interface for users and streamlining the management of content for library staff.

Currently, there are a number of projects in the docket for User Experience such as implementing LibCal as the new room reservation system and events scheduling management tool and incorporating a digital wayfinding system to help users navigate around the building to locate books and services more easily. The growth of user experience in the MSU Libraries has followed the Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI) model (Hess 2013), establishing a practice of consulting with or observing users regularly to continuously improve spaces and services, both physical and digital. Based on the early success of the unit, it is a reasonable certainty that the role of the User Experience unit at the MSU Libraries will continue to grow, applying principles and practice holistically and using user experience as a primary motivator for continuous improvement.

References

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Biography

Christine Tobias

Christine Tobias is the Head of User Experience at the Michigan State University Libraries (MSUL). She pioneered the user experience movement at MSUL by leading the effort to weave a thread of assessment and build a culture of talking (and listening) to the Libraries' users. Christine received her MLIS from Wayne State University in 2007 and previous to her current position, served in various areas such as reference services, web services, usability studies, and library instruction. She enjoys gardening, watching MSU sports, camping in Michigan, and spending time with her family, including her two precious grandchildren.

UX Consultation Request Form

Please enter your email address: (required)

[ ]

Does your project involve data you have already collected?

○ Yes, I have data that I will be using.

○ No, I will need to collect the data.

Please select the category that best describes your project: (required)

○ Service Points & Processes: Evaluation of service point, including physical service desks, library spaces, website, online tools, or internal processes.

○ Assessment: Measuring the impact/value of the MSU Libraries on the teaching, learning, and research community.

○ Data analysis and visualization: Analysis and/or visualization of project-related data.

○ Library statistics and data: Annual collection and reporting of library statistics; management of in-house data

Do you have a deadline for this project? If yes, select the date.

[MM/DD/YYYY]

Which area of library operations is the focus of your project? Select all that apply.

☐ Collections

☐ Instruction/Teaching and Learning

☐ Space

☐ Technical Services

☐ Physical Service Points

☐ Virtual Service Points

☐ Other:

[ ]

Which user population is the focus of your project?

☐ Undergraduate Students

☐ Graduate Students

☐ Faculty/Academic Staff

☐ Community

☐ Other:

[ ]

Have you completed IRB training?

○ Yes

○ No

○ My project does not involve human subjects.

Briefly describe your research question or project.

[ ]

[Submit]