

Digging deeper

Developing our capability to understand our users

Jo Aitkins

Head of Public Services
University of Leicester
jua1@le.ac.uk

Heather Baines

Library Assistant
University of Leicester
hb16@le.ac.uk

Neil Donohue

Learning and Teaching Services
Manager
University of Leicester
nd122@le.ac.uk

Jodie Hannis

Public Services Supervisor
University of Leicester
jmh71@le.ac.uk

Dips Patel

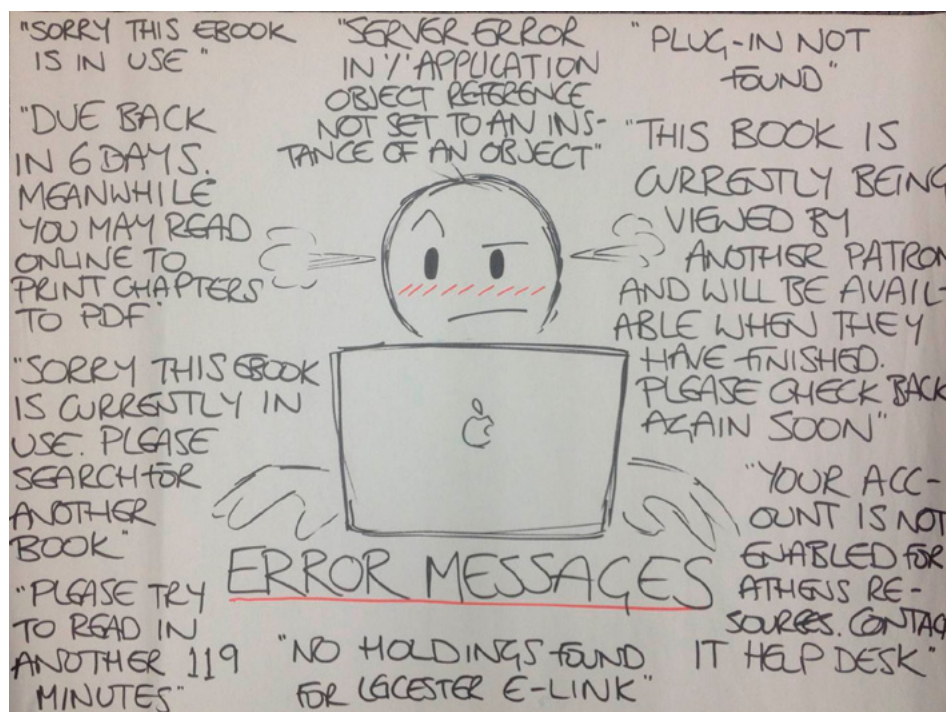
Library Assistant
University of Leicester
dp346@le.ac.uk

Introduction

User satisfaction and the student experience have always been our underpinning raison d'être. Our national student survey library satisfaction rating is 92% and we also hold the customer service excellence award; however, we are never ever complacent. Our LibQUAL survey of 2014 saw increased satisfaction, but it also highlighted that our users felt that we could be better at handling their service problems and making electronic resources available. So how could we dig deeper to understand our users better, and what might we further improve?

The systems thinking approach and analysis of 'failure demand'

We decided to use the expertise of the university's change and improvement team, who help re-design processes to make them more efficient and more centred on students through a framework based on the Vanguard systems thinking methodology (Vanguard Consulting 2014). A small team from public services – Jodie Hannis, a supervisor and three library assistants, Heather Baines, Dips Patel and Jen Sutherland – worked with Gretel Stonebridge and Thomas Shepard from the change team to conduct a 'failure demand' exercise (Seddon 2003). They analysed the email enquiries received over the course of a year and drilled down to those where *we were either failing to do something, or failing to do something right for the customer*. They found that although we get contacted by fewer than 1% of users accessing e-resources, the enquiry email services received about a hundred e-resources enquiries monthly, of which 99% are 'failure demand', in the sense defined in italics above. Login problems were a constant issue throughout the year, regardless of how long library users have been at the university, and we are spending at least six weeks of the year helping users login in successfully. The team also identified that users experience problems using the website and e-books. Using these findings, they interviewed and observed students and produced some powerful user experience evidence boards.



Capturing the error messages encountered when using e-books
Photo: Graham Barton

The copyright in items published in SCONUL Focus remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Digging deeper

Developing our capability to understand our users



Observing what happened when one student searched for an item on the catalogue
Photo: Graham Barton

As a team they have presented their findings to the library management team and the university professional services management team, the latter chaired by the University Registrar. They will also be part of the library and IT services working group, who will be responsible for informing the development of a single login procedure for all members of the university for all purposes.

Focus groups for specific issues

We continue to use focus groups to test assumptions and find out about our users; we have found these to work best when based on specific issues. We held a series of student focus groups in conjunction with the students' union when we were reviewing our loans and fines policies. The groups were given exercises and questions to help draw out their opinions, and this approach received a positive response from many of the participants. The output from the groups was used to scope and produce a survey for all students and staff. The outcome was the introduction of simplified and longer loan periods and fines charged only for overdue recalled items.

We also held a focus group for academic staff because their satisfaction, as expressed in the LibQUAL survey, was lower than that of other users, and we found that we were failing to meet their minimum requirements for 'making electronic resources easily accessible from my home or office' and 'a library website enabling me to locate information on my own'. Through the focus group we established that their main frustration was around authentication and not the range or availability of the content we provide. It has been a timely intervention as it has added further evidence to the need to improve the university authentication process.

Exploring customer personas

We have also been experimenting with other ways to help us understand our users better. The library's marketing and communications group has been developing customer personas to help inform our strategic marketing activities. We used activity data, feedback from student-staff committees, evaluations from teaching sessions and enquiry statistics to create a range of personas that we thought reflected the issues, thoughts and concerns of the student and staff populations. We used focus groups to test these assumptions and to refine the key messages that would appeal and resonate with them. An example

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Digging deeper

Developing our capability to understand our users

of useful feedback was that many postgraduate (taught) students felt that the PhD persona had greater resonance with them than the master's persona. We explored the students' perceptions of existing marketing campaigns and found that their comments about our *More Books!* promotion was that they thought that this was a campaign by the students' union to tell us to buy more books, rather than a being positive approach to students from the library asking them to request items they needed and to be involved in shaping our collections. This shows the true value of digging deeper into what we know about our users and is making us rethink some of the language and strap-lines used in our campaigns.

Demand management

Over the last three years we have also increased both the intensity and variety of demand management activities, all gauged at trying better to understand and satisfy user demand and inform collection development and spending priorities. We use the library management system to produce 'purchase alert' reports three times a week. These list items with three or more holds (reservations). They are analysed and additional copies (with a preference for e-books) are purchased. This ensures that we are reacting quickly to identify pressure points on the collection, increase the number of e-books and identify areas of the collection that need to be developed or are 'in vogue' based on popular dissertation and assignment titles.

We also take a systematic approach to e-book turnaways from our main aggregator suppliers. We analyse the turnaway statistics three times a week during semesters to identify any texts under pressure, and increase the number of copies we can obtain under our licences. We use this data, combined with data from our online reading list system, *readinglists@Leicester*, to inform academic staff of texts that are under pressure. They in turn can tell their students what practical steps we are taking to resolve the matter, thereby enhancing the student experience. The turnaway statistics also provide us with trends at publisher level; this is something we intend to use to inform which of the various patron-driven acquisition and evidence-based selection models we will use.

This approach to demand management has seen an increase in the amount of collections budget spent to support these purchases, rising from £35,000 to £42,000 this year. The proportion of this that is spent on e-books has risen from 11% to over 18% this year. Feedback from students at student-staff committees is increasingly that we should provide e-books rather than print, and our new initiatives are directly supporting the move to e-books.

University initiatives

Our university is also engaged in activities designed to understand our students better. Library staff are actively encouraged to get involved with these changes, consultation and process improvements. They include a project called 'Are students at the heart of our processes?' This brings together students, senior managers and frontline staff to find new ways of working in partnership, undertaking proactive student-staff engagement and supporting reflective practice. Another project, 'I start my studies', is also bringing staff together from across the university to improve the customer journey for new students.

What next?

We shall continue to use these and other methodologies because they result in tangible evidence-based benefits for our users, they support cultural change and provide staff with some very enjoyable and positive development opportunities. The areas into which we shall be digging deeper in the future include a systems thinking intervention conducted with our IT Services colleagues and focusing on the enquiry service that we provide jointly in the

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Digging deeper

Developing our capability to understand our users

library help zone. We shall also further develop our work on personas, and we expect to undertake some further systems thinking interventions in preparation for the implementation of our new library systems platform next Easter. In order to build on the notion of 'failure demand' we also intend to introduce staff training and development activities around the theme of handling and solving problems.

References

Seddon, J. W. (2003). *Freedom from command and control: A better way to make the work work*. Vanguard Consulting Ltd

Vanguard Consulting Ltd (2014). *The Vanguard method – theory and practice*. Available from <https://www.vanguard-method.com/> [accessed 22 June 2015]

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.

