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The Usability Study and Change: Pain, Process, and Predictions A Supplementary Update to The Usability Study of the Coates Library Website: Final Report

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Reception of the Usability Study

In March 2005, *The Usability Study of the Coates Library Website: Final Report* was finalized and submitted to Diane J. Graves (Director of the Library) and Christopher Nolan (Assistant Director and Head of Public Services). In addition, copies of the report were distributed to its primary audience—the library's web team. This team of librarians, library staff, and information technology professionals make decisions and carry out tasks related to changes and enhancements at the library's home page (lib.trinity.edu) and subsidiary pages.

The document was also posted to the library's institutional repository (digitalcommons.trinity.edu) for easy access by team members and other interested parties in the Trinity University community. A print copy was distributed between web team members and annotated by the various readers.

Institutional Process of Revision

In May 2005, members of the library's web team met to discuss possible changes to the library's pages. These changes were to be based on (1) the usability study and (2) suggestions or task analyses conducted outside of the study's scope. Assignments were made for these revisions, and meetings were conducted in June and July of 2005 to review and gauge the process.

On August 1, 2005, a revised version of the Coates Library website was launched.   As web team members operate on different schedules, components of the site continue to remain in the process of revision and enhancement. As with all extensive web texts, this kind of process is continuous.

Report of Specific Changes in Response to the Study

The following is a brief catalog of changes made to the library's website as they appear in the August 2005 iteration. Changes are defined in three ways: structural changes, labeling changes, or content changes. In those cases where a link is new or the linked content is unique to the August 2005 revision, changes are not divided by category.

The following titles correspond to links at the library's home page (lib.trinity.edu):

  I. Home Page
    a. structural change: links focused on the left and right margins
    b. structural change: library image located in center column
    c. structural change: rearrangement of buttons in top and bottom toolbar
    d. labeling change: label change for two links in the top and bottom toolbar
         i. "Quest" label is now "Books & More"
         ii. "Databases" label is now "Articles & More"
    e. labeling change: links renamed under "Faculty Corner" heading
    f. content change: news located in center column beneath image
    g. content change: search box included at bottom of middle column
    h. content change: "First Year Seminar" link removed from "Find" column
    i. content change: "Library Instruction" link added under "Faculty Corner"
    j. content change: Reserves links on homepage made more consistent

  II. Articles & More (Databases)
    a. structural and labeling change: "Wondering Where to Start?" button
         moved and renamed to "What Subject Do I Want?"
    b. content change: revision of links in the "Sort Databases by Subject" tool
    c. content change: link added for "New Databases"

  III. Reserves … Reserve Readings (Find Reserve Materials)
    a. labeling change: "E-Reserves" is now "Electronic Reserves"
    b. content change: simplified, clarified instructions for patrons

  IV. Quest (Course Reserves Search)
    a. structural change: links to "Electronic Reserves" and "Blackboard" made
         more obvious with button and font color
    b. labeling change: "E-Reserves" is now "Electronic Reserves"
    c. content change: "Blackboard" link corrected

V. Journals, Articles, Newspapers (Find Journals, Articles, Newspapers)
- a. labeling change: "Wondering Where to Start" link changed to "What Subject Do I Want?"

VI. Books (Library Catalogs)
- a. structural change: link to Quest simplified, clarified, and highlighted
- b. structural change: tables simplified

VII. Course-Related Links (Course Guides)
- a. structural change: links organized by category

VIII. Library Instruction
- a. all new link with all new content

IX. Request Equipment & Rooms (CLT)
- a. labeling change: link name changed and location name changed from IMS to CLT (departmental name revision)

X. Cite Sources
- a. all new content

XI. Hours
- a. structural change: simplified introductory matter

XII. Services and Policies
- a. structural and labeling change: single table split into separate tables labeled "Services" and also "Policies"

XIII. Ask a Librarian
- a. content change: link added for chat reference service

XIV. Where is…?
- a. labeling change: link name changed and location name changed from IMS to CLT (departmental name revision)

It should be noted that these changes are not the only revisions to the library's website but do include primary work completed during summer 2005. It is valuable to note that most of these changes were either directly or indirectly related to information collected in the spring 2005 usability study.

Commentary

While many libraries and other entities involved in web design and construction spend time and effort conducting and theorizing on the usability study as a tool of techno-aesthetic progress, fewer focus on the social ramifications of the usability study. As with other tasks designed to improve a product or tool, the goal is to finish the project and move forward with other work. It would seem helpful, then, to comment on some of the peculiarities of the usability study as a social activity.

The Usability Study and Pain

"Home pages" are given this name for a reason. They function as "homes" in many ways, places that Internet users visit regularly and with which they become familiar. In the case of the home page for an academic library, these users include students, teaching faculty, administrators, staff members, as well as librarians and library stuff.

Continuing with the idea of the webpage as a "home," when someone enters and changes or moves the contents of a living space, this causes disruption for those who call the space their own. Even individuals and teams charged with exacting change are forced to contend with adapting their usual habits to the revised situation. Change, adaptation, and re-situation cause pain---rather like stubbing a toe or banging one's knee on recently moved furniture, the aches and pains of the revision and re-situation process are rarely considered in the usability study process.

The pain for Internet users may be most obvious. Website patrons familiar with the "old way" of doing things might be confused by the "new way," particularly if the reasons for such a change are not obvious. These changes could come in the form of new titles, new placement of links, excising old pages and added new resources. The familiarity and comfort associated with the "old way" evaporates, and the pain of changing process and perception takes place.

The pain for those involved in the construction and maintenance of the pages is also rarely considered. Just as a book is labored over by its author, the website as a text is the labor of numerous authors. The usability study and changes that may result cause pain for these authors, while ideally creating a more usable, useful resource. The web author finds him or herself in a challenging position. Unlike the traditional author who must live with what has been published, the web author is (or may be) constantly in negotiation with the text. When a website is published, the website is (or could be) continually revised, updated, and enhanced. The responsibilities of web authoring do not cease. The personal ownership and sense of what works about the site can be a challenge when faced with the way patrons actually use the site.

The Usability Study and Process

The process of applying results of usability research is a complicated task. In contrast to the necessity for strict controls of the study methodology, the process involved in making decisions based on research results and enacting change are far more complicated. This may be particularly true for academic libraries since some resources and pathways involved in using academic libraries websites may (and often will) require instruction and guidance.

While it is appropriate that a usability study be carried out by one or two individuals to insure consistency of conducting and recording study sessions, the interpretation of usability data is enhanced by knowledgeable reviews from a number of parties. Revisions based on this data might look different if completed by information technology staff and assistants only. Librarians or library staff may also have a personalized conceptualization of the need or lack of need for certain kinds of revision. The team aesthetic when reviewing and making decisions related to the application of usability results allows for a more balanced perspective. Further, in the case of the Coates Library study, individuals conducting, recording, and analyzing the usability study were not directly involved in the revision process and are not members of the web team. This type of design might help study participants refrain from skewing results in favor of the web team's desires. This may also have an impact on reception of the results as well.

After review of the study and after changes have been made to the site, the process of guiding audience reception is most critical. Research conducted on the "best time" to launch revised web design and content differ. In some environments, an immediate launch of an entirely new site is audience appropriate, while gradual change is more helpful in other locations. For academic libraries, the full launch approach is warranted. Students, faculty, and staff are more likely to adapt quickly to certain kinds of changes, and extended change could cause frustration.

Responding to concerns, questions, and frustration related to change is also a delicate matter. While changes to electronic sources are inevitable and often expected, the pain discussed in the previous section may require release for certain patrons. Building lines of communication that connect usability research to the revision process as the aftermath of that process allows librarians and staff to anticipate and supplicate responses resisting change.

Evaluating change and continuing usability research should complete most usability projects. Many published and informal reports neglect this consideration in relation to process completion. This is not without reason. By the completion of the usability study and web revision process, thoughts on continued and continuing development are often set aside in favor of the new or current task at hand. However, immediate and continuing assessment of web resources for usability in light of their purpose and audience can and in many cases should be a continuing project.

The Usability Study and Predictions

The "usability study" as a tool of web designers and librarians is often a construction of a particular institution or entity utilizing the resources and information presently available. While most usability studies (as published in print or online) can be replicated, most are constructed with certain idiosyncrasies related to the institution. As the sophistication and wider acceptance of usability study processes increase, products will be developed to make this style of research easier to complete and to evaluate. Eventually, a computer program will track how users find information and either (1) offer lists of suggestions for possible changes based on usage or (2) revise the website on its own based on these tracking statistics. Such information gathering methods should save the human element from the process of usability study development as well as manual revision. Form and function will be fused, and the formal usability study process will be unnecessary and set aside.

For the time being, academic libraries and similar institutions will continue to develop methods to improve their online offerings, while also revising the methodologies of other usability researchers. At a certain saturation in the literature (and arguably we are already there), published studies will necessarily fall out of favor and not be of interest outside of the institution. Academic libraries will take advantage of electronic repository technology to add to a continuing body of research that records how the online presences of libraries are (either rapidly or slowly) developing outside of the traditional library definition. The librarians at Trinity precipitate and advocate such a shift by publishing these reports in the university's digital repository.