Focusing on students' discovery tool preferences

Sarah Elsegood
*Arts and Humanities Faculty Librarian,
University of East Anglia*
Tel: 01603 742426
Email: s.elsegood@uea.ac.uk

Background and aims of focus group

University of East Anglia (UEA) library provides access to e-resources and bibliographic information about library holdings via three interfaces, all provided by ExLibris: Aleph, the traditional library catalogue; MetaLib, the e-resources federated search gateway; and, since 2008, the next-generation catalogue Primo®, locally badged initially as Broadsearch.[1] In turn these can all be accessed via the UEA portal, where students can also access their course documents such as reading lists, through the Virtual Learning Environment, Blackboard.

How do our students look for information and do our search tools meet students' needs? We set up a focus group to discover how our users actually find information and which resources they choose to use. What are the features of their favourite interfaces and why? Answering these questions is helpful when making decisions relating to the configuration of our search tools.

Our next-generation search interface Broadsearch incorporates many Web 2.0 personalisation options, such as being able to save searches and records on a personal e-shelf and set up search alerts. User-generated tagging and reviews are also possible. In this focus group we were interested in finding out whether these and other features added value for our students.

Methodology
A formal application was made to the university's Ethics Committee on 4 February 2011 detailing the aims and methodology of the focus group and confirming that it was an evaluative service review.

Participants
A sample of 42 students was contacted by email and invited to attend the focus group. The sample consisted of a selection of students from all four faculties (arts and humanities, social sciences, science and health) who had either attended library workshops, were Staff Student Liaison Committee representatives or had booked appointments with faculty librarians. All students who responded positively to the invitation were sent a copy of the data policy statement. Eight students accepted the invitation, using the voting button on Microsoft® Outlook email, and nine students attended on the day. Data on age and country of origin were gathered from the Student Information System.

The focus group took place on 17 February 2011, from13:00 to14:30 and was facilitated by UEA Survey Officer, Dr Sree Ghosh. Information Skills Librarian, Jane Helgesen, planned and organised the event and I attended in an observational role, taking notes but not participating in the discussion. A PC and projector were available so I was able to demonstrate specific aspects of Broadsearch, MetaLib, UEA portal and the library catalogue if asked to do so by the facilitator. The discussion was recorded using a Miantz PMD660 MP3 recorder and mixer from our Audiovisual Services department in order to assist with the process of accurate transcription. A volunteer, Deborah Burbage (MA Information and Library Studies student, University of Aberystwyth) observed the session and agreed to transcribe from the recording in order to gain experience of research methods. Refreshments were provided.

What we asked the students
- As an icebreaker: what was your most recently read book?
- Thinking about general websites that you use, their look and feel, which is your favourite and why?
- In two groups, using flipcharts, explain or map out how you would start searching for information for an essay on one of the following topics: global warming, media ownership, *Hamlet*, human genome, impact of social networking
- Broadsearch has the following features (we provided a printed list): which are your top 3 or 5 and why?

What the students told us
Busy students appreciate services that save them time and effort and add value to the library experience.

There is a clear need for more effective and targeted publicity that emphasises the relevance of new services and facilities to particular groups and types of student. This particular group valued immediate access to 'good-enough' online full-text resources for their assignments, which were often completed close to the deadline. Work has started in applying marketing segmentation techniques to our user community in order to focus our publicity efforts, following a recent workshop from visiting Customer Services Manager, University of Sunderland.[2]

Given the problems of information overload, the students suggested that the library feed the students small chunks of timely and relevant information in the form of regular 'facts of the day', or 'did you know?' alerts. This has been introduced on the UEA library blog.[3] Many students do not have time to participate in our programme of drop-in library workshops[4] so bite-sized sessions were requested. We have introduced some 30-minute sessions at lunchtimes, starting with one for the Nexis® newspaper resource. Better promotion of the library blog and our online content is required to increase the number of followers and students' awareness of existing services and resources.

> **Focus group comments:**
> *'So why don't they give us just random bite-sized pieces of information?'*
> *'Yeah, stick it on the portal in big letters: Did you know you could do this?' 'Fact of the day'*

Courtesy notices or 'underdues' alerting users that books need to be renewed shortly were suggested. Colour-coding of the loan lists on the UEA portal Academic tab to indicate overdue items or those needing renewal was another idea proposed by participants.

Students make use of reviews and recommendations on sites such as Amazon and find them helpful as a time-saving device and as a way of assessing whether a book is difficult to read or is recommended. The option for users to write reviews of items on the Broadsearch catalogue was considered useful, particularly if the reviews were written by lecturers. It was suggested that tags could be used by lecturers to indicate which books were the core texts for a module.

Next-generation catalogue
There was a consensus that Broadsearch's features, whilst very helpful, need to be more intuitive to use and that better publicity is needed to increase

awareness of the available options such as saving records, creating alerts and Web 2.0 features such as tags and reviews. The group found the three different scopes available within Broadsearch confusing and we have responded to this by simplifying to just two renamed options – 'Primo OneSearch' and 'Catalogue only'. The Primo One-Search option incorporates Primo Central content with our local catalogue resources to provide a one-stop shop for quick access to a range of journal articles by topic as well as to books and other materials in stock.[5]

This scope provides access to a database of aggregated journal article and book data from ExLibris but with our local resources boosted appropriately. Formerly, a third scope named 'Articles, etc.' allowed users to search the catalogue together with federated searching of a selection of ten subscription databases using the MetaLib quick-set functionality. There was confusion from the focus group about the breadth of what was being searched in terms of content, with some students wrongly believing it searched all UEA subscribed journal titles available in print or electronically, or all subscription databases. This option has now been removed and the service will be relaunched as Primo OneSearch for the autumn semester.[6]

24-hour loans of High Demand Collection items were suggested to replace the one-day loan due for return at 10:15. Awareness of weekend loans and advance booking could be improved.

The students suggested that the ability to cancel hold requests awaiting collection would help with the circulation of books in heavy demand.

Library anxiety
Towards the end of the session, the students discussed their experiences of the library more generally and were open about their anxieties and difficulties in navigating around the library to find the resources and services they needed. This could be due to inexperience in using large libraries, lack of confidence, or a need for greater awareness of services, and seemed to present them with a mental obstacle. Barriers to accessing library services may be physical, technological, psychological and even financial, and library anxiety has been found to impede academic success.[7] Any changes to the physical library environment or services, however positive, added to the students' feelings of being momentarily unsure or overwhelmed. They reported sometimes feeling disorientated and suggested that colour coding of the two halves of the floors might help with this.

Focus group comments:
'I want to go in the library without feeling like I have to take a compass and like a trail of bread-crumbs.'
'When you have to go to a different floor it's like having to go to a different world.'

Just as Mellon discovered in her classic study into library anxiety in in 1986,[8] the students in our focus group expressed concerns that others knew more about the library than they did. Feelings of anxiety when first visiting the library as new students can lead to a general avoidance of the library thereby impeding the development of information literacy skills. It seems possible that something similar is happening in the electronic sphere, with initial feelings of being overwhelmed by the choice of online resources during early search experiences leading students to a preference for 'quick and dirty' searching in a small number of known resources with simple interfaces. Next-generation catalogue developments such as Primo Central aim to provide students with access to the subscribed content through the familiar interface of the library catalogue.

Our focus group participants revealed that financial and psychological factors such as higher rates of fines for high demand collection books on short loan, and lack of forward planning skills to book weekend loans were a disincentive to borrowing from this collection, particularly if they had experienced overdue fines in the past.

Information literacy skills
The information search exercise provided valuable insights into searching strategies, interface preferences and the information literacy skills of the students. From the choice of topics, both subgroups decided on 'the impact of social networking' – a less academic topic which may have influenced the resources and search strategies they discussed. Participants were aware of the range of generic and subject-based information skills workshops offered by the library and acknowledged that attending these would be helpful in meeting their need for information about resources and services, but lack of time and motivation prevented this from translating into action.

Focus group comments:
'It's so awkward because so much of this is probably available in the library workshops sessions that they run but who has like an hour to give up for it? Particularly when you're in your second or third year.'
'We're just not that proactive.'

The students demonstrated an awareness of the need to evaluate resources and cite references properly, and used some pragmatic time-saving strategies. For example, checking the Amazon website for books on relevant topics enabled them to read reviews before committing themselves to reading a book or ordering it through the inter-library loan service. The ability to search the text of an e-book online was appreciated as a means of not having to read an entire chapter or book. These examples illustrate the very focused and instrumental research strategies of this group in seeking out 'good-enough' full-text electronic materials for assignments, as Valentine concluded from a 1993 focus group of students:

'Students use research strategies that they perceive will reap the greatest benefits with the least cost in terms of time or social effort.' [9]

One surprise, however, was that no reference was made to using readily available supporting documentation or 'scaffolding' such as lecturers' reading lists or indeed the students' own lecture notes. As librarians we spend much time and money obtaining reading-list resources. Whilst the students were very comfortable online, and discussed using multiple interfaces such as Facebook and Microsoft® Word in one session online, they appeared to be restrictive in the range of online sources and interfaces that they mentioned using regularly – largely preferring Amazon, Google Books, Wikipedia and Google due to their simplicity, rather than subscribed library resources of higher quality and subject relevance. Students perceive using a wider range of academic interfaces as costing too much in terms of time and effort in order to gain familiarity with their features, so we as librarians need to emphasise the benefits to students of doing so, and enlist them as champions of these subscribed library resources. One focus group student was

enthusiastic in recommending the Nexis® newspaper database to the other participants.

The sample
In creating successful focus groups one needs to balance the need for diversity with that of heterogeneity in order to stimulate sufficient discussion whilst minimising conflict.[10] Whilst we invited a wide range of students from our four faculties, those participants who attended were all very similar. The challenge of a focus group is to get a representative sample of an appropriate size without using systematic random sampling. Offering lunch or a financial incentive can prove effective in attracting more participants but the optimum group size of 6-8 participants must be considered. The afternoon timing of the session might have made it more difficult for science students to attend as they have laboratory work. We are very grateful to the students who participated for giving up their time to share their views and experiences of using library resources.

School and faculty	Course	Year	Status	Date of birth	Home / EU/ International	Gender
Social Work (Social Sciences)	BA Social Work and Psychology	1	Undergraduate BA	1990	home	female
History (Humanities)	MPhil Modern History	1	Research postgraduate MPhil	1988	home	male
History (Humanities)	BA History	2	Undergraduate BA	1990	home	female
Language / Communication Studies (Humanities)	BA French and Spanish	4	Undergraduate BA	1989	home	female
Language / Communication Studies (Humanities)	MA Applied Translation Studies	One-year course	Taught Postgraduate MA	1988	home	male
Literature and Creative Writing (Humanities)	BA English Literature and History	graduated	Student Union Officer	1989	home	female
Literature and Creative Writing (Humanities)	BA English Literature	2	Undergraduate BA	1990	home	female
Music (Humanities)	BA Music	1	Undergraduate BA	1990	international	female
Political, Social and International Studies (Humanities)	BA Politics	3	Undergraduate BA	1989	home	female

Fig. 1 Focus group participants

It was interesting that the participants saw the focus group as an opportunity to find out more about the library, rather than as one of providing the library with valuable information about the student experience. They reported that they had found the experience of participating in the group

more effective, in terms of learning about the library, than attending library tours or information skills sessions.

Focus group comments:
'...Everybody in the whole university should do this group, then everybody would know all this stuff that we didn't know before we came in this room'
'We love the library, well we didn't know that!'

NOTES

All web pages accessed 27 July 2011

1   S. A. Elsegood, *'Next-generation library catalogues: reviews of Encore, Primo, Summon and Summa'*, Serials, 22:1 (2009), pp. 70-74 <http://uksg.metapress.com/openurl.asp?genre=article&issn=0953-0460&volume=22&issue=1&spage=68>

2   Kay Grieves, 'How do you like your eggs in the morning? A simple 7 step toolkit for creating strategic marketing plans that really work'. Workshop held at UEA Library, 24 February 2011

3   http://taguealibrary.wordpress.com

4   http://www.uea.ac.uk/is/infoskills

5   'Primo Central plain and simple' http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDc6kJo6SX8

6   http://primoonesearch.uea.ac.uk

7   Qun G. Jiao, Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie and Art J. Lichtenstein, 'Library anxiety: characteristics of at-risk college students', *Library & information science research*, 18:2 (Spring 1996), p. 151

8   C. A. Mellon, 'Library anxiety: a grounded theory and its development', *College and research libraries*, 47 (March 1986), pp. 160-65

9   Barbara Valentine, 'Undergraduate research behaviour: using focus groups to generate theory', *Journal of academic librarianship* (November 1993), p. 304

10   Michael Bloor, Jane Franklin, Michelle Thomas & Kate Robson, *Focus groups in social research: introducing qualitative methods* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 20