Stop over-thinking
Basic tools for understanding stakeholder needs

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If you are like me, you attend conferences and read papers about innovative ways of gathering stakeholder requirements and feedback, return to your office welling with enthusiasm, then <*you fill in the blank*> absorbs your attention. Weeks pass before you can re-kindle your excitement about the *other university's* great approach to stakeholder engagement. And how did they find the time to do anything anyway?

Having chastised myself for never quite finding the time to do much more than keeping the doors open, I have decided to stop over-thinking and get on with using some basic tools for understanding *stakeholder* needs. I use the term stakeholder intentionally as the services I lead require understanding the needs of a range of groups.

The tools: process mapping, web surveys, exit surveys and observational techniques. I have found that these tools, augmented by our standard feedback tools (e.g. suggestion and course feedback forms), representation at institutional committees and groups as well as the plethora of UK national surveys, provide useful information about stakeholder needs and their impressions of our services.

The landscape

SOAS Library is one of the world's leading academic libraries for the study of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The library houses over 1.3 million volumes at the SOAS campus at Russell Square in central London as well as significant archives, special collections and a range of electronic resources. SOAS Library is one of three divisions in a converged service. SOAS LIS comprises:

- Research Library (RL): main library and Special Collections Reading Room

- Customer Services and Operations (CSOps): Customer Services, IT Service Desk, IT Training, Multimedia Services (including teaching environment and conference support), and Print Services

- Information Systems (IS): ICT, network services, and corporate business systems

I lead the CSOps division, which is the most converged of all of the divisions. With such a diverse range of stakeholders, it is easy to get tied in knots trying to learn what the stakeholders expect and how to respond with any agility. Major surveys for this range of services, though extremely useful, take time to plan and must be coordinated across the institution to avoid repetition and survey fatigue. So, to get some understanding of stakeholder expectations in a timely manner, I went back to the basic tools and stopped over-thinking the process of gathering requirements and feedback.

Process mapping – as is and to be

CSOps works closely with the Registry department to support the student registration process by producing identification cards, and enabling access to the library. Having received training on a technique for process mapping, I facilitated a session for the Registry department, one of our key stakeholder groups, to simplify the process of students changing their degree programmes. As we use student record information to determine access to our services, we have an interest in receiving status changes as soon as possible. And Registry and our academic departments want to ensure that students receive the correct entitlements in a timely manner. By facilitating the review, I was able to work through the process with staff from Admissions, Registry, Planning, academic departments (teaching, research, and administrative), IS and a student union representative. Process mapping involves walking through the existing process creating a flowchart illustrating each step. This sounds easy, but what is quickly discovered in a room full of people who work through a process daily is that they do not always agree on how the process actually works. Or they
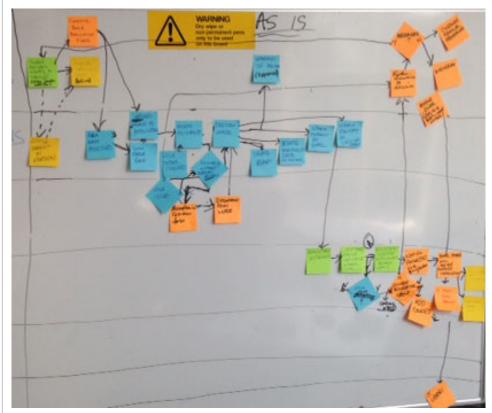
understand their part of the process but have never understood the process end-to-end. Once each stage of the process is represented visually, it often becomes clear that the process is unnecessarily complex. As facilitator, I worked with the group to identify the unnecessary elements of the process and to develop a more streamlined version. Although the stakeholders in the room agreed the need to simplify the process, negotiation between the parties to agree a final, simplified process was crucial to ensure buy-in.

Process mapping is a useful method of reviewing processes and procedures to verify that they remain fit for purpose and/or meet the needs of the stakeholders. All that is required is the right people in a room, a facilitator, and a means of recording the process as is and as it will be.

Process map: No tech… still does the trick
Photo: R. Everitt

Web survey – Focused feedback

The Multimedia team in CSOPs supports teaching environments for SOAS. I received feedback from academic administrators that some academic staff members preferred the standard computer lab provision that contains foreign language software and headphones rather than the specialist language lab. Although I solicited and received feedback from staff members about the provision, I needed a steer about the future of the specialist provision as the room was due for a software upgrade. I toyed with the idea of focus groups to discuss how the space was being used. However, as many academic staff members work part-time, it would have been difficult to get everyone in one room. I received a list of everyone who used the specialist provision from the timetabling team and contacted the stakeholders to get targeted feedback about how they used the space.

I created a short survey monkey questionnaire asking about use of the specialist versus generic provision. I sent the link to those who had used the room and gathered feedback over a period of one month. I received a 50% return rate from the questionnaire. The output suggested that the specialist provision was still considered useful, but training on its use would be beneficial.

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The software upgrade of the specialist provision is under way and I will be working with the IT training coordinator to add an induction session about the use of the specialist provision to the training programme.

Exit surveys

After going through security procedures at an airport, I noticed kiosks asking about my experience of getting through the security checks. It struck me that this was a simple way of gathering useful feedback about a specific service delivery. The response options were simple: smiley face, indifferent face or sad face. There was also an option for additional comments. The kiosks were positioned near the security checks, thus focusing user comments on that 'service.'

During a sample week to capture information to contribute to user satisfaction benchmarking for UK higher education institutions, we gave out simple feedback cards asking users how they felt their enquiry had been handled. This focused the stakeholder's response on the enquiry rather than concerns around the environment that tend to dominate our standard feedback forms. Stakeholders were asked to leave their cards in boxes near the exit of the library. We received a 93.6% satisfaction rate during that sample period.

As we provide a range of walk-up stakeholder services in the library, we wanted to capture stakeholder experience of these services. So, on a separate occasion, a member of staff met stakeholders as they exited the library and asked them a few questions about what they had come to the library to do and whether they had been successful. We found that 63% of those who responded during the sample week came into the library to seek study space. This was unsurprising as we were on the run-up to the busy exam periods. This information reinforced that we had to balance the need to prioritise access for our internal stakeholders with honouring our commitment to access schemes. The remaining responses were about coming to the library to access resources; most stakeholders got what they were looking for and others provided useful information about materials they could not locate or difficulties with printers/copiers.

Observational

I was keen to encourage library stakeholders to use the self-service machines for basic transactions to release staff from solely desk-based interaction with stakeholders. However, desk staff flagged up the fact that stakeholders often returned to the service point for assistance after attempting to use the machines. Usage of the machines was high overall as these machines are the only means of issuing/returning items when the service points are closed during late evenings and on Sundays. I wanted to understand what issues stakeholders were encountering while using these machines.

A library staff member observed stakeholder behaviour at the machines during a sample week to try to capture what they were doing before they sought assistance from other library staff members. He recorded the transactions, the errors or blocks that appeared, and whether the stakeholder was using the machine correctly. He found a range of issues: a desensitiser that needed to be adjusted, stakeholders not positioning books so that they could be desensitised, and rules that forced stakeholders to the desk potentially unnecessarily, to name a few findings. Routine maintenance of the machines dealt with any issues with desensitisers. Where feasible, we showed stakeholders how to position books so that they could be desensitised correctly; this was augmented by the display on the monitor which showed stakeholders how to position items. And as we were planning to move to a new library management system, we planned to review the rules to ensure that we were not unnecessarily sending people to the service points for assistance.

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Just get on with it

SOAS LIS has undergone a number of changes in the last few years in an effort to improve service delivery. We are due for a comprehensive survey of our diverse stakeholders to better understand what we are doing well and where we need to improve. In the meantime, we shall continue to use these quick and basic tools to respond to stakeholder needs with more agility. Fed up with over-thinking, I have decided to just get on with it!