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A degree of difference? Information experiences of students with print disabilities

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Ben used to be the University of Kent's law librarian and our library's expert in accessibility, before joining the Student Support and Wellbeing Service 3 years ago. He is working in partnership with Jisc on a project researching and developing approaches to accessible information and technology provision in universities.

Angela works in the Templeman Library's web and marketing team. Her interest in UX was boosted by attending a 'UXLibs-in-a-day' course in 2016, and she is currently leading a project to embed UX practices within IT and library services at Kent.

We used to work closely together as colleagues and have continued to collaborate whenever possible. At the start of this year, we bumped into each other on campus and had this conversation:

Ben: "I'm doing this M.A. in Higher Education and I'm planning a photo elicitation study with students with print disabilities. I'm going to ask them to take photos of barriers they encounter when accessing information and then I'll interview them."

Angela: "Oh cool, so you're doing a piece of UX research."

Ben: "What's UX?"

So obviously, we had to work together.

What we did

We asked participants to keep a diary for a week and record their experiences accessing information (in relation to their studies, but also privately), to document good or bad interactions with photographs or screenshots, and then to meet us for a one-hour interview.

We wanted to understand how print disability affects students' access to information and how different their experience is from students without disabilities. Ben uses the Copyright Licencing Agency's definition of print disability:

A print-disabled person is anyone for whom a visual, cognitive or physical disability hinders the ability to read print. This includes all visual impairments, dyslexia, and any physical disabilities that prevent the handling of a physical copy of a print publication. (CLA, 2016)

But he argues that this could easily be expanded to people who study remotely (like part-time or commuting students), and therefore the interventions we make for students with print disabilities ultimately improve the services we offer to everyone.

We hoped to shed light on:

- typical barriers that students with print disabilities experience (with a view to removing those barriers)
- how positive or negative information experiences make people feel about their place within the institution.

We fully agree with Sara Lerén in her UXLlibIV keynote that it is best to do usability testing with extreme users. But we wanted to make sure that we understood the experience of students with disabilities 'as students' rather than 'as people with disabilities', and so we decided on a comparative approach to see what experiences they shared with non-disabled students. We had planned to recruit 5 students with and 5 without print disabilities, and managed to have 6 of each group who completed the diary and interview.

We incentivised students with Amazon vouchers and Employability Points (a University of Kent scheme – students can redeem them for anything from internships to special training). Non-disabled students were all recruited through the Employability Points website, while we identified print-disabled students mostly through their involvement with existing Student Support and Wellbeing projects.

Our whys

We are both fans of Simon Sinek's idea of the golden circle: start with *why*, and the *how* and the *what* will follow (Sinek, 2009). Our fundamental *why*, the reason we

wanted to carry out this research, was to understand the barriers students encounter when accessing information at university and then to help remove them. We want to share our understanding of those barriers, and of how they make students feel, with colleagues across the University, and we want to help improve students' access to information in practical ways.

What went well

The students were brilliant: we gave them a framework, but they all brought their individual understanding to the brief, and as a result we ended up with a vast trove of very rich data and a very real insight into the lives of our students across a range of stages and subject areas.

We are grateful that our managers allowed us to spend time doing this as part of our day jobs.

One of the best things was working together across different university departments, each of us bringing different expertise, experiences, perspectives and access to networks to this piece of work. We highly recommend identifying partners in other teams with whom to collaborate on UX work. We feel this is vital to extend the reach of our outputs, due to the extra credibility of two university departments' commitment to the same objective.

False starts and challenges

In a sense we have been the victims of our own success: the sheer volume of the data we gathered has proved very time-consuming to analyse. We both stumbled wide-eyed into a piece of work for which some training in how to do social sciences research would have been extremely useful. For example, we started out thinking we could just code the data by hand (Figure 1), but it proved impossible. Fortunately we stumbled across Nvivo (qualitative data analysis software) and are using that now to analyse our data.

In addition, the week we asked the students to keep their diaries was not at all typical, as it fell bang in the middle of a UK lecturers' strike. This meant some lectures and seminars were cancelled and experiences the students reported in relation to University communications were unusual.

* * *



Figure 1 Our attempt to code the data using Post-it notes, which proved unmanageable.

What we learnt

We assumed that the topics covered by the students would relate mainly to IT or technical issues, such as the library catalogue or electronic resources, or to access to physical resources such as finding library books.

In fact, the range of topics covered in the feedback was huge, even to the point where we sometimes thought students had misunderstood the brief. But when we explored this with them in the interviews, it became clear that even apparently irrelevant issues (like the campus shop or access to food and drink while studying) directly impacted on their access to information.

The experiences students shared with us included their preferences for print or electronic resources, building access, signage, teaching spaces, university communication and processes, the student union, the importance of wellbeing for studying, and the natural environment of the campus.

The students identified many things the University does well, in addition to picking out things that need to be improved. As we report on our research, we will make a point of recognising and praising this good practice, so that colleagues feel encouraged to carry on doing things we already do well, as well as making improvements where we may be falling short (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Example of good practice: easy to read spine labels praised by a student with a visual impairment (participant photo).

Where we are now

As of August 2018 we are still analysing the data. But we have already reported issues that we felt were critical, and the qualitative nature of the feedback has been crucial to engage colleagues in resolving them. An example of this is shown in Figure 3, where a student identified a lack of contrast on the front steps outside our library building:

But these stairs outside can just completely put a stop on my day and they made me really nervous, and the threat of falling down because they're all the same – same facing brick, there's no distinction between the stairs.

I think it's something like the fact that I do get on with things so independently, it's the fact that such a small thing can so regularly just jar me back into this having to stop and go, 'Oh I'm disabled, I'm gonna have to go over here and do this.'

We shared this feedback immediately with key stakeholders, who were moved and convinced by the sheer detail and emotional impact of the student's words to resolve this issue, with the architects and our Estates department working with the student to identify and test a range of solutions. This is typical of the University's approach



Figure 3 Lack of contrast on the library steps (participant photo).

to seeking feedback and then meaningfully engaging with it to make improvements.

Conclusion

We are finding that the detailed and qualitative nature of the participants' feedback is promising to have a significant impact on University decision makers. It has also enabled us to understand much more about the impact of informational barriers on the experiences of students both with and without disabilities.

There is a lot of data still to analyse, but among the students' own words we have already

found much inspiration to inform our work at the University. Here is a participant helping us understand how best to support students with disabilities:

I am always telling non-disabled people that the best way to approach a disabled person is with the question 'How can I help?'

Because from that I know that you want to help, you don't know how to help, you trust me that I can explain and you don't have any preconceptions which can destroy the helping process.

And another here defines the ultimate goal of inclusion with beautiful clarity:

I guess that's kind of the big thing about accessibility: you just want to feel the same as everyone else.

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