

Blind User Experiences of US Academic Libraries can be Improved by More Proactive Reference Service Delivery

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Evidence Summary

Blind User Experiences of US Academic Libraries can be Improved by More Proactive Reference Service Delivery

A Review of:

Mulliken, A. (2017). There is nothing inherently mysterious about assistive technology: A qualitative study about blind user experiences in US academic libraries. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 57(2), 115-126. <https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.57.2.6528>

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Abstract

Objective – To explore blind users' experiences with academic libraries.

Design – Qualitative questionnaire.

Setting – Academic libraries within the United States of America.

Subjects – 18 individuals who are legally blind, have experience relying on a screen reader to access the internet, and have used an academic library either online or in person within the previous two years.

Methods – An open-ended questionnaire was administered via telephone interview.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using an inductive approach to identify themes using Hill et al.'s (2005) approach.

Main Results – The author found seven themes in the interview data: experiences working with reference librarians in person, difficulty with library websites, screen reader use during reference transactions, preferences for independence, using chat, interactions with disability officers, and challenges of working with citation styles.

Conclusion – The study concluded that academic libraries and librarians should be more proactive when approaching reference services for blind users. The author offered suggestions for practice about how to improve blind user experiences of academic libraries.

Commentary

Accessibility of websites and electronic resources, particularly for visually impaired users, is an ongoing concern for libraries. A number of investigations in recent years have highlighted a need to continually improve online service usability and for librarians to advocate to the publishers the rights of visually impaired persons (Byerley & Chambers, 2002; Haanperä & Nieminen, 2013; Sahib, Tombros, & Stockman, 2011; Yoon, Newberry, Hulscher, & Dols, 2014). However, as Mulliken (2017) notes, these studies tend to focus on what the library provides, such as databases and indexing services, or observation of user behaviours, rather than investigating user's needs (Byerley & Chambers, 2002; Haanperä & Nieminen, 2013). Mulliken's study addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the user experience of US academic library reference services and websites by blind users.

A critical review form developed by Letts et al. (2007) was used to identify strengths and weaknesses of Mulliken's study. The study's approach was clearly articulated and explored the topic from a user experience perspective, rather than the service provider's, alternative to previous studies. However, the study was not as transparent as it could have been: the questionnaire was not published with this article, and the author also did not indicate whether the sampling continued until data saturation. With regards to the study's findings, presentation of themes arising from the data would have benefited from additional structure as well as a discussion of how the themes potentially impact the overall user experience. This would have allowed the author to construct a more coherent narrative of the data.

This study concluded that librarians responsible for providing academic library reference services need to be more proactive in their approach to blind user experience. The author outlined the following suggestions for implementation: firstly, librarians need to build their understanding of using screen readers. Secondly, the author recommends a local expert model of service delivery – similar to the way that copyright services is supported in many academic libraries – whereby a librarian who is experienced with and keeps up to date with screen readers and related technology and accessibility issues shares this knowledge with others. Thirdly, the author suggests that library teams ought to engage in discussion about the accessibility and usability of library reference services and electronic resources. Furthermore, collaboration opportunities may also be explored between library services and other areas of the university, such as the disability office, to coordinate accessibility more effectively. All of these suggestions are worth exploring by practitioners and library leaders in order to raise awareness of accessibility issues with their staff and identify areas for service improvement. Though the author does not offer direction for future research, the study itself highlights an opportunity to build upon its findings.

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