Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

But What About Us? Developing an Inclusive Approach to Library Insight

Selena Killick

Volume 15, numéro 3, 2020

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088772ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29704

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

1715-720X (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Killick, S. (2020). But What About Us? Developing an Inclusive Approach to Library Insight. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, *15*(3), 173–177. https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29704

Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Using Evidence in Practice

But What About Us? Developing an Inclusive Approach to Library Insight

Selena Killick
Associate Director, Library Services
The Open University
Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom
Email: Selena.Killick@open.ac.uk

Received: 3 Jan. 2020 **Accepted:** 6 Aug. 2020

DOI: 10.18438/eblip29704

Setting

The Open University (OU) is the U.K.'s largest academic institution dedicated to distance learning, with over 170,000 students. Established in 1969, we were the first online university waiting for the Internet to be invented. The Library was established when the University formed to provide print collections for campus-based academic staff. As electronic publishing grew, we commenced offering services to students. Today 100% of our journal collections and around 75% of our books are electronic. The online library attracts half a million unique users per annum. Each year, 91% of our students study a module with embedded digital and information literacy skills or library materials, and we know that those who use library resources and attend library tutorials get better results (Killick et al., 2018; Nurse et al., 2018).

The Library has a strong culture of assessment, which ensures that service improvements are underpinned by evidence. This is achieved through our Student Library Research Panel, a representative community of 500 students who work with us as co-creators (Dick & Killick, 2016). Although there is a natural self-selection bias, both users and nonusers of the Library agree to participate. This inclusive approach ensures that our strategies meet the needs of the whole student community.

We gather insight through a range of techniques, including interviews, surveys, focus groups, usability tests, love letters and breakup letters, touchstone tours, card sorting (for information architecture projects), and directed storytelling—all at a distance (Stiles, 2017). The students have partnered with the Library on a variety of projects, including the

procurement of a library management system and discovery tools (Dick & Killick, 2016).

Problem

As the Library's assessment culture has grown, one concern about our approach has continued to surface: The Student Library Research Panel membership only includes students. They are the largest community we serve and, due to the distance learning model, difficult to gain feedback from. While we do conduct some user experience research with our predominantly campus-based research students (Jenkins, 2017), we do not routinely work with other key stakeholders. Insight from academic staff, responsible for curriculum creation and predominantly based in Milton Keynes, is typically anecdotal feedback. Insight from our 4,000 associate lecturers, who are located across the U.K. and are responsible for teaching and supporting our students on a part-time basis, is even scarcer. The Library was planning service improvements based on student insight alone and not seeing a fuller picture.

Evidence

To gain a wider understanding of the needs of our whole community, we embarked upon the Library Needs project. To ensure we captured the views of the whole community, the project sought insight from staff for the first time, as well as students.

Initially, the project team analyzed the Library insight we already had. This included a review of the insight from the panel members and campus-based research students, along with feedback captured through institutional surveys (for example the National Student Survey qualitative data).

After securing appropriate institutional ethical approvals, the team embarked upon primary research with members of the OU community, specifically:

- Academic staff based on campus and in other parts of the U.K.
- Associate lecturers
- Research students on campus and in other parts of the U.K.
- Students (undergraduate and graduate—known as "postgraduate" in the U.K.)

Using a snowball technique to recruit participants, people who had previously worked with the library were asked to assist in recruiting people with whom we may not yet have spoken. A total of 33 people volunteered to participate in the research from all parts of the U.K., academic faculties, and community groups (academics, associate lecturers, research students, and students).

Using a directed storytelling conversational approach, we gathered insights into the participant's needs, perceptions, and expectations of the Library. Prior to meeting, the team developed a series of light-touch questions for the different communities, with follow-up prompts if the conversation required it. For example, an academic staff member's questions included the following:

- Can you describe what you think of when I say Library Services?
- Can you tell me about an experience/your last experience of using a service provided by the OU Library (researcher note: if no experience of using the OU Library, any other library)?
- Can you describe the last time you needed to find something out for your research or you needed to add something to a module you were preparing?
- [When discussing future needs]:
    - How has your academic practice been changing over the last few years?
    - How do you think it will change over the next few years?
    - Can you think of anything you would want from Library Services

> to help you meet these changing needs?

The focus was on allowing the participant to have a conversation with the researcher and to lead the discussion; the questions were used as prompts rather than a script. We held face-to-face conversations for users based at the Milton Keynes campus and met over the telephone with those who work and study remotely.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed before conducting conversation analysis and thematic analysis. The team used the findings in an immersive workshop with the Extended Leadership Team (ELT), where the insight was combined with their professional expertise and the University's strategic aims, to develop the departmental operational plan and for the forthcoming year.

While the primary research gained from the students corresponded with the research previously undertaken with the student panel, wider insights from the other community groups were surprising. Positively, we are seen as a prized resource that is central to the work of the University. Participants spoke about the value of the Library to their work, research, and study. In line with our continual-improvement culture, however, a number of opportunities to improve were identified by the ELT.

One of the key areas for improvement is the physical library. Since commencing services for students, the strategic focus has been on the online environment. Coupled with increasing financial pressures, the physical support services have been reduced. This has not impacted the distance learning students, but it has impacted our campus-based academic staff and research students.

Implementation

In response, the Library has partnered with the Estates department to develop a new strategy for the physical library. Using a mixed-methods approach, we have gathered further detailed insight to inform this, including observational studies of the building, hourly headcounts for each floor, and exit interviews.

As physical services have been declining for several years, so, too, have visits to the building. Nonusers of the current building were included in the research scope to overcome this. We installed a self-service, anonymous "postcard to the library" station in our catering outlets. The postcards prompted feedback by opening with statements such as "I like to use the library building because … " or "I don't like to use the library building because … ", eliciting rich qualitative feedback from both users and nonusers of the Library.

Mini guerrilla interviews at various locations across the campus were also conducted. To get the participants thinking more widely than a traditional library environment, the team asked broader questions around existing campus spaces and any gaps in current provision overall. An online survey replicating the mini guerrilla interview questions was also employed. This was sent to staff members who regularly visit the Milton Keynes campus but are based in our offices across the U.K., a key stakeholder group who had the potential to be missed from our on-campus sampling (Stiles & Killick, 2019).

The insight was fascinating, powerful, and, at times, heartbreaking to read. Respondents have a strong emotional connection with the physical library and what it represents as a symbol for the University. Some respondents highlighted the strengths of the physical library, such as the calm, quiet, and light working space, which we are keen to maintain. Others, however, described it as soulless, empty, and unused. This provided a powerful call to action; we knew we really must do better.

Following the same approach as previously used, the insight was summarized and presented to the ELT.

Outcome

The findings, combined with our professional expertise and institutional strategic aims, have resulted in the new physical library strategy that is now being implemented. Through partnering with the Estates department, we were able to use the evidence to inform a multi-year plan for building redevelopments. The first phase has been to provide space to support knowledge exchange through collaborative working and events. In order to preserve the valued quiet working environment, workspaces were zoned, and quiet study spaces were moved from the open ground floor atrium to the floor above, which provides a naturally quieter environment. The ground floor atrium has been renovated into a flexible workspace, allowing large exhibitions and showcase events to be hosted in the Library, combined with collaborative working at other times. Feedback has been exceptionally positive from the OU community, and more phased developments are planned in the future.

The key learning from this process has been the importance of capturing the views of our whole community, including the users and nonusers, from all user groups. We are now extending the Library Student Research Panel to become the Library Research Panel. We want to expand the membership to ensure we continue to gather insight from a representative sample of our whole community. This will establish our collaborative working culture with the community we support, ensuring we continue to develop the Library to meet their ever-changing needs and expectations.

Reflection

Using evidence is an important part of our organizational culture, enabling us to develop our services in line with user needs. The key strength of the Library Needs project was the directed storytelling methodology, allowing us to identify several strategic improvement projects (one of which has been the building renovation), which we would never have discovered using a closed research technique. Recruitment of participants through the snowball technique was effective given the time constraints of this research; however, this led to a self-selection bias of library users over nonusers.

Our key recommendation is to design your insight collection methods to include nonusers from the outset. Purposely gathering insight from people outside of the library building enabled us to understand the reasons for non-usage and to develop a strategy to overcome this. The future expansion of the Library Research Panel is designed to allow more insight to be gained from our nonusers to ensure future strategies are more inclusive of our whole community.

References

Dick, S., & Killick, S. (2016). Delighting our customers: Building services collaboratively with learners at a distance. In S. Baughman, S. Hiller, K. Monroe, & A. Pappalardo (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2016 Library Assessment Conference: Building effective, sustainable, practical assessment*, October 31–November 2, 2016, Arlington, VA (pp. 543–548). Association of Research Libraries. http://oro.open.ac.uk/id/eprint/57807

Jenkins, D. (2017). How research students at The Open University conduct research: Insights from cognitive mapping. *SCONUL Focus*, (69), 18–22. http://oro.open.ac.uk/id/eprint/59313

Killick, S., Nurse, R., & Clough, H. (2018). The continuing adventures of library learning analytics: Exploring the relationship between library skills training and student success. In S. Baughman, S. Hiller, K. Monroe, & A. Pappalardo (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2018 Library Assessment Conference: Building effective, sustainable, practical*

assessment, December 5–7, 2018, Houston, TX (pp. 188–199). Association of Research Libraries. https://doi.org/10.29242/lac.2018.15

Nurse, R., Baker, K., & Gambles, A. (2018). Library resources, student success and the distance-learning university. *Information and Learning Sciences*, *119*(1/2), 77–86. https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-03-2017-0022

Stiles, K. (2017). UX research with distance learners. In A. Priestner (Ed.), *User experience in libraries Yearbook 2017: Stories, techniques, insights* (pp. 127–131). UX in Libraries. http://oro.open.ac.uk/id/eprint/52664

Stiles, K., & Killick, S. (2019, June 18–19). *Completely shelfless: Reinventing a physical library for an online community* [Conference session]. Fifth Annual International User Experience in Libraries Conference (UXLibsV), Egham, Surrey, United Kingdom. http://oro.open.ac.uk/62190/