Everyone Can Design: Exploring Participatory User Experience Across Library Services

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**Abstract**

As librarians, each of us has an aspect of our work that can benefit from seeking user input. User experience testing and design projects that lack consideration and thoughtful inclusion of all library users unintentionally create a disconnect between our intent to build welcoming services and spaces and the ultimate outcome of such projects. Participatory design sets out to center users in the design process by giving them ownership, embracing and celebrating their perspectives, and centering their knowledge and experience from the beginning of library service design. Using these principles to expand our definition of “expert” and engage our library user community means that we are designing for actual need, rather than what we perceive their needs to be. This session introduces the principles of participatory design and their uses in evaluating and creating new ideas for library services, with the goal to encourage librarians to consider all users, how to break internal silos among library services, and to bring new perspectives to our work as well as that of others.

**Summary**

*Introduction to Participatory Design*

The session began with an overview of the basic principles of participatory user experience design, in which ethnographically-based studies are completed by and focused upon the user’s reported experiences, rather than centering the designer as the expert. Website and discovery service user experience testing is most library workers’ experience of the application of participatory design, where library web designers conduct one-time or ongoing user tests with task lists and small focus groups. In this session, participants explored the application of user experience design principles in their areas of interest in all library environments.

Design exercise models discussed included open and closed card sorting, the love letter/breakup letter, photojournaling as a diary study, and journey mapping. Participants also considered issues around effective facilitation: focusing on testing the process of engaging with a library service or resource rather than testing the user’s knowledge and facility; respecting participants’ time; being present with the user as they work their way through the design experience; and the importance of following through and following up with users who shared their thoughts in the design testing phase. Communicating planned changes to a design and following up with the testing partner after the testing phase is complete is paramount for building trust with the library’s user community, especially if the user’s feedback provided a specific and crucial piece of information that informed the end product’s implementation.

Throughout the session, participants asked questions to refine their understanding of user experience design and how to make it more participatory and user-centered. This also served to make the session more dynamic and focused upon their needs, turning the session into its own participatory design experiment.

*Further Exploration*

While it was not part of the presentation as formally given, participants had many questions focused upon building buy-in among fellow library employees for the work of putting together a user experience design and testing program for a variety of services and resources within the library. Participants also expressed a desire for more time to engage with the case study activity and to share out their prototypes.

*Activities*

Participants split into groups and worked through a guided case study exercise (Appendix 1) to create their own brief user experience exercises, based upon their areas of interest for evaluation and using participatory design principles and exercise models introduced in the session. Among the questions they considered were: identifying the stakeholder groups with whom they would like to engage; modalities in which the design assessment is to be used (hybrid, online, in person); the audience for the user experience design model, which can differ from the stakeholder groups; and whether or not the design exercise should be two- or three-dimensional. Case study examples in all typical areas of library services were provided as seed ideas for groups to spark conversation among group members and to offer new pathways for considering user experience design outside of the typically-encountered online realm. Participants also considered the context and the service level expectations for which the design exercise and the end product would be used to help them to select an appropriate design exercise model. Finally, participants reported out about their brief plans and potential applications at their home institutions, helping one another revise their ideas and offering constructive suggestions for improvements.

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Appendix 1

Case Studies: Examples for “Everyone Can Design”,

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## **User/Access Services**

Requesting an item not available from browsable area

* Course Reserves
* Storage
* ASRS
* Archives/Special Collections
* Specialized collections like a curriculum room
* Other closed stacks

## **Reference/Research Services**

Finding research assistance in-person

* Website tools (research or course guides)
* Reference desk
* Chat/virtual reference tools
* Scheduling a research consultation with a librarian
* Finding aids embedded in discovery services (i.e. CSU’s OneSearch)
* Data visualization and data management

## **Technology/Space Services**

Requesting an equipment item and/or reserving a space within the library

* Website tools (calendar or scheduler)
* Services listings on website
* Maps and directional signage
* Frequently Asked Questions
* Notifying users of terms and conditions
* Procedural changes
* Policies (including privacy)

## **Instruction Services**

Engaging with a new faculty member for an instruction session for their course

* Past practices with this particular department for course-level instruction
* Institutional best practices for one-shot or on-going teaching
* Library’s program goals for assessment
* Department’s program goals for assessment
* Past encounters the faculty member has had with library instruction
* Goals for curricular integration of information literacy instruction
* Desired learning outcomes

## **Intra-Library Work**

Determining practices for collaboration and communication

* Knowledge management for documentation
* Meeting agendas and minutes
* Collaboration across and within departments in the library
* Setting norms for decision-making and expectations at meetings
* Project planning in short- and long-term activities

## **Select Your Scenario and Your Test**

## **Questions to Consider**

* What method will you use?
* Who’s your audience?
* What are your hypotheses?
* How will you use the results to make change?
* How will you communicate your results to people who participated?

## **Scenario:**

## **Test:**

## **Space to Draw, Write, Chart - Get Creative!\***

\*art/craft supplies on table at back