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User feedback as a management tool in academic libraries: a review

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a selective review of current research and practice on user feedback in academic libraries. By dividing user feedback studies into four categories: Library as Place, Navigation, Satisfaction, and User Experience, it aims to provide a framework for academic libraries embarking on a process of systematic user feedback.

Design/methodology/approach – By reviewing the literature on user feedback activities undertaken by several academic libraries, this paper offers insights into how users experience library services, collections, and space.

Findings – User feedback activities, particularly concerning noise and seating, are widespread in academic libraries.

Practical implications – The studies reviewed in this paper may be replicated by other libraries and used as a tool for managerial decision making.

Originality/value – The review is valuable for its analysis of the recent contributions to user feedback practice, as well as its description of the different methodologies employed and changes implemented.

Keywords – Academic libraries, User feedback, Library assessment, Research methodologies

Paper type – Viewpoint

Introduction
User feedback in libraries involves a systematic process of obtaining users’ opinions about services, collections, and space in order to improve experience and therefore, satisfaction. User feedback provides insights on the needs, behavior, and problems of library patrons.

This paper reviews a selection of literature on four categories of user feedback studies conducted at academic libraries around the world: Library as Place, Navigation, Satisfaction, and User Experience studies. It addresses issues such as: use and navigation of the physical space and website, degree of satisfaction, and overall experience. Although informal methods of data collection such as website feedback forms, suggestion boxes, social media, and student union forums are enlightening, this paper will focus on a selection of systematic assessment processes that were undertaken in order to provide insights and to ascertain trends. It also offers examples of improvements implemented as a result of survey findings.

The first category of user feedback is the Library as Place or Library Space survey which examines the utilization of the physical space such as seating choice and noise tolerance, with the aim of providing insight on the factors that render the library an inviting place that is conducive to study.

One example is the In-Library Use survey designed by the University of Washington library in 2002 aims to determine the services used and activities carried out in the physical library. It consists of a one-page print survey which is distributed during two-hour intervals as users enter the library and are collected when they leave. It has been administered on a triennial basis since 2002 at the University of Washington (Hiller...
and Belanger, 2016) and by the University of Haifa since 2008 (Hiller and Porat, 2011). Both institutions uncovered valuable space information from the In-Library Use survey, such as the increase in the use of mobile devices and group work, and the decline in the use of library computers, collections, and service-desk assistance.

Another Library as Place survey is the personal space survey which aims to determine the behaviors that influence the degree of proximity acceptable to library users. In 1966 the University of California conducted the first observational study of library seat choice and responses to invasions of personal space (Felipe and Sommer). The results showed that most students tried to sit as far as possible from others, and that invasion of personal space disrupted their ability to study, producing reactions such as flight or antagonism.

A more recent study of Seat-Choice Patterns was conducted by the National Library of Israel (Hadad and Lipson, 2016) as part of its plan for effective seat occupancy in its new building. Observing users over a four-year period, they found that many people expanded their personal space with bags and books, and that the current furniture layout was conducive to effective seat occupancy and encouraged seat hogging. Using lighting and suitable furniture, the National Library plans to minimize ineffective seating by giving the illusion of privacy.

Seat mapping surveys or seating sweeps are observational walks around the library that aim to expose seating patterns for individual and group study and to identify the furniture arrangement necessary to meet these needs. A study conducted by Given and Leckie (2004) used seating sweeps to map the physical layout of two large public libraries in Canada and patrons’ uses of those spaces. They found that there were differences in seating choice patterns and use of the library based on age and sex. Seat pattern occupancy may be displayed with heat maps, recently used by Drexel University (Khoo et al., 2016) or geographical information systems, used by the University of Rhode Island (Mandel, 2010).

Seat Hogging Surveys aim to identify the motivation for seat hogging and to ascertain the areas in which it is prevalent and the reasons for doing so. The Singapore Management University (Cribb et al., 2015) examined the seat hogging phenomenon after receiving negative comments on their 2013 LibQUAL® survey by asking 56 students about the motivation for seat hogging. They found that the most common reasons were “wanting to eat”, “saving a seat for a friend”, and the “need to store my belongings”. The researchers suggested that there might be a correlation between academic success and seat hogging, as students who come early, choose a quiet spot and remain there the whole day, are more likely to succeed than those who waste time searching for a seat or who sit in a noisy area.

In order to combat seat hogging the National University of Singapore (Nguyen et al., 2015) used sensors to determine whether seats were occupied, unoccupied, or unoccupied but its table was occupied by a book, laptop, etc. When the latter was determined staff members removed the Hogger’s belongings. Another recent attempt to deal with seat-saving is the “No Parking in the Library” scheme implemented by the University of St Andrews Library (2015) in Scotland whereby users are notified in advance that after one hour of non-occupancy their possessions will be removed and the seat given to another user. A different approach was implemented at University of Exeter Library (2013) whose “Taking a Break Scheme” scheme aims to by-pass librarian intervention by encouraging users to leave notes on the table indicating when they plan to return. At Nanyang Technological University Libraries and Student Union (2013) in Singapore, where the phenomena are particularly prevalent,
an anti-seat hogging video was posted on YouTube called “Share it, Give it up!” appealing to users to consider others.

Noise Level Surveys aim to determine the acceptable noise levels in various areas of the library so that furniture may be arranged to minimize noise and allow effective study. McGill University, Canada (Lange et al., 2016) explored the effectiveness of a noise-monitoring device in reducing actual and perceived noise levels in an intervention and a control area at two branch libraries. The actual noise measurements were collected twice a day and then corroborated after the intervention with readings from the noise-monitor device. They found that the noise-monitoring device had no statistically significant effect on actual or perceived noise levels. However, they were able to identify the areas where noise toleration was low.

A seat mapping survey at Drexel University’s (Khoo et al., 2016) also revealed some surprising data on noise tolerance levels. They found that some of the high-occupancy areas were considered quiet, whereas some of the low-occupancy areas were perceived as noisy. Temple University’s (Bell, 2008) study confirmed the connection between noise levels and furniture. They found that in areas with comfortable furniture where food and drink were permitted the noise levels were higher than in other areas and should be separated from quiet study areas. A more recent study by four South Florida university libraries (Franks and Asher, 2014) on individual and collaborative study needs revealed a high demand for designated and sound-proofed group study areas.

A survey at Sheffield Hallam University library (Harrop and Turpin, 2013) also confirmed the importance of silent, quiet, and group areas for successful study. Using observational sweeps and a photographic mapping exercise, they identified the need for clearly defined learning environments – silent, quiet, and group zones. Conversely, another study at Sheffield Hallam University using multiple methods showed that a relaxed, somewhat noisy atmosphere had a positive effect on studying, and was often students’ preferred choice of study location for this reason (Hunter and Cox, 2014).

A creative solution to the noise issue was implemented by the University of New Hampshire (Donahue et al., 2010) following its “In the Zone@UNH” scheme, whereby librarians placed “Respect the Q” notes on the desks of noise offenders asking them to be quiet, as well as notes encouraging them to send text messages if they have noise complaints. Other solutions such as noise monitors, zoning, sound-proof partitioning, and improved signage were implemented at the University of Limerick, Ireland (Breen and McCaffrey, 2013) after follow-up to their LibQUAL+® question “a quiet space for individual work”.

The second category of user feedback is the Navigation Survey which aims to determine the obstacles users encounter when navigating the physical and electronic library. The most common method of testing physical navigation is the Wayfinding survey, while the most common method of testing electronic navigation is the Usability survey. Wayfinding focuses on the extent to which library users find what they are looking for in a timely manner, and whether the shelf arrangement and signage are clear enough so that they are autonomous in doing so. Participants are given several assignments and filmed using video or mobile devices such as phones, tablets, or “GoPro” cameras. Solutions typically involve improving floor, ceiling, and shelf signage, and improving the visibility of print and electronic maps.

Following LibQUAL+® comments about difficulties locating items in the library, the University of Chicago library (Tatarka et al., 2006) conducted a Wayfinding study by asking users to locate three specific items. The findings demonstrated that none of the participants could find all three items in the correct location due to a number of
obstacles; and as a result, a comprehensive and consistent sign system was implemented. Multiple shelving sequences were combined into a single collection, clearer terminology was adopted, and directional aids were created to highlight the distinction between reference and circulating collections. After fixing most of the problems raised in the first study, Larsen and Tatarka (2008) conducted a second study which showed that four out of ten participants were able to find all three items without prompting. Although many of the 2005 problems appear to have been rectified, a few new ones were uncovered, such as the confusion over call numbers and directional map use. A study based on Larsen and Tatarka’s methodology was conducted at the University of Haifa in 2008 (Porat et al., 2008) and produced similar results.

Another Wayfinding study at the University of Pennsylvania using “Depthmap” software (Li and Klippel, 2012) showed that the layout of the library building and visual access predicted how well users found the items they needed. Other aspects such as signs or individual characteristics of users were also found to play a role in Wayfinding performance. A more recent study (Zaugg et al., 2016) at Brigham Young University highlighted the difference between novices and experienced users. Novices used a combination of signage, maps, service desks, computers and smartphones, and had more problems with call numbers than experienced users.

Usability Testing aims to determine the extent to which the library’s website and catalog are easy to use and useful, and what information could be added or removed in order to improve the experience. At the University of Haifa (Porat and Igra, 2013) students and faculty were given tasks such as: “Find the library map”, “Find the library opening hours”, “Find information on interlibrary loans services”. All transactions and out-loud thinking were recorded using “Screen Recorder” and audio software. Although most questions were answered easily, the Electronic Offprints was moved to a different section of the website as a result of this study. Another type of usability study was conducted by the University of Houston (Brett et al., 2016) using “Morae Usability Software”. Participants were recruited at the entrance to the library and asked to perform two tasks likely to be needed for class assignments or for general research on a laptop. They found that participants expected call numbers to be linked to an electronic stacks guide or map.

The third category of user feedback is the satisfaction survey which aims to determine the extent of overall satisfaction with the library’s services, collections, and space thereby highlighting areas for improvement. Satisfaction survey are usually conducted as online surveys posted on a website and/or sent by e-mail to a representative sample or to the whole population. The most widely used library satisfaction survey is LibQUAL+®, an international survey maintained by American Research Libraries (ARL) that has been translated into over 20 languages and used by over 1,200 libraries worldwide in 17 countries. The advantages of LibQUAL+® are its benchmarking opportunities and the fact that all the data are maintained and collated by ARL. LibQUAL+® Lite, an abbreviated eight-question version of the survey was introduced in Hebrew and English in 2009 and showed that similar insights could be obtained with fewer questions and that completion rates were higher than with the regular 22-question protocol (Thompson et al., 2009; Porat, 2009).

In 2012 all 385 LIBER (Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche/Association of European Research Libraries) members completed a “Survey Monkey” satisfaction survey about LibQUAL+®. The results showed that the use of LibQUAL+® in Europe is widespread and that its strengths are: ease of administration, opportunities for benchmarking, and the practical implications of the findings. Over 75 percent reported
that they took measures to improve their performance in weak areas, or to promote their existing services among the user community, following the survey, and about one-third established new services. However, its weakness is its user unfriendliness with 50 percent of libraries reporting that the survey was difficult for its participants to complete (Voorbij, 2012).

The free-text comments are especially valuable in satisfaction surveys as they offer many additional insights beyond the statistical responses to the survey questions. Western Michigan University Libraries utilized “ATLAS.ti 5.0” to conduct content analysis of its LibQUAL+® comments and found it “essential for supporting and strengthening the findings from the detailed SPSS analysis of the quantitative data” (Dennis and Bower, 2008, p. 436).

Smaller libraries sometimes prefer to create their own satisfaction surveys. For example, the Engineering Library of the University of Saskatchewan (Maddison and Zhang, 2015) sent its users three open-ended questions via “Google Docs”: “What do you want more of at the library?”, “What do you want less of at the library?” and “What do you love about the library?” and as a result provided more computers, more individual and group study areas and longer opening hours. After designing its own satisfaction survey using “LimeSurvey” open source software Sarah Lawrence College described it as a “flexible, customizable, and cost-effective tool” (Angell, 2013, p. 593) for assessing library services. Following two LibQUAL+® surveys in 2009 and 2013, the University of Haifa created its own online satisfaction survey using the library’s “QSIA” software (Porat et al., 2014) which they found to be more culturally suited to the Israeli academic population and provided equally insightful user responses.

The One-Question Poll is a quick and easy type of satisfaction survey borrowed from the world of business (Markey et al., 2009) also known as The Ultimate Question (Reichheld, 2006) whereby organizations forgo elaborate satisfaction surveys in favor of a one-question poll: “On a scale of zero to 10, how likely is it that you would recommend us to your friends or colleagues?” In academic libraries this question could be modified to: “If you wouldn’t give us 10 out of 10 for our service, collection and space, why not?”

The fourth category of user feedback is the User Experience Survey which aims to determine the extent to which a user’s library experience is positive. Surveys of this type are known as ethnographic surveys because they involve observing user in their natural environment. Examples of User Experience Surveys are: focus groups, interviews, exit surveys, and student diaries.

The ethnographic research in Illinois Academic Libraries (Duke and Asher, 2012) conducted a two-year study of the student research process at five academic institutions. Employing several ethnographic research methods, such as semi-structured interviews, photo journals, and cognitive mapping exercises, exposed many of the struggles and frustrations students face when undertaking research and were able to recommend improvements to better meet their needs. Focus Groups or small group brainstorming sessions aim to obtain a consensus of opinions on specific subjects, as well as gaining in-depth responses to issues exposed in other studies. A variation of the traditional brainstorming technique is the Nominal Group Technique (NGT), developed by Delbecq et al. (1975), whereby a facilitator asks two or three questions and elicits one-sentence responses from each participant until the issue has been exhausted. The advantage of this technique is that it requires that each group member participates and no one person or idea is given disproportionate attention. The University of Wisconsin-River Falls Government Document library
Richmond and McKnelly (1996) effectively used NGT to rank their collection development plans by asking two questions: “What are the three most important government documents services?” and “What is the biggest problem in getting information or materials in the government documents department?”

The University of Haifa, Israel used NGT to obtain insights during the planning of a new wing by asking: “What are the most important library services for you?”, “What is lacking in the library?”, and “What would you improve?” The responses were incorporated in the subsequent renovation/building program (Zilberberg, 2009).

The University of Virginia (Ball and Wolnick, 2010) conducted another variation of the traditional focus group study whereby students were asked to write down as many things as possible associated with the library on separate notes which were grouped into different subject areas such as food, studying and socializing, and then asked to discuss the issues. They were also asked to write down for each of their last three visits to the library what they worked on, whether it was a group or individual activity, and what resources they used. The findings showed significant frustration with equipment, technology and the building as well as an aversion to asking librarians for help.

More recently, the library of the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (Conrad and Alvarez, 2016) conducted a series of focus groups to supplement their usability testing by asking users to indicate the services they expected to find on the library website. This study underscored the difficulties users have in deciding which services to use, to whom to turn when encountering a problem, and the meaning of library jargon.

In-depth or semi-structured interviews are used to understand a variety of issues such as: user behavior, experience, and satisfaction levels. A study on user behavior and service design at Ohio Wesleyan University (Daigle, 2013) used semi-structured interviews with faculty and students following usability testing of their discovery tool and found that many users were aware that their information-seeking methods were simplistic, and even esoteric.

Telephone interviews are another way of following up on other surveys. Columbia University (Rutner and Self, 2013) followed-up one LibQUAL+® question “print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work” by interviewing 24 faculty members by telephone. They uncovered several reasons for dissatisfaction, such as: insufficient support from library staff and systems regarding journal acquisition and use, the need for work-arounds for accessing needed journals (such as interlibrary loans), problems with online access, collection gaps, insufficient back file coverage, and the desire for a discipline-specific “quick lists” to provide access to important journals.

In 2016 the University of Haifa (Aldes, 2016) carried out a Patron Behavior Survey by interviewing a sample of students who were asked if they were aware of the library’s rules of behavior, and if so, why they continued to talk to friends and use mobile phones in silent areas, eat in the group study areas, leave their bags unattended, and smoke in prohibited areas. Aldes found that the most prevalent reason was lack of knowledge about the activities intended in each space, and that although they were not using the library’s collection or services, the lack of other study space on campus made it a desirable location.

Exit interviews can be used to find out about users’ experiences and level of satisfaction on one day or over several days. Central Missouri State University (Littlejohn, 1994) conducted a “General Satisfaction Exit Survey” designed by Van House et al. (1990) by asking users three questions as they left the library during one week: “What did you do in the library today?”, “How easy was the library to use today?”, and
“Overall, how satisfied are you with today’s library visit?” They found that respondents were either very satisfied or very dissatisfied, and the response rate varied depending on the interviewer and time of day.

Student diaries are another way to find out about users’ experiences in the library, such as the reasons for seating choices, and the staff that made their library experience good or bad. Advantages of such a survey are the insights that are gained at a relatively low cost. A pilot run by Liverpool John Moores University (Sykes, 2015) based on the 15 diaries that were received during a three-week period showed that many students valued the scholarly environment of the libraries (especially the silent areas) believing it to aid their studies, and noticed the efforts staff made to maintain silence in these areas. Moreover, they still placed a high value on print collections.

Marketing is vital to the success of user feedback activities not only during the planning stages, but also when the surveys are being conducted and after the results have been analyzed (Porat, 2013). It is common practice for libraries to create “You Said, We Did” web documents outlining the changes implemented and demonstrating to their users and stakeholders that they have paid heed to the feedback.

Discussion and conclusions
User feedback is a lengthy, labor-intensive, and often expensive process which should be closely tied to the library’s strategic objectives. Before embarking on a systemic process of assessment, it is important to coordinate with other institutional departments so that campus-wide surveys are not conducted at the same time or when budgetary constraints prevent the implementation of major improvements. Practical considerations such as: whether library staff or an external company should conduct the surveys, population, or sample, sampling methods (such as random or snowball), rewards (one prize, several prizes, or no prizes), response rates, the frequency of conducting surveys, and benchmarking (population, budget, and collection size and subject orientation) must also be addressed. Free-text comments must be categorized and analyzed and compared to the Likert scale responses, and librarians’ opinions also taken into account. Prioritizing improvements, convincing decision makers to provide funding and continuously improving must be incorporated into the library’s strategic plan.

The insights gleaned from the above studies confirm that investing in a systematic user feedback process is a worthwhile pursuit in academic libraries and provides valuable perspectives on a service, collection, and space issues.

References


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