Do Students Really Search Differently?
Comparative Usability Testing with Students and Library Staff

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Our experience as librarians suggests that library staff search and locate library resources differently than college students. Librarians bring to their work knowledge about library collections as well as search tool functionality that informs their strategies for finding relevant library resources. The purpose of this research project was to demonstrate whether that is, in fact, true, and if so, to articulate those differences. Differences may indicate a library-oriented site design rather than one more usable for students. As those patterns are identified, the findings may be used to improve the usability of the web site for students as well as to illuminate real student behaviors for library staff.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The library web site underwent a major re-design over the summer of 2009. The design includes new site architecture and, of particular importance to this research question, new search tools for using the library catalog and for finding articles and databases. Usability tests on the web site were conducted with 14 students and 18 library staff working in both public service and non-public service positions. Students and many of the staff came to the test with little to no experience with the tools. The test required participants to conduct five pre-determined tasks of searching for resources using the Library's home page as the starting point. Tasks ranged from finding a named book to locating primary resource materials on a specific topic. The same procedure and tasks were assigned to library staff as to students. The sessions were recorded and analyzed using Morae video-capture.

Preliminary Findings

Library staff took more time to locate resources, but with better accuracy. For example, several student users did not identify the correct catalog record for the book they were asked to locate. Staff members were more deliberate in their choice of search tool and took more time with their searching and evaluation of results. Many library staff chose to use the "classic" catalog interface in preference to the new one. As might be expected, library staff members used advanced features like facets and search limits more frequently, and were more apt to try multiple methods for getting at the best results. Students' more "Google-like" approach proved to be more effective for some tasks.

In general, library staff used different strategies, selected different tools, and used facets and search limits in ways that were different from students carrying out the same tasks. Their prior knowledge about library collections and differences in how search tools function also informed

their search strategies. Students were more interested in speed and when presented with a search box, assumed that it offered a "Google-like" search functionality.

Practical Implications/Value

The presentation will include research results illustrated with examples of the analyzed video recordings. The results have led to recommendations for web site changes, particularly in how the search tools are organized and described. Research findings may also lead to the re-assessment of the new tools themselves. For example, why are library staff members bypassing the new catalog interface in preference for the classic interface? Finally, exposure to and reflection on different search behaviors--those of our students--impels us to consider the effectiveness of our own instruction and reference practices.