

User Experience in Libraries: Applying Ethnography and Human-centered Design

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Abstract:

Review of Priestner, A., & Borg, M. (Eds.). (2016). *User experience in libraries: Applying ethnography and human-centered design*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Keywords: *user experience, UX, research methodology, library space planning, instruction, reference, book review*



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It is no secret that libraries are recovering from an identity crisis. The advent of the Internet and related technologies made information a more accessible commodity leaving libraries with the onerous task of re-examining what it means to be a library and what it means to provide library service. As librarian Paul Gatz explained, the work that librarians do to help users meaningfully use this information is “what is most valuable in the library...” (Gatz, 2018). *User Experience in Libraries: Applying Ethnography and Human-Centered Design* provides the tools for providing that meaningful service by advocating for a user-centered research methodology when evaluating library services and spaces. Priestner and Borg (2016) set out to make *User Experience in Libraries* “a useful, authoritative book on [user experience] in libraries.” (p. 3). The book achieves this goal by thoroughly explaining the concept of user experience, ethnography, and human-centered design, and demonstrating the application of these research methods in the academic library context through case studies.

User Experience in Libraries is a collection of essays about user experience research methodology, why this methodology should be used in libraries, and how this methodology has been used to evaluate academic library spaces and services. User experience research requires that the researcher focus on the user’s perspective when interacting with a space or service. (p. 2). It goes beyond documenting what the user does and seeks instead to understand why the user did that action and whether that action met the user’s need. As the authors stated in the first chapter, “these research methods are as much about a mindset as a practical approach, as they prompt us to acknowledge *what* is rather than how we think things *should be* or how people *should behave*.” (p. 3). The book argues that librarians “need to rely less on our ‘expert intuition’ and move to a model of ‘expert listening’” when evaluating library spaces, services, and products, which allows the library to improve the “whole experience” of the library user. (p. 38). By seeing the library and its use from the perspective

of the library users (or nonusers), the library is in a better position make the space and services friendlier to users and ultimately more visible and accessible. (p. 23).

The “user experience” research methods are focused on gathering data that helps to answer the questions of how a user is using the space, why they are using it that way, and whether the user is successful. Ethnography is one method in user experience research that achieves this goal because understanding what users are doing and why requires observation of the user in the space, which is “the crux of ethnography.” (p. 3). Library users can be “viewed as constituting a ‘culture,’ that is, a collection of ideas, values, experience and attitudes linked to a particular group of people...” making ethnography a valuable framework for research. (p. 10).

While ethnography looks to study the library user “culture” to figure out why and how a space or service is used, human-centered design is a process for using this research to create the space or service. (p. 50). This nonlinear process involves four modes: immerse, inspire, image, and invent. (p. 50). The immerse mode and inspire mode are, in essence, the research component of the design process, and they rely on similar methods described above for crafting the research question and gathering information. (p. 51-56). The imagine mode and invent mode are about brainstorming solutions, based on the information gathered followed by testing the concept by building a prototype and subsequently a pilot. (p. 56-65). This process described in this chapter is similar to the process outlined in the Design Thinking for Libraries toolkit, which was used by the Chicago Public Library to create the program Games on the Go. (Marshbank). The book’s explanation of human-centered design is concise without losing key detail, but librarians interested in diving deeper into this design process should also consider reviewing the toolkit, which is available at <http://designthinkingforlibraries.com/>.

User Experience in Libraries provides an easy to digest overview of the theory behind user experience, ethnography, and human-centered design followed by a practical application of these complex topics. In describing both the theory and the use of these methods in academic libraries, the book uses a lot of jargon related to user design and ethnography. While the jargon is explained thoroughly in the earlier chapters, it is used throughout the book such that the reader may have to revisit the previous chapters to fully understand their application. Additionally, the book tackled multiple, complex topics from user experience broadly to the minute details of a human-centered design process. While the chapters are concise enough where they are easy to digest, it may take the reader a couple of re-reads to completely unpack the different concepts in the book as a whole. These issues would have been addressed if the book used a structure that built more upon the concepts

While the chapters that provided background information were extremely useful for understanding what these research methods are and why we should use them in libraries, the case studies brought the concepts to life. The case study chapters discussed research undertaken by academic libraries that employed user experience research methodologies. The chapters also discussed in detail the rationale behind the choices that the libraries made with respect to data gathering, interpretation, and finally how these results then translated into action. These chapters give librarians who are interested in employing these research methods the tools to do so. The case studies and the other chapters were well researched providing plenty of references for the reader interested in exploring these concepts further.

One of my favorite chapters in this book was a case study where the author's discussed her experience using two academic libraries. The author is a librarian who has hidden disabilities, and she discussed her experience using two academic libraries and compared her experience. She used these

experiences as a spring board to discuss a more inclusive approach to user experience and specifically that “[a]ccessibility is not just about disability. It is about making a building, product, device or service available to and usable by a many people as possible.” (p. 109). She then discussed how “[m]any of the problems faced by users who find libraries to be inaccessible relate to the problems faced by users with library anxiety.” (p. 109). This chapter was compelling because the observations she made from her experiences as a library user with disabilities and the connection she made between those experiences and library anxiety generally gave the reader a better understanding of why an inclusive approach is essential when designing library spaces and services. This chapter made me rethink aspects of the spaces and services at the library I work at, and how we can change to be more inclusive.

All in all, this book serves as a guide, and inspiration, for anyone who is engaged in public service in a library setting and interested in designing a research project that evaluates library space and services, from one shot instructional sessions to reference to remodeling the library space itself. While the focus of the book is academic libraries, and the user group that the studies considers are primarily student users, this book describes user experience research methodologies with enough detail and references that any library could design a user experience research project that examines any user population. *User Experience in Libraries* provides novice researchers and experienced researchers alike with the tools to apply this methodology and use the resulting data to create impactful services and spaces, demonstrating the value that libraries continue to bring.

References

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