Footfall vs feedback: using UX to find the unheard student voice

Claire Browne @ckmbrowne
University of Birmingham, UK

In September 2016, Library Services at the University of Birmingham opened its new Main Library. Built at a cost of £60 million, following large scale consultation with the student body, the library contained over 1800 seats, 14 group study rooms, and over 300 PCs over 5 storeys.

The building opened on a high: footfall increased by over 30%, initial feedback was hugely positive and reactions to the space were fantastic.

But then a change was felt in the air… comments became more critical, and by the end of November 2016 we had over 200 unsolicited, unfavourable comments focusing on the Library.

"Oh no," we thought, "isn't this what they wanted?"

And yet, every day, the Library was full of students working hard. So why did they continue to use us if the feedback told us there were problems?

It was obvious we needed to do some work to get the full picture, and to learn how people felt about and used our library. Was there a silent majority who were just getting on with it, or did we just hope so?

Figure 1 The Main Library at University of Birmingham.

Step 1: Getting to grips with data

Our first step was to start formally collating and categorising all the feedback and comments that we were receiving. We took information from social media, our online feedback form, email, staff/student committees, and we also asked frontline staff to note down what was being said to them as they were on desk or out roving. *(Capturing what is said to staff provided highly valuable insights and we continue this as good practice to pick up on issues with our services).*

The top issues identified were:

1. Access to study space
2. Poor Wi-Fi
3. Noise and lack of related behavioural signage

These were the big issues, but we also uncovered lots of small things that, whilst they really irked our users, were easy to fix; for example, adding push/ pull signs on the doors that led in and out the café. We were also able to tackle one of the 'big three' right away by adding pull-up banners that indicated which zones were quiet/silent.

Tackling Issue 1: Space observations

We wanted to investigate further the perception by our users that the library was 'full'. We had accurate occupancy data (access gates) and, though it showed we were busy, it never showed that we were at capacity. Thus we decided to head out onto the floors and see what was happening.

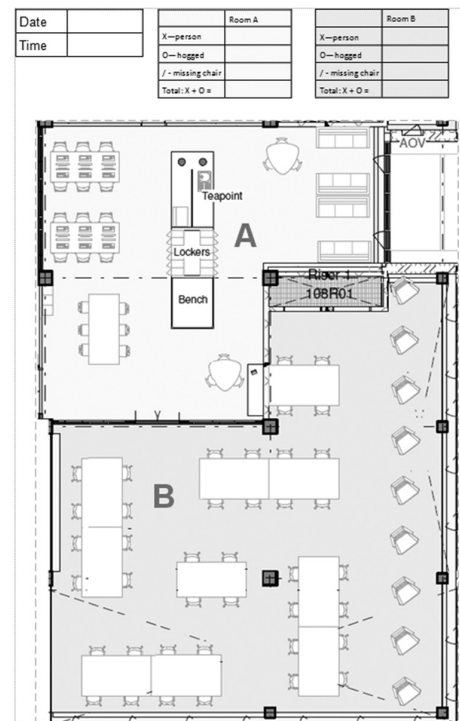We used seating plans from our furniture suppliers to mark where

Figure 2   A seating plan adapted for Space Observations.

people were sat. We did this four times a day to enable us to see which seats were most popular (e.g. the first to go), when we were busiest, and of course to measure accurate seat occupancy.

We learned that whilst we were never 100% full, there were absolutely preferential seats that were also the first to go, and that it could be hard to see the free spaces in some zones when it was busy (due to the large size of the rooms). This activity gave us the chance to make some immediate changes to help our users, including roving staff assisting users to free spaces, and changing furniture that was not being used. A good example being our silent study rooms. The two rooms are of equal size, but one was furnished with traditional desks and one with soft seating. The room with traditional desks was the first room to fill up every day, but the soft seating room was hardly used. It was therefore an obvious solution to change the soft furniture, and we saw immediately that users started to use that room to the same level as its twin.

Tackling Issue 2: Exit interviews

Most people will recognise that those who give unsolicited feedback are likely to be the extremes of either the service's detractors or promoters. We felt that we needed to know what the average opinion was, so decided to so some 'guerrilla' interviews as people left the library.

These included a 'happy or not' question to get an overall satisfaction number. This gave us a baseline of current approval (77%), and proved that there were many users who were happy or very happy with the library and its services. The

Figure 3   Exit interviews taking place in Main Library.

picture was not so bleak! This baseline could also be used to track changes in satisfaction as we made improvements to our services. The first survey also gave us lots of additional qualitative data (over 260 responses over two weeks), which meant we could get a great insight into the thoughts of our users.
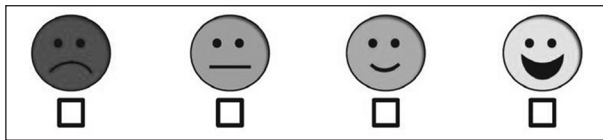

Figure 4 'Happy or not' tick boxes.

Wi-Fi (adapting the exit interview)

We knew from our users that the Wi-Fi in the building wasn't up to standard, but our service provider believed that it was only an issue in localised areas, and only affected a small number of users who were on Apple devices. Suspecting otherwise, we adapted the questions of our exit interviews during the second term, asking users if they had struggled to connect, and if so, where in the building they were working and what device they had used. The survey showed us that the issue was building-wide, regardless of device used (but also that the majority of our users are on Apple devices, so it would be a problem either way). We were thus able to pass this data to our network team, who in response were able to install both new hardware and software. Complaints about Wi-Fi have now been virtually eliminated.

UX into positive action: the unanticipated benefits

The formal collation of all this data enabled us to identify themes and develop realistic aims; marrying what was timely, important and achievable. This plan of action, and the resultant improvements to services, were then communicated to the student body and the rest of our users.

However, there were some unanticipated benefits of conducting our UX activities:

1. *We could report that it wasn't all doom and gloom!*
    Hidden amid the data were some very positive comments about the

building and its services, and it was nice to be able to show those to library staff and have them feel appreciated.

2. *We were prepared for NSS*
    When the NSS results came out, our score dropped from previous years to 79%. However, because of the exit interviews giving us a satisfaction score of 77%, we were not surprised or upset by this. We were also ready to report back to the University the changes we were planning and the improvements we had already made. *(And the next year our score jumped 6 points to 85%, so we must have been making great headway!)*

3. *A victim of success*
    Imagine building a £60 million library that no one wanted to use?! Our main issue was that people wanted more of the same; we were busy because people liked the space. When we asked them why the library and not other study spaces, they told us it was the best place on campus. And it was the small things that made the difference, such as having water fountains, or really comfortable desk chairs. My favourite comment from the feedback was "your problem is that it's too good."

Some lessons learned: practical and methodology

1. *If you're going to openly ask for feedback, are you ready to get it?*
    When you ask them, most people are willing to talk to you, so before you start, think about how you will process that data and give yourself the right amount of time to do so.

2. *Seeing what is said to staff is illuminating*
    Not only does this give staff a way to process comments, but it's a great way of knowing what's happening, particularly if your role doesn't include time on frontline services.

3. *People respond well to the human touch and especially their peers*
    We used students hired via the Guild of Students to conduct our exit interviews, and this got a great response rate. Also, the in-person surveys garnered far many more responses than via the link posted online/through social media.

4. *Don't be afraid to go low-fi*
    Paper forms, though more work for us, were easier for the user to complete than giving them an iPad or asking them to use a laptop. In addition, respondents could see that it was just one side of A4, so knew we wouldn't keep them long and were therefore more likely to stop and talk.

Finally, on a personal note….

To end, I just wanted to add some thoughts on my experience:

a) *The emotional impact*
    One might assume that just anyone can do UX and, to some extent, I champion the 'give it a go' approach. But when things aren't going as well as you would like, it is emotionally draining to hear negative comments, particularly on a large scale. You need the ability to dissociate yourself and not to take things personally.

b) *But we do that!*
    Everyone has had that frustrating feeling when the user tells you they want exactly the thing you already provide, and it's tempting to push back and say "We already do that." But that is the exact opportunity to ask them

instead, "When would it have been helpful to know that, and what would have been the best way to communicate with you?"

c) *Tomorrow's fish-'n'-chips wrapper*
    It is amazing how fast you become old news; things stabilise and the users' attention is pulled to the next big thing. You have to think how you're going to keep that dialogue going; remember to shout about your successes and look for new ways to observe or engage; and of course there's the UXLibs conference for additional inspiration.

Above: Claire receives the 'Best Presentation at UXLibsIV' prize from Alterline's Ben Hickman.