Deepening the Conversation

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It was only natural that two librarians with favorite books by Jane Goodall, Edward Said, Alvin Toffler, and Malcolm Gladwell should end up as the User Experience (UX) Department of a university library. Goodall and Said inspired us to watch our fellow human beings more closely, and Toffler and Gladwell inspired us to embrace the change that is rushing toward all of us. The contemporary library’s UX Department draws inspiration from both directions: tying together field research and user observation to design library improvements (big and small, fast and slow) that are useful and embrace the need to always be adapting.

When we are in the same environment day after day, we do not experience it the same way as those who are new to it. It follows, then, that if we are to create spaces and services that are relevant to each of our users, we have to push ourselves to see our libraries and information centers through the eyes of those who are new to them as well as those familiar with them.

At Rice University, for example, this means seeing our library through the eyes of incoming students as well as those of returning students and faculty. Like our students, our faculty go through the march of time—they don’t experience the library the same way each year. We need to continue to make changes that work for them as well.

User experience deepens the conversation we have with all of our users. User experience starts a story about the library’s services and how we do things that help or hinder the research process. It is a first step in gathering information to build services and design learning spaces that serve our users’ needs.

Observation and ethnography are powerful tools that help develop UX skills. User experience often has a level of richness that comes out in the process—for example, we start to know how many papers researchers keep on their desktop, and where and why they bought their own copy of a certain book.

If the Fondren Library is to remain vital to Rice University (as we hope it does), its relationship with the library’s users has to be deep, empathetic, and communicative. Three years ago, Fondren took a step in that direction when our UX office doubled in size (with the addition of Amanda).

In our roles as UX librarians, our charge is to look at a perceived problem and not simply solve it once (or worse, ignore it), but ask “Why did this happen?” and “How can we improve this process/communication/policy or physical/virtual space to ensure a better experience for our users and staff?” That is where our fun begins—with usability testing, information gathering, and surveying or interviewing stakeholders and users. It is truly empowering to be able to examine all parts of our library, from the processes to the physical building, and propose changes to improve the user experience in Fondren.

One recurring project is coding and organizing the comments on our Survey of All Students, an annual survey students must complete before receiving their final grades and signing up for the coming year’s classes. This has provided a lot of insight into the student experience at Rice and clued us into a few things to research further. Once the following academic year is in full swing, we have a full schedule of things to investigate using our micro-testing (aka guerrilla-testing) methodology: fast usability testing, often under five minutes, on a weekly basis.

One can never predict which user interactions will provide crucial information. User experience goes beyond one department—when an organization has a mature UX model, every staff member in a library sees through a user’s eyes. For example, cataloging and technical services staff often see user data differently than front-line staff, and they tackle search issues with an incredible expertise.

Systems thinking is truly effective in user experience approaches. Get out of your normal bubble and create
interactions that are not in your usual path. Gain a deeper understanding of what other library departments do and how they might utilize the user information you are gathering. For example, interlibrary loan departments can generate incredibly powerful reports and data that can influence the publications in which we decide to invest in the future.

Each year, we hire a couple of student workers to round out our department. We also facilitate a group of library student ambassadors who serve as a sounding board for ideas and a feedback channel. Since Rice has an increasingly diverse student body, these students bring even-more-varied viewpoints and backgrounds into our office, and we are all the richer for incorporating their user experiences. SLA

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