

Joe J. Marquez

When the (Web)master becomes the student

Usability testing in the classroom

Several months ago, a colleague of mine told me the following words: “You’re not an instruction librarian. . . . but you will be called upon to teach a few (or more) freshmen-level library instruction sessions at the library.” At the time, I didn’t really pay attention. I mean, I am the Web services librarian, not an instruction librarian. I was sure I wouldn’t be asked to teach. . . . at least not a lot. My colleague’s words proved to be more prophetic than I could have imagined, especially at the start of the Fall 2010 semester.

“Other duties as assigned”

I was hired to be the Web services librarian. And while part of the requirements of the position included a few reference desk shifts, a little virtual reference, and some in-class instruction, my interaction with the students was generally rather limited at the beginning. However, within a short period of time, we found ourselves down four librarians due to temporary leaves and unexpected departures. I was now fourth in the seniority line in our library. I was batting cleanup, moved up from the number eight spot in the instruction responsibility lineup. As the semester started and the agenda for freshman and liaison instruction was becoming clearer, I was reminded of that phrase at the end of the job description that I applied for: “Other duties as assigned.” That semester I taught 19 instruction sessions, including four freshman instruction classes. And contrary to my initial anxiety, it was the best thing for my understanding of Web services at our library.

My initial reaction to my new duties was, “What am I doing this for? I am the Web guy.” However, this feeling didn’t last long. I discovered that the instruction platform was the best method for interacting with would-be users of the library’s Web site, and for getting firsthand knowledge of how actual users interact with my creation, the library’s Web site.

But it worked on my office computer . . .

Shortly after becoming the Web services librarian at Sonoma State University Library, I had decided to overhaul the library’s Web site. Using my ten-plus years of Web development and information architecture experience, combined with user feedback and testing, I led the Web team in a redesign and rebranding of the various Web sites. The design was user-informed and very practical in its implementation of common conventions of Web site interaction. The Web site was task- and user-focused. . . . or so I thought.

Standing up in front of a classroom of students gives you a different perspective on who you really work for. Suddenly I was on the spot, and this made me really rethink my approach and my initial solutions for navigating the library’s Web site. I worked on my presentation of material for my instruction sessions. I refined it and went over the “script” in my head until I knew it backward

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and forward. I had designed the “perfect” and most “logical” site, and my sessions were going to be a cakewalk. But they weren’t. I saw blank stares, knitted brows, looks of confusion. Was I presenting the material in the wrong order? Were subscription databases so much different than Google that students would never use them? When I took a step back from the projection screen and looked at how I was presenting the material, I realized it was not my presentation per se, but rather the presentation on the Web site that was confusing. The order of actual tasks was confusing. Was it incorrect? Not entirely so, but the navigation and presentation was not as smooth and flawless as it could have been. What had worked during various whiteboard site-mapping sessions and on my monitor during the development phase proved to be more difficult online. No amount of user testing could have replaced what I learned watching actual users interact with the site. I was reminded of an anonymous comment left on an academic library Web site comparison site: “Designing the academic library Web site is the most difficult task.” Yes, it is.

Now what do we do?

What I saw in those instruction sessions was confusion, and it made me swallow my pride and revisit some of my redesign decisions. My solution was to return the functionality that I had buried based on user feedback and my own good inten-

tions on how a site should function. I had emphasized too much the importance of marketing the library over quick(er) access to databases and research guides.

The time spent in those 19 sessions also gave me keen insight into how students actually use the Web site. The formal (or informal) test environment is helpful, but it lacks the spontaneity and actual user search and browse behavior that you can only witness when the student is in a more comfortable or natural setting (rather than being watched or asked questions by an investigative designer). Seeing the facial expressions demonstrated the mental pinch points I had created in navigating to resources. Particularly crucial to my understanding of the student view was the hands-on portion of each instruction session. The hands-on time provided intimate Q&A sessions, particularly with less vocal students, which taught me more about the site than all the user testing combined.

This fall we will have two new librarians. When asked if I would relinquish my Education Department duties, I said no. Education requests a lot of instruction sessions. And while I am still the Web services librarian, I can’t see a better use of my time than doing a fair share of instruction. Instruction allows me to keep a close eye on how students are using the only part of the library that is open 24/7: the library’s Web site. *zz*

(“Copyright to the university” continued from page 594)

of higher education they represent. New initiatives, like the Google Books digitization project and the Hathi Trust, along with ongoing debates about authors’ rights and the future of the traditional publishing model, ensure that copyright will continue to be an engaging issue in the coming years. It is essential, therefore, that institutions make a genuine effort to address copyright and educate their students, faculty, and staff. The real value of this effort, however, lies not in informing the

university community about copyright law and educating them about how to use properly copyrighted material, but in helping all parties involved take full advantage of the information and materials available to them in the name of creating the best and most effective educational experience possible.

Note

1. The Copyright at CMU Web site is available at copyright.cmich.edu. *zz*