The Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project: Reference Service Implications for Illinois Wesleyan University

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For more information: www.erialproject.org
Introduction to ERIAL

- Funding: Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) Grant from the Illinois State Library ($337,000)
- Timeline: September 2008 - June 2010
- Participants: Five institutions / 30 Librarians
Collaboration & Cooperation

ERIAL

NEIU  IWU
UIC  UIS
DePaul
Two Research Questions

- What do students really do when they are assigned research projects for class?
- What expectations do students, teaching faculty and librarians have of one another for the student research process?
Why Ethnography?

Ethnography employs:

- A collection of qualitative methods
- Close observation of participants and phenomena

Ethnography provides:

- A holistic portrait of human behavior
- A nuanced view of complex social practices and processes
- An understanding of the richness and diversity of individuals’ experiences
ERIAL Research Participants

- Open-ended ethnographic interviews
  - 41 Librarians
  - 75 Faculty Members
  - 161 Students

- 706 Total Research Contacts in 9 Research Activities
Research Methods--Examples

Retrospective Research

Mapping Diaries

Cognitive Maps
Research Process Interviews

• First-year IWU student attempting to locate a video to use as a source for a research assignment

• Confused about where to look for materials in the catalog, as well as LC call numbers

• Student had two library instruction sessions
Step 1: Identifies Item in Catalog

- Misinterprets call Number as “Video Room 315”
- “RM” shelving is located on the fourth floor
- Not sure about where to go, the student goes to the reference desk for help
Step 2: At the Reference Desk

- The student staffing the reference desk is not there, leaving no one to help
- The student consults a bookmark giving call number locations, decides that the item is on the fourth floor based on where “V” call numbers are shelved

“I’m guessing--it starts with VID so that’s on the fourth floor”
Step 3: Try the Circ Desk

- Decides to ask at the circulation desk
- Is given incorrect information: “Videos are on the third floor”
- Videos are shelved in the stacks by call number
Step 4: Ask at the Media Center

- The student goes to the third floor, but is confused because she can’t find “Room 315.”
- Asks for help at the media center, but the student tells her that she should ask at circulation.

“The circulation desk downstairs deals with where things are. We’re mainly to check out equipment. . .things like laptops. I’m sorry”
Step 5: Read the Floor Plan

- The student consults the third floor signage, but can’t find the call number on the map because it shows only one floor.

“This is not helping me…”
Step 6: Return to the Circ Desk

- The student returns to circulation desk, and is finally given correct information
- Finds video in the stacks
- Total time to find item: **10 minutes**
- Very few students will persist this long
Summary

- A minor gap in the student’s information literacy knowledge led to a major problem in finding the material.
- Student approached three different service points and did not receive adequate help with her problem.
- Small obstacles can lead directly to a failed search, negatively affecting students’ learning outcomes.
Service Implications

- Additional directional signage
- Maps and/or locations displayed in catalog page alongside call number
- Common basic service requirements and training at all service points
- Increased training for library student employees
Research Results: Search

- Limited knowledge of processes of academic research and tools of scholarship
- Little understanding of information organization (LC Headings, Subject-specific databases, etc.)
- Almost all searches are “Google-like” searches (~85% of searches were simple keyword searches)
- Fast and cursory evaluation of search results

“Apparently you don’t have much on rock and roll.”
Service Implications: Search

- Implement web scale searching tools
- More emphasis on information literacy basics in instruction sessions
  - How to craft a search
  - Evaluating sources
  - Copyright / ethical use
- Create a plan for continued observation of students
Research Results: Librarian Interactions

- Very few students ever seek help from a librarian
- Students don’t understand what librarians do or their role at a university
- Students who have instruction sessions are more likely to seek help from a librarian
- Students will seek help from librarians after a faculty recommendation

“I understand that [librarians] are not magicians or something, but sometimes they seem like it.”
Service Implications: Librarian Interactions

- Increase collaboration with teaching faculty
  - Instruction sessions in Gateway classes
  - Interweave instruction sessions throughout majors/minors
  - Structure of assignments
- Integrate library resources into course management systems (Moodle)/syllabi
- Student voices in outreach materials
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