



UX in Libraries

Behavioural mapping: decisions and desires

“ We can see desire lines everywhere when we are outside; well-trodden paths cutting corners that are contrary to planned design.

WHY do we choose one route over another? Time is often a factor: we happily take a winding path in a park if we're on a Sunday stroll, but select the most direct option if late for a meeting. Experience informs our decision-making too. Last week I was taking my son to his first Taekwondo grading and due to a lack of signage took a circuitous route to the sports centre entrance. Later I noticed an entrance nearer to the car park that I'd take in future. While the routes we take may not command much of our attention, in service industries such as libraries, it is worth inspecting choices of route more closely.

Mapping user routes

Library users may always take the same path from the entrance to a specific area: a quick route to “their study space”, or to a bank of PCs. Perhaps they get up to visit a vending machine or to fill up their water bottle, or to wander about looking for people they know as a form of work avoidance.

Whatever these behaviours are, they offer opportunities for library staff to consider how effectively their spaces and furniture are laid out. Scrutinising user routes may also reveal behaviours in spite of the space: taking an unnecessarily long route, or skirting an obstacle. It is possible that users do not know about spaces that could be more appropriate to their needs. Perhaps poor signage or confusing collection layout unduly influence choices?

Experimenting with new layouts, wayfinding, or furniture can change user experience for the better. However, in most cases such changes are made randomly, or are not monitored and are typically a result of library staff instinct or whim, not pragmatic data on use.

Focused behavioural mapping, a specific observational UX research technique, offers another way.

Observe and record

By systematically observing and recording the routes library users take through our spaces we can better understand their motivations and objectives. This can be achieved by mapping individual user paths, or more roughly mapping a flow of users (perhaps one line for every five users). The former works well in quieter library spaces, the latter in busier libraries and entranceways. All you need is a rough sketch map of the space and some felt-tip pens to map the routes taken. The space you study should not be too large or you will not be able to keep track. You may need to imagine invisible lines cordoning off a subsection of the space to make the process manageable. Assigning letter codes to users can allow the mapping of individuals: recording their time in and time out of the space as well as their specific movements.

The desire line

Behavioural maps usually reveal a preferred route through a space: a path most taken. This is known as a “desire line” or “desire path.” The retail industry has long known about desire lines; essentials like milk and bread are not placed near supermarket entrances but instead are located further in so that customers have to pass other goods on their way to them. We could be taking similar opportunities in libraries, albeit to improve experience and understanding, rather than to sell more product.

Tweaking the line

Once known, desire lines can be exploited by positioning services along them: roving staff; promotional posters; high-use material; new stock; all where they are more likely to be convenient and seen. An alternative approach is



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to intervene and modify the desire lines that have been identified. Recently, while conducting UX fieldwork with library staff at the University of Sheffield, behavioural mapping revealed a desire line regularly blocked by a lift queue, and another, on a higher floor, travelled along by students who were seeking study spaces but which did not reach areas with empty desks. In both cases, layout changes could be made to alter or extend desire lines.

We can see desire lines everywhere when we are outside; well-trodden paths cutting corners that are contrary to planned design. They are much less obvious within libraries, but once located they should influence how space is managed and laid out, and thereby how users experience it. If you don't know where the desire lines are in your library, I encourage you to find out. **IP**

The 4th international UX in Libraries conference takes place 6-7 June at Sheffield Hallam University (plus a pre-conference half day on 5 June for newbies) @UXLibs <http://uxlib.org/uxlibs4/> and see news story, p. 14.