UX in Libraries

Cognitive maps: instant access to the worlds of your users
This month I’d like to focus on a UX research technique that offers unparalleled access to the thoughts, preferences and experiences of your users: the cognitive map. It may sound complicated but the idea itself is very simple: asking a library user to draw their experience of a library service or, more broadly, of learning. You may be thinking that the fact that this technique involves drawing automatically excludes large swathes of your user population, but really all you are after – and this must be communicated to the user beforehand to reassure them – is doodles or scribbles, simple stick men and women, anything that helps to express their experience through this less frequently used medium.

Revealing more of ourselves
When we draw, we access new information, we forge new relationships between concepts, we attach emotion to experience; in short, we reveal more of ourselves, and this is why these artefacts can be staggeringly useful to the library researcher.

Maps I have received over the years have shown the library as a “safe harbour” or “out of reach”, as just part of their learning journey or the centre of their weekly routine, as an important online resource or an essential physical space. These drawn or scribbled insights should in turn act as “jumping off points” for more detailed discussion of library experience, revealing what has meaning to the users, how the library fits into their wider lives and thereby how we can design our services to make them more valuable and effective.

The beauty of the cognitive map is that it’s on your subject’s terms, it’s their worldview that we, the researchers, are starting from. This makes it the perfect tool for UX, which is all about getting into the shoes of our users and understanding their perspective.

Ground rules and tools
You do need to set a few ground rules so that the brief is not too daunting to the user. Firstly, you need to set a question for them to answer via their drawing. I’d recommend keeping it broad so that when you come to discuss what they have drawn they have the opportunity to reflect on their preferences and priorities rather than yours. Examples include: “What does the library mean to you?”, “Where do you find information and how do you use it?” or “How do you research for an assignment?”

You can zoom in with a question to have them draw their use of a particular physical space or resource, but remember that broader parameters offer the user more freedom to express their experience.

Secondly, they’ll need tools for the task: typically, three different coloured pens and a sheet of A4 that they can choose to use portrait or landscape.

Finally, you need to provide them with a time limit. Usually six minutes in total, so they have two minutes to draw with each pen. The use of different coloured pens offers you a potential glimpse of what is a priority, because they will tend to draw with the first pen the main problems they are facing or, alternatively, something they can’t live without.

Meaning for the user
When the map has been completed it is important that you do not try to interpret what has been drawn. The map features whatever the user says it does, regardless of whether you understand it! This technique is about what has meaning for the user.

Be aware also that what has not been drawn can be just as valuable to you as what has. If a user has omitted something you expected to see, perhaps even the library itself, then this can tell you a great deal.

I can guarantee that you will be surprised by what people draw and what is more the user may be surprised too, because when drawing they are accessing a different part of their brain to that which they ordinarily use when asked to describe their experience.

Through the deceptively simple cognitive map we are directly accessing complex user thoughts and emotions and how they relate to each other in pictorial form. It is a road less travelled that offers us instant access into the worlds of our users.