

INSIGHT



User Experience Research

# Observation: it's a whole new world

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**I**'M delighted to have been asked to write a column on User Experience (UX) research and design, which will focus on specific techniques as well as the design thinking process which can transform your research data into service ideas and prototypes. If you thought UX was just about web design think again...

UX research is about discerning user behaviour as well as need. Fortunately, the most important UX research technique also happens to be the least expensive and the easiest to conduct. All you need is a free half-hour, a notepad and an open mind. Spending time watching your library spaces and how library users interact within and around them promises to offer you a raft of insights and surprises, revealing that you can work in a space day after day, but never really see it properly. As Goethe stated: “The hardest thing to see is what is in front of your eyes.”

### Counting sparrows

My wife and son are into birdwatching and they recently took part in the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch, spending an hour counting the number and type of birds they could see visiting our garden. As well as enjoying the luxury of focusing on just one activity, they became very enthusiastic about the variety of birds they were spotting. Interestingly, it was their perception that the birds they saw during that hour didn't usually visit the garden: “We were expecting to see Great Tits and I didn't think we were ever visited by Blue Tits, but I've counted two.” The session also resolved a long-held confusion between dunnocks and sparrows. A further hour of observation at a later date revealed that the first hour had been more representative than they had thought.

Why am I telling this story? Well, because I can guarantee that you are likely to have a similarly revelatory experience if you spend concentrated time observing in your library.

### Surprising problems

As well as counting how many users visit your library, detailed observation in your spaces should involve noting: the routes people choose to take through your space; whether any of them look lost at any point, the problems they encounter, and indeed whether they give up and leave; where they choose to sit and how they choose to sit; what they have with them; how they interact with others; what activity they are engaged in and how long for.

In this way, you can very quickly put together a fascinating jigsaw puzzle of experience and activity and start to judge whether the space meets their needs and behaviours. As with the birdwatch it needs to be repeated too, at the same time and at different times, so that you can discern patterns of activity and use, together with a list of problems that need solving.

Crucially, none of these problems are likely to have been reported, nor will they be the issues you'd arrive at through brainstorming. Some problems will really surprise you, others will make you kick yourself for not noticing them before.

### Open up to a new world

While out training at a State Library in Australia last year, a course participant came running up after just 20 minutes of observation. She was brimming with nervous excitement at her discovery that many people she had just watched navigating the library lobby seemed to be in a state of confusion and stress. She also related how they paid little attention to the “Welcome signage”. She was concerned by the number of



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potential users who seemed to turn away because they were either daunted by the prospect of entering, or appeared to choose the museum and art gallery next door instead, presumably because of its more inviting signage.

After just one short session of concentrated observation she was certain that they desperately needed to embark on a wayfinding project and change the experiences of those coming to the library for the first time.

Her experience is by no means unique. Everywhere I go, library staff are waking up to the value of simply watching their users and seeing where they go and what they do.

Get up from your desk, go into your library, take a seat and open up your eyes to what might just be a whole new world. **IP**