Redesigning the Harvard Library Website with User Research at Every Step

Today I'm going to talk about how we made user research central to the redesign of library.harvard: the discovery period & resulting personas, defining our navigation structure, conducting prototype testing, and figuring out our UX strategy for the project.

This is the homepage for the new website. We wanted it to feel friendly and welcoming. We also wanted to have the hours for the most popular libraries easily accessible.

The majority of the site build took place from September 2017 - July 2018, but my UX work on the project started in January of 2017 with discovery research.

Discovery research from January 2017-June 2017. With our discovery research we wanted to stop making assumptions about what users wanted and actually base our decisions in research. We wanted to inform questions like, What do users want to do on the site? What aren't they able to do right now?

What would users actually find useful? We conducted interviews with around 30 users. And also looked at usability testing and user feedback previously conducted on our old website. It was great to have the new interviews, and pair them with previous findings. Looking at everything through this lens yielded helpful insights. Here are some of the quotes that influenced our content and design choices.

Quickly get to the most popular databases and tools that are hard to find in our catalog. On the website if you search for things like Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and Zotero, you get a best bet answer that takes you directly to the resource or information about set up.

We feature many high-res images from our collections in the hero image on the homepage to expose more users to them and include a link that gives the title, location, and record link.

We also created a homepage for Harvard Library collections that's engaging and visually interesting.

We heard this in our user interviews and in multiple studies we've previously done like surveys and in-library assessments of spaces.

This is our Find a Space app, inspired by Cambridge University's space finder app. It provides filters, photos, and a map for finding study rooms.

We heard this quote in a variety of studies as well. Students find it jarring when interfaces look unrelated, even though they know they're resources provided through the library.

To that end, we created specific brand guidelines and a child theme that we've started implementing on other interfaces outside the library website.

For instance, this is the child theme on our LibAnswers instance, which we've branded as Ask a Librarian. This is all done through CSS inside LibAnswers.

So you can see a few of the ways in which our work puts the user at the center. But rather than always looking at quotes, we needed a way to keep our work centered and make users more tangible.

An artifact of the user interviews that we conducted during discovery. After conducting the interviews we created four distinct personas. These personas certainly do not represent every, single user that the libraries have, but the UX goals they have are representative of the most common goals that we heard in the user interviews and in previous user research related to the library website. The personas were a helpful research artifact and tool to keep the web team user-focused, especially at times when we had to forgo user research because of time and resource constraints. This is only the abbreviated version of the personas. Each person also had a representative quote, a bio and research needs. I wasn't sure these were going to stick and they were actually the last thing I did before I went on maternity leave. When I came back from maternity leave, the team was talking about how Owen would use the site and why including this content would be helpful for Carlotta. Personas are useful if your team uses them to keep discussions user-focused and if they're based on real data. I had been skeptical of personas effectiveness in the past, but it really depends on the team and the clarity of the

personas. A few things that made these successful: consistent photos, alliterative names, and grounding in local research. And that the team adopted them. We also didn't set out with the goal of creating personas as a product. After conducting the interviews, the personas seemed like the most useful way to make the information we learned relevant and memorable. So that's our discovery story, but it's only laying the ground work

Next was tackling navigation. Since I'm only one person I wanted to use existing research whenever possible.

Product owner "hidden navigation is cleaner". I want this to feel clean and easy.
Hamburger & collapsed navigation menu research from the Nielsen Norman group
Used this research as support for a persuasive argument as to why the navigation should not be hidden in a hamburger on desktop by default.

We needed local users to inform the labels and groupings for our navigation. We ran a card sort with students and staff.

Results from card sorting
- How tos - do users want a big long list of how tos or grouped with related content?
- "Visit" as a common word for locations, hours, access, etc.
- "Borrowing" not access
- "Teaching" not Instruction
- "Media & Technology" needs to be a top-level, don't think of it under Borrowing

To get user feedback on designs, we did prototype testing. We also did prototype testing with our users at a library entrance. To make testing prototypes on-the-spot as easy as possible staff used an online survey as script/notetaking hybrid. Participants were shown the prototype, while staff used a laptop to fill in the answers to our questions. We asked questions about design, layout, and organization of content. We heard feedback like, they want to be able to see what information is available on the entire page, too much white space and padding.

This is the resulting final design for the library detail pages. There is a jump nav at the top where you can see the headings for the entire page for easier access to information.

What's your UX strategy? With a big project like this, even if you have stakeholder buy-in for UX, it's still up to you to be the UX advocate. Some of the strategies that worked in this project were:

- Scheduling regular user research meetings for findings and future planning
- Getting ahead of the roadmap by doing research before we needed it whenever possible to help inform the designs.
- Using existing research, local or not, paired with local research
- Presenting findings in a similar format to other feedback (like, wish, what if)
- Getting team commitment & stakeholder buy-in from the start, UX is not an afterthought

It's up to you as the UX researcher to figure out what works best for your team and adapt your strategy to work with the team's way of working.