TheUserExperience | By Melinda Baumann

Focus Group Insights

As librarians, we are always on the lookout for opportunities to improve the user experience. When you have a great idea and time to plan, focus groups can help uncover attitudes, experiences, and opinions through group discussion. A facilitator prompts six to ten participants with questions and tasks; the ensuing conversations help guide planning and identify what topics need further investigation.

In April 2017, I facilitated three focus groups for the University of Virginia (UVA) Library to assess early plans for creating a Maker space in one of our libraries. I interviewed library staff about their desired outcomes, which included the need to gather input from current UVA students with experience using a Maker space ("experts") alongside those who had no familiarity ("generalists"). These focus groups were to elucidate the qualities of a library space dedicated to helping students build, make, and create.

GENERAL FEEDBACK

Library stakeholders recruited experts for two focus groups from students working in existing digital labs, and the library's User Experience (UX) team recruited one generalist focus group of students who had previously expressed interest in participating in UX research. All participants were compensated with $15, credited to their UVA debit card, which could be used for printing in the libraries or other campus services.

Generalist focus group participants were first asked to give impressions of the terms build, make, and create, while the expert focus groups were asked what the term Maker space meant to them and to discuss past Maker space experiences. All three groups were asked what a library creative space should help students do or accomplish, what makes for a good experience in a creative space, and whether it is important for such a space to be student-run (a library stakeholder requirement). All focus groups were shown photos of various types of Maker space equipment—including a 3-D printer, motion capture suit, virtual reality headset, 360 video camera, and more—and encouraged to think about how training and learning might occur in this new space.

ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE

One of the more interesting findings of the three groups is that the students, at least at this early juncture of the Maker space project, expressed stronger opinions about the design of the space than what equipment and services the space might provide. Participants prioritized the need to make the space accessible to people with disabilities, so library stakeholders consulted with the campus disability access center for advice on appropriate furniture, floor design, and wall color and how people should be able to navigate the space.

Both experts and the generalists also uniformly asserted that the space should be "open to all" and used terms such as inviting and welcoming and modern to describe the desired design. The participants described the ideal space as "neutral," without affiliation with a particular academic department or discipline, and said that designers should avoid targeting all services at users with lots of technological expertise (because "high-tech is a turn-off" to some students and makes them "feel intimidated").

Students want a space in which they can feel comfortable to explore and learn, and they express that the library is uniquely positioned to function as that neutral, welcoming space. Based on the focus group findings, the stakeholders will continue to involve students in matters of design.

Some participants also identified a need for "simple" materials such as markers, paper, and scissors that are "more relatable than high-tech" and will ensure that the space is not too tech-heavy. Surveys will help quantify what other equipment is most important to students, which will be added to the Maker space as the budget allows. Some outreach ideas generated in the focus groups include communicating through existing student clubs (art, technology, gaming, media), offering workshops and short courses, displaying finished projects, and hosting non–Maker events in the space.

STILL AHEAD

Other challenges remain that can't be addressed with focus groups. In this case, for example, no group clearly articulated a view that the space should be student-run, but self-governance is a UVA core value. Additionally, the new Maker space will require comprehensive, ongoing marketing campaigns and other methods not yet identified to reach diverse student communities.

The recurring use of the terms accessibility and open to all among participants highlights the need to ensure that the space is inclusive and welcoming, but these are expansive concepts that are hard to quantify. The critical issues of service models and operating principles were raised in the focus groups but necessitate further research through surveys, usage statistics, and other methods that will validate whether these findings resonate broadly to our user community and how to incorporate them to improve the user experience.

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order—but there is a newer method that can help classify manuscripts based on features invisible to the naked eye. X-ray fluorescence (XRF) can non-invasively find traces of chemical elements, offering clues about the origins of centuries-old paintings, manuscripts, ceramics, and stained glass.

"Scanning X-ray fluorescence is a relatively new technique to study il-luminated manuscripts," according to Louisa Smieska, a researcher at Cornell University's Cornell High Energy Synchroton Source (CHESS). CHESS is using XRF to examine medieval documents in Cornell's collections. "What's different about our work is the use of higher-energy X-rays, generated at a synchrotron source, compared to the lower-energy X-rays that have been used in laboratory-