Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

A Faceted Catalogue Aids Doctoral-Level Searchers

A Review of:
Olson, Tod A. "Utility of a Faceted Catalog for Scholarly Research" Library Hi Tech 25.4 (2007): 550-61.

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Received: 06 June 2008 **Accepted:** 10 August 2008

Abstract

Objective – To learn whether a faceted catalogue and word cloud aids in the discovery process.

Design – User study.

Setting – Large academic research library in the United States.

Subjects – Twelve PhD candidates in the humanities, the majority of whom are engaged with researching, proposing, or writing their dissertations.

Methods – The library's entire catalogue of 5.2 million records was loaded into the AquaBrowser OPAC search interface. A pilot study was conducted using three humanities graduate students employed by the library. Following the pilot, the main study was conducted using graduate students in the humanities. Graduate students in the social sciences were desired for the study, but were not able to be contacted due to time constraints. Once selected, the test subjects were asked to use an interface that offered both facets and tag clouds for enhanced search quality. Test subjects were allowed to choose the topic they would like to research; all chose to research their dissertation topic. A moderator and recorder facilitated research conducted with the faceted catalogue. The moderator ensured that students commented on their findings, cleared up any confusion with using the interface, and

kept the students on task. Only when students remarked that a new discovery had been made were those discoveries noted. The impact to the discovery process of faceted navigation and AquaBrowser's word cloud was studied while the impact of relevance ranking was not.

Main Results – The article asserts that results from both the pilot and main study were sufficiently similar to justify combining them for the paper, but the advantage that students employed by the library might have over other students is not discussed. Nine of the twelve students used in the study found new results using the faceted catalogue and word cloud. The responses of the user group to the faceted catalogue and word cloud were "overwhelmingly positive" (555). However, since students were allowed to move freely between the word cloud and faceted navigation tool, it is difficult to attribute new discoveries solely to one or the other. However, when a new discovery could be "attributed primarily to one factor or another" (555) it was noted. The faceted navigation tool aided discovery at least four times and the word cloud aided discovery at least six.

Conclusion – A faceted catalogue interface with a word cloud feature clearly aids in the discovery process for more advanced researchers—those with specialized subject knowledge, familiarity with their library's collection, and experience in researching their area. However, facets and word clouds have limitations: records with limited cataloguing have little to offer faceted navigation; catalogue records from diverse providers introduce controlled vocabularies beyond LCSH and MeSH into search returns, resulting in the same word potentially appearing multiple times in the same return albeit with different meanings; the word cloud may contain certain words that researchers feel to be irrelevant.

Despite these issues, the use of word clouds and faceted navigation (and relevance ranking) appears to be beneficial to research conducted by experienced subject searchers in the humanities.

Commentary

Although the study is well-explained, questions remain unanswered. Neither the number of new discoveries per student nor the significance of the new discovery was reported. The role of moderators and their potential to influence results is difficult to discern: "The facilitator … intervened when subjects became confused or needed coaxing" (554), but the extent of the intervention is not revealed. Finally, the study does not show the impact of relevance rankings (although this omission is noted). However, these issues are acknowledged in a discussion of whether the artificiality of testing may have impacted the results.

An explanation of the decision to limit test participants to dissertation-writing graduate students in the humanities (and social sciences, ideally) is useful. Humanities and social sciences are two areas of study that make extensive use of the library's print collection. Moreover, it may reasonably be assumed that graduate students engaged in dissertation research are familiar with library collections and traditional tools for discovery, thus making the test subjects better equipped to judge whether a new discovery tool contributes to their research process. Therefore, to answer the question of whether extensive users of print collections will benefit from a faceted interface to the library's catalogue, the test subjects were appropriately chosen despite their limited numbers.

The question of how best to serve the needs of users of print collections is timely. Print collections are increasingly moving off-site due to limited on-site shelf space. Therefore, access to print literature becomes

increasingly difficult. At the same time, other studies have shown that library users respond well to faceted searching. This study illustrates the way user studies inform the decision-making process in libraries, while also contributing an analysis of a specific user group's experience with a faceted interface to the larger discussion of revamping traditional discovery tools.