Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Facet Use in Search Tools is Influenced by the Interface but Remains Difficult to Predict

A Review of:
Dahlen, S. P. C., Haeger, H., Hanson, K., & Montellano, M. (2020). Almost in the wild: Student search behaviors when librarians aren't looking. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *46*(1), 102096. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.102096

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Received: 1 June 2020 **Accepted:** 22 July 2020

DOI: 10.18438/eblip29790

Abstract

Objective – To examine the relationship between student search behaviours and the quality of scholarly sources chosen from among library search tools.

Design – Unmonitored search sessions in a facilitated library setting.

Setting – A mid-sized public university in the United States of America.

Subjects – 50 upper-level undergraduate students in the social and behavioural sciences.

Methods – Recruited participants were given one of two search prompts and asked to use EBSCO's Social Science Abstracts and two configurations of ProQuest's Summon, with one being pre-scoped to exclude newspapers and include subject areas within the social sciences. The search tools were assigned in random order. In each case, the participant was asked to find two of the "best quality" articles (p. 3). A librarian was present in the room but did not observe participants; instead, all sessions were recorded using Camtasia Relay. Afterwards, participants were interviewed about the process they used and their impressions of the search tools. They also completed a survey collecting information on

their GPA and whether they had previously had library instruction.

Main Results – Facet use differed significantly between the EBSCO database and Summon, though not between the two different configurations of Summon. There was a significant relationship between high use of facets in one platform being connected to high use in the other platforms. In contrast to some previous studies, a non-trivial proportion of participants went beyond the first page of search results. In support of most previous studies, participants infrequently searched on the subject field or changed the default sort order. Summon's article suggestion feature was noted as being especially helpful, and clicking on suggested articles was significantly correlated with the number of article records viewed.

Conclusion – The choice of search tool has a large influence on students' subsequent search behaviour. Many of the advanced features are still missed by students, although in this study the majority of sources picked were of high quality. The authors note the importance of configuring the interface so that facets and other features deemed worthwhile by librarians are higher up on the page. The researchers reason that the prominent display of facets leads to greater uptake. Despite finding no association between library instruction and facet use, teaching students how to use facets remains an advisable strategy.

Commentary

This article, a continuation of research previously conducted by two of the authors, examines a few related questions that all revolve around the use of discovery systems and similar search tools in academic libraries. Foremost among them is the extent to which users take advantage of facets (or limiters). Previous research has shown that many students do not use—and perhaps do not fully understand—facets (Bloom & Deyrup, 2015). The authors add to this literature by using a within-subjects design testing three interfaces (two configurations of Summon and the Social Science Abstracts database) to determine how this might affect facet use. However, the study measures several other variables including the amount of time taken during the searches, which links were clicked, and ratings of authority and relevance of the articles that were selected.

This commentary relies on the CAT critical appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014). The study is a well-motivated project with an extensive literature review. The research question is somewhat broad and does not explicitly mention facets, although this is a major aspect of the study. The methodology is well described and appropriate to the analyses. For the most part, the analyses are clear, but the article might have benefited from some screenshots of the search platforms, especially for readers who are less familiar with them. Some of the statistical results were presented without clear explanation. For example, it seems like Pearson correlations were used which requires interval or ratio level data, but it is difficult to interpret variables like "use of the scholarly facet" or "clicking on a suggested article" as meeting that criterion without more details (pp. 5–6). Other limitations of the study, such as the convenience sampling and recruiting of a narrow subset of students, are acknowledged and discussed.

This study is laudable for laying out concrete and refreshingly clear advice on how librarians should customize search tools to increase the use of facets and other advanced features: the higher up and more visible, the better. Salience in interface design is usually taken as common sense, but it can sometimes (rather ironically) get buried in the practitioner literature. The careful planning, execution, and analysis of this study is to be admired, but it also raises the question of whether future studies could achieve a similar level of thoroughness using more automated means. Could some of this data be captured programmatically using browser plugins or server logs rather than screencast software, from which data extraction is extremely labour-intensive? If so, this might encourage more librarians to do this much needed work.

References

Bloom, B., & Deyrup, M. M. (2015). The SHU research logs: Student online search behaviors trans-scripted. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *41*(5), 593–601. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2015.07.002

Perryman, C., & Rathbun-Grubb, S. (2014). The CAT: A generic critical appraisal tool. In *JotForm – Form Builder*. Retrieved from https://www.jotform.us/cp1757/TheCat