Evulation of the Usability of the Libraries Page with BGSU Students

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Abstract: This research project explores the usability and usefulness of the “Libraries” webpage located within students’ MyBGSU account through usability testing. Usability testing is a method in which participants are asked to complete tasks within a platform (e.g. webpage, mobile app, etc.) that mimic a typical user in order to understanding their behavior, challenges, and thoughts about it. Ten Bowling Green State University (BGSU) students of various majors and years were randomly selected and asked 9 questions about their opinions regarding the “Libraries” page, such as what they like and don’t like, and what they find useful, as well as things they would change. Recommendations were made based on the results of this study and given to the BGSU Library staff for future improvements to the webpage.
Introduction:

Usability is defined as “the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specific goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use (International Organization for Standardization).” Jakob Nielsen, one of the world’s leading experts in usability explains that a key aspect of a websites survival is its usability (Nielsen, 2006). This is especially true in the ever-increasing digital world we live in today. Websites are a primary tool to deliver information, share content, and provide updates; they help shape the brand and image of the organization – and university websites are no exception.

On December 29, 2013, Bowling Green State University implemented Canvas Learning Management System (LMS) to replace the Blackboard LMS as a tool for students and faculty to manage their classes. When employing the Canvas LMS into the MyBGSU portal the site was completely redesigned and various university departments wanted exposure on the site. A “Libraries” link to a newly created page was added to MyBGSU and the library staff collectively decided what content should be placed on this page. However, little, if any, student testing or evaluation was conducted. Librarians have long questioned the usefulness of this page and what the best content, information, and features would be for students, considering they are accessing this page from their MyBGSU dashboard. The goal of this study was to understand students’ perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction with the Libraries page located within the MyBGSU portal. The result from this study were used to create recommendations and suggestions for the Library staff to increase the value and usefulness of this page.
Methodologies:

I conducted usability testing with 10 Bowling Green State University male and female students ages 18 – 22. These students had a variety of majors (Business Administration, Visual Communication Technology, Nursing, Marketing, Math Education, Communication Disorders, Music Education, Communications) and included freshman, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students. I selected them at random from various locations across campus – specifically Olscamp Hall, the Technology Building, and the Bowen-Thomson Student Union. These buildings and students were chosen at random in order to get a representative sample population.

I approached each student and asked if they would be willing to complete a short survey on a page on the MyBGSU website and specified that it had 9 questions and would only take between 4 – 6 minutes. Every student willingly agreed and participated in the usability test. I allowed the participant to use my laptop to answer the questions and sat perpendicular to them so I could see the participant’s face as well as what they do on the computer.

The questions focused heavily on the students’ use, perceptions, and expectations of the web page and how it can be improved. The first 5 questions were asked after the student logged on to their MyBGSU account but before they clicked on the “Libraries” link. For the last 4 questions, students were on the “Libraries” page browsing through the page and answering the questions.

I encouraged the participants to talk aloud and verbalize their thoughts as they completed each task. Jakob Nielsen deems the talk-aloud method as the number one usability engineering method as it gives the facilitator a window into the users soul (Nielsen, 2012). Hearing them speak their thoughts and watch them use the website, allowed me to see their perspective and better understand their struggles and challenges. I asked the questions in a friendly neutral tone.
and when they completed the task or answered the question I responded with a simple, “Okay, thanks.” I recorded their responses, facial expressions, questions, and reactions on a sheet of paper. As the facilitator, my main job was to lead the discussion and keep them talking, not to influence them in any way, give them clues or hints when they struggled, or express my own opinions (Krug, 2013). At the end of the test, I thanked them for their participation.

In addition to conducting usability testing with students, analytics from the chat box located on the “Libraries” page were evaluated to find common themes and patterns. These analytics consisted of 119 inquiries from students asking for assistance with a variety of topics such as finding journal articles, printing, textbooks on reserve, library books available, and the Learning Commons. This data, along with the student testing was used to inform the decisions and recommendations that are presented in the discussion below.

Results and Discussion

The questions I asked as well as the results from each question are discussed below.

1. Log in to your MyBGSU account

Participants logged in successfully to their MyBGSU account via my laptop

2. Locate the Libraries link

All 10 students quickly and successfully located the Libraries link, whether or not they have used it. The link is clearly placed on the page and not overly difficult to find.

3. Have you ever clicked on this link before?

Eighty percent of the participants responded “No” and 20% responded “Yes.” Because every student was able to find the link quickly, this suggests that the overwhelming amount of “No” responses were not due to difficulty locating the link, but more likely because they have never had a compelling reason to click on it. Students
seem to access the library page, and the resources and tools available on it, from a point other than their MyBGSU account.

4. Why did you click on this link? (asked only if the participant responded “Yes” to the above question)

Out of the 2 people who answered “Yes” to the question above, one mentioned it was for research purposes (meaning she used the Summon search bar to locate articles for a research paper) and the other stated it was for a class demo (i.e., the teacher walked through Canvas and showed students what the link was).

OR

Why would you click on this “Libraries” link? (Asked only if the participant responded “No” to Question 4)

Students were quite hesitant when responding to this question most likely due to their unfamiliarity with the library. Eighty percent of the students predicted that this link would contain information regarding research purposes such as Summon and peer-reviewed journals and articles. Three out of 10 people thought information about library books; such as the books that are available for checkout and the due date for checked out books might be found in this link. Because these 2 responses about why students would click on this link (to find information about research and books) were given the most, it suggests that this is what students know about the library and what they would use the most.

5. What are you expecting to get when you click on this link?

The question elicited a wide variety of responses; 3 people predicted it would take you to the homepage of the Jerome Library, 5 people guessed there would be information
about the library such as hours of operation and contact information, and 2 people speculated that they would find the call numbers for all the books in this link. This question reveals their expectations of what this page will contain. If the expectations are vastly different than what the site actually contains, changes should be made so students expectations more closely align with what is on the page.

6. What do you think of this page?

This broad and open-ended question encourages participants to honestly voice whatever they like or dislike about the page, what their thoughts are on various features and elements, and whatever confuses or concerns them. The most common reactions to this page were surprise (“this is not what I was expecting!”), confusion (“Not sure why I would use this”), and dislike (“It’s ugly”). The chat box – being the largest and most prominent feature on the page – received varied feedback. Forty percent of students mentioned it wouldn’t be beneficial for them and they wouldn’t know what to ask a librarian, while 20% believed it would be good and useful for them. Almost half of the participants expressed their confusion and dissatisfaction with the UL Blog Feed; they did not think it was valuable, they thought it was cluttered, and they wouldn’t use it at all. The Summon search box was helpful to several students, but two of them mentioned how it might be confusing if students did not know what Summon was. Finally, 3 students noticed the log-in information on the left-hand side and questioned why it was there. Overall, the responses were generally negative, and at best, slightly confused when they saw this page. There are definitely changes and recommendations that could be made to increase student satisfaction and the usefulness of this page.
7. Which items/sections on this page might be useful to you?

This question was valuable to understand which parts of the page students liked so the library can increase the visibility of the “useful” items and either remove or rearrange those things that students don’t find useful. Sixty percent of participants stated the Summon search box as being quite useful for research and finding credible sources and journal articles. Because the vast majority of students must write at least one research paper during their college career, it would make sense that the Research Database Summon would be very beneficial. Three people said the chat box, library hours, and “Library Account at a Glance” would be valuable to them and only 1 person mentioned the Individual Research Appointments as being useful.

8. Is there anything you would like to see on this page that isn’t currently there?

Every participant suggested something different that they think should be added. I have categorized them into groups below:

<table>
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<td>• Learning Commons info</td>
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From these responses, it is clear that students are looking for a wide variety of amenities the library offers from this page. Visual elements such as images and headers were
suggested by students which isn’t surprising because humans are highly visual. This library page severely lacks any type of visual attractiveness.

9. **If you use the library web page, how do you currently get to it?**

It was surprising to see how students access the University Libraries home page from a variety of different places.

**Table 2: How Students Access the Libraries Home Page**

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</tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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**Recommendations**

The goal of this usability test was to understand how students use the “Libraries” page located within their MyBGSU account and what their expectations, perceptions, and satisfaction level are regarding this page. After analyzing the responses of the usability tests, I’ve provided recommendations to increase the usability of the web page and to give students the information and resources they want and need from this location within MyBGSU.

1. **Add a Textbook Reserves tab to the Summon search box**

When asked the questions “What are you expecting to get when you click on this link?” and “Is there anything on this page that you would like to see that isn’t currently there?”, multiple students responded that they think or wish they could
access the textbooks on reserve for their classes. Because students frequently use this feature on the University Libraries home page, adding a tab on the Summon search box, similar to that on the home page, would enable students to quickly check their course reserves while on their MyBGSU portal. As mentioned previously, the Chat box analytics were examined to identify reoccurring questions that were asked by students. Out of the 119 chats that were asked from this page, 17 of them were related to textbook reserves. This suggests that students are coming here to find information about specific textbooks, so including a Textbook Reserves tab would be highly beneficial for them.

2. Add Learning Commons section to Libraries Page

Similar to the results above, students responded that they either thought information about the Learning Commons would be located under this link or they wished it was on there. Because the Learning Commons offers academic assistance for students on the first floor of the Jerome Library, it is logical that students would think it belonged there. Because students mentally grouped it in the Libraries category and the fact that the Learning Commons is physically located in the Jerome Library, it makes sense that since the Learning Commons information (i.e. description of what it is, the hours of operation, the various amenities and details) would be displayed on the Libraries page. Currently, the Learning Commons has its own link located in the left navigation bar, but because users spend time scanning the content area not the navigation area, important information and links should be put in this area as users are more likely to
see them (Nielsen, 2006). However, additional testing is recommended to determine if these two pages should be fully combined.

3. **Remove the UL Blog Feed**

This usability test revealed what students think of this page and how often they use it. One particular section that 40% of students mentioned when asked the question, “What do you think of this page?” was the UL Blog Feed. There was great confusion over why it was there and what value if offered students. While only a small sample of the BGSU student population was tested, it is evident from this sampling that they thought this feature of the Libraries page was unhelpful, cluttered, and did not fit well with the rest of the page. By removing this content, it will free up space for other information that students deem valuable.

4. **Add Printing Information to the Page**

One of the primary components of this Libraries page is the “Library Ask Us!” Chat box. Data from this chat box was pulled and analyzed to find trends and patterns. Two reoccurring questions were about printing from the library computers and how to add BG bucks to students’ accounts. Approximately 8% of the chat box questions were regarding printing in the library. Simple printing instructions could be added to aid students if they are having trouble understanding how to print. Including these instructions has the potential to increase the usefulness of this page and decrease the confusion among students when trying to print.
5. **RefWorks Log-In Information Moved to Bottom of Page**

Currently, the log-in information for RefWorks is located on the left side bar of the Libraries page. During usability testing, 3 students were confused about what this information is and why it was there. It’s understandable that because this information needs to be behind a locked site (one that requires a username and password to enter) it cannot be posted on the Jerome Library site; however, it can be better formatted and designed so the page retains a consistent look and feel. This inconsistent placement of this content on the left side bar slightly surprises and jars the user as they are not accustomed to seeing information located under the vertical navigation bar. Therefore, to better align with their expectations and usability best practices, it should be reformatted and moved to the bottom of the page. A “What is this for?” link was added to this content block as well to give users context and an explanation for the placement of this information.
Figure 1: BGSU Libraries Page, 2017
Textbook Reserves tab added for quick, easy access to check course textbook availability.

The Libraries and Learning Commons links were combined because students thought Learning Commons info should be on this page.

The UL Blog Feed was removed and Learning Commons, Library Hours, and RefWorks log-in information was added in its place.

Due to the large number of chat questions that were asked about how to print from the library computers and how to add money to their BG1 account, these instructions were added.

Students were confused by the RefWorks log-in information that was located on the left side bar, so it got moved to the bottom of the page with a link explaining what it is.

The Library Account at a Glance was reformatted to better support quick scanning.

Figure 2: Redesigned BGSU Libraries Page
Conclusion

As a result of this usability testing, the BGSU Library staff now has explicit, tangible steps that can be taken to improve the usability, usefulness, and value of this page for students. The results from this research show that students are slightly dissatisfied with the content and features located on this page. They would find it beneficial if resources and information they need like printing instructions, more visual elements, textbook reserves, and Learning Commons information were added and the “unhelpful” items such as the UL Blog Feed and RefWorks login information were removed or rearranged. Through this usability testing, I was able to learn what students really think about this page, how they use it, and what they would like to change, and then create recommendations that can be made based on this research. Further research needs to be done to validate these finding, such as conducting usability testing with a greater sample size and more in-depth interview questions. However, this testing proved to be insightful and the result of these findings can be used to improve this “Libraries” webpage in the future.
Works Cited


Appendix A

Table 1: Suggestions from Students About What They Want on the Libraries Page

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Appendix B

Figure 1: BGSU Libraries Page, 2017
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1. Textbook Reserves tab added for quick, easy access to check course textbook availability

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