

# NEW AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

## Usability testing: a client-centred approach to innovation

Whether you call it 'Library 2.0' or a response to the shifting technological landscape, a wind of change is ushering us into an exciting new realm of spatial and technological development. Usability testing, a technique used to test the ease with which our clients can use our website, has become a major factor in shaping the development of this important virtual resource. Web Developer Kat Clancy and Web Cataloguing Librarian Michelle Watson will outline Deakin's client-centred approach to innovation at the VALA 2010 Conference in February. Until then, here's a taste of how usability testing has influenced the development of the Deakin University Library website, its search and discovery tools and, ultimately, how it has improved support for flexible education at Deakin.

### Not just a catalogue

Deakin University Library's website, [www.deakin.edu.au/](http://www.deakin.edu.au/) library, was initially redeveloped in 2006. Since then, the website has been progressively enhanced and adjusted to meet the needs of staff and students, with the help of usability testing and direct feedback. Once seen as the public interface to online library services and resources, the library website has become an interactive portal of information, with many features available via computer or mobile phone, including Quick Search (Encore), a web 2.0 version of our traditional Classic Catalogue; Mobile catalogue (AirPAC): a low bandwidth catalogue specially designed for mobile devices; and online course materials, including e-readings, delivered via the university's Learning Repository (Equella).

Our range of online resources, including subject databases and increasing collections of e-books, enables students to seamlessly continue their research and study at any time of the day, as well as during the university close-down periods, simply by pointing their browser to the library website.

### Usability testing drives innovation

Since 2006, specialist library staff have conducted usability tests across all campuses on an annual basis, focusing on the methods, pathways, and tools that our varying stakeholder groups use when navigating the library website. Here are two examples where new features have been incorporated into the website as a direct result of usability testing.

#### Introduction of Quick Search

Quick Search was introduced to the website after usability testing concluded in 2008. The decision to introduce a simple, 'keyword only' search option was based on the results of the usability study, which revealed that undergraduate students in particular struggled with aspects of the traditional 'classic catalogue', including incorrect use of the author and subject indexes, and typically found the range of options and choices overwhelming. It was thought that Quick Search would meet the needs of this user group, while the classic catalogue would continue to be favoured by academic staff and postgraduates. Would two search options be confusing? This would be explored in the next round of usability tests.

#### Increasing the range of search options

Usability tests supported the introduction of an 'articles from journals and newspapers' search facility on the library homepage, which includes a number of features. This includes a select list of popular databases, which can be accessed via a dropdown box.

This list of databases is one of the most well used features of the website. All databases can be accessed directly from a link on the library homepage, and a link to Easy Article Search for federated searching was introduced to assist in the discovery of journal articles, particularly for undergraduate students.

### Usability testing in 2009

The 2009 web usability study was intended to be broader than the study conducted the previous year. Instead of focusing on individual search interfaces, participants were asked to complete a series of everyday information gathering tasks using the library website to find out how well the various search gateways 'hung together' on the library home page: what pathways did clients choose when starting from the library home page? Were multiple pathways flexible or confusing? Could clients find the resources and information they needed? Were we successful in addressing the usability issues that had been identified in earlier testing? The 2009 testing also included a section to determine how well clients could find basic information on the library home page, like opening hours and the number of items they could borrow.



2009 tests were recorded using Camtasia Studio for Mac. This is the first time that this client-centred technique has been employed at the library, providing an additional insight into how clients access library resources and information.

The library website is at the frontline of a shifting technological landscape. As such, it remains a work in progress: usability testing and direct feedback from clients enables us to be innovative, relevant, and receptive to new technologies and the varying needs of our clients. Together with the introduction of new generation learning spaces, the library website remains a critical resource that supports our staff and students' teaching, research, and learning endeavours.

For more information about usability testing at Deakin University Library, watch out for Kat Clancy and Michelle Watson's presentation at the VALA 2010 Conference.

Anne Horn  
University Librarian  
Deakin University Library  
[uni-librarian@deakin.edu.au](mailto:uni-librarian@deakin.edu.au)