Web Advisory Group

Barton catalog usability test results
Nicole Hennig, Web Manager
February 2, 2001

Test 1 - current web Barton
January 22 - Feb. 1, 2001

Overview

The purpose of this test was to find out some general things about what worked and what didn't work about our catalog interface in order to help us begin to customize the screens for our new ExLibris system. We decided also to test a couple of existing ExLibris catalogs (at McGill and Boston College - since they are very different from each other) to give us some idea of how ExLibris systems (which have different capabilities than our current GEAC system) work for our users.

Thanks to Wayne Jones, Darcy Duke, Jim Eggleston, and Stephanie Hartman for helping to create and carry out the tests!

who we tested:

- 7 undergrad students
- 3 staff of the MIT Libraries (since we are also users of our catalog)

what we focused on:

- the easiest, most basic tasks that a first-time user should be able to accomplish in the catalog

what we looked for:

- any features of the interface that were confusing or unclear
- aspects of the catalog record itself that were unclear (though there is less we can do about this)
- features that were especially helpful or clear that we should preserve in the new system

catalogs used:

- Current web Barton
  http://libraries.mit.edu/barton
- ExLibris: Boston College - QUEST
  http://ecs100.bc.edu:4545/ALEPH/
- ExLibris: McGill - MUSE
Test 1: Barton catalog usability tests: MIT Libraries

2 volunteers used McGill (1 staff, 1 student)
2 volunteers used Boston College (1 staff, 1 student)
6 volunteers used Barton (1 staff, 5 students)

the test:

- each test was about 1/2 hour long
- volunteers were asked to find the answer to 10 questions
- they were asked to "think out loud"
- we asked a few post-test questions (for the subjective opinions)
- instructions for observers
Web Advisory Group

Barton catalog usability test results
Nicole Hennig, Web Manager
February 2, 2001

Test 1 - current web Barton
January 22 - Feb. 1, 2001

Questions

Part I - Known item searching

This part of the test looks at how people use the catalog to find known items. In real life people often have incomplete citations or incomplete information about exactly what they are looking for, so these questions will reflect that.

1. Find the book, Biopiracy: the plunder of nature and knowledge. Which library owns it and what is the call#?

2. Do we have any books by Deborah Hayes and if so, give the title of one?

3. Find the book, A century of electrical engineering and computer science at MIT, 1882-1982. How many copies do the libraries own and are any available to check out?

4. Here is a citation to an article in a journal:


4a. Do we own this journal?
task 4b: understand the holdings info for a serial title, so they know if the citation in hand is available.

[person conducting the test looks up the Journal of the American Chemical Society mentioned in the previous question if not found by user]

4b. Do we have the issue that contains the article in the citation?

Task 4c: find out a if journal is available in print, microfiche, or electronic formats.

4c. In what formats is this journal available?

Task 5: Find out if we have a particular electronic database and be able to find and click on the hyperlink in the record to access it.

5. Most of our databases are cataloged in Barton. Find the database called WorldCat and click on the URL to access it.

Part II - General research

This part of the test looks at how people use the catalog to conduct general research. This could mean looking for items on a particular subject or in a particular format. The assumption is that they have a topic in mind or want to find items that will help answer a question, or perhaps they want to browse items on a particular topic.

These questions are more open-ended.

Task 6: Find a few books on a particular subject.

6. Find at least 3 books on holistic medicine.

Task 7: Find the most current books on a topic.

7. Find some current books on the history of Boston (written since 1990).

Task 8: Find an MIT thesis on a particular topic.


Task 9: Find a map or audio CD or video tape or other format on a particular subject.

[Note: give this question 5 minutes. Also, if in searching the next questions the user is still stuck in searching video format only and doesn't realize it, bring them to "new search" after giving them a minute or less to figure it out.]

9. Find a video showing the construction of a passive solar home.
task 10: Follow the hyperlinks that lead you to other titles with the same subject heading and author.


10a. Find some other books by the same author.

[Observer brings them back to full record screen.]

10b. Find some other books on the same topic.

Post-test questions:

Observers: First fill them in on any questions they have about how the catalog really works - what would be the best way to search for some of the things we asked, etc.

Then ask the questions below:

1. What do you like best about this system?
2. What do you like least about this system?
3. What could we improve that would have the most impact for you?
4. Would you be interested in participating in future usability tests?
   yes ___ no ___

Name:
email:
Web Advisory Group

Barton catalog usability test results
Nicole Hennig, Web Manager
February 2, 2001

Test 1 - current web Barton
January 22 - Feb. 1, 2001

Results

I: usability problems

General comments - for all catalogs tested:

- many users didn't realize you can type in the first few words of a title only - they tended to put in the whole title

- many users failed to leave off the initial article, such as "A" or "the"

- many users input author's names with the first name first (firstname lastname)

- most users stuck with the default choices and used whatever options were presented to them first

- users didn't understand the different between browse and keyword searching

- searching for items on the "history of boston" was difficult for people

- people had no idea about structured subject headings, such as "Boston (Mass.) -- history"

- users could not understand the serials holdings, i.e., date ranges, formats available, etc.

- many users didn't ever click on the "full record" link

- users didn't expect to find databases like "Worldcat" in the catalog (every user commented on this)

- some users were confused about searching for article titles vs. searching for journal titles

- clicking on the author's name or the subject heading in a full record to find more titles is something that most users understood and used successfully (if they ever got to a full record)
- when users were having trouble finding something, they often would change several different aspects of their strategy at once, usually making it less likely to find it (entering more info instead of less)

**Current web Barton**
http://libraries.mit.edu/barton

- since Browse is the default, many users never noticed the keyword search option
- since "author" is the default in the menu, some users forgot to switch it to title for a title search
- many users had difficulty finding the screens that let you limit by format (users wanted this available from any screen)
- graphic buttons on left side of screen were hardly noticed by anyone
- some users concluded that we didn't have a journal in print if they saw other formats available, but didn't see the word "print" anywhere (call number was not enough)

**ExLibris: Boston College - QUEST**
http://ecs100.bc.edu:4545/ALEPH/

- previous page and next page wasn't understood in browse list (the whole concept of what a browse list is was confusing - people thought it was the same as keyword results)
- the item you typed wasn't highlighted in the browse list (or marked in any way at all), so people seemed confused about where they were at first
- the label "no of recs" was confusing
- showing previous and next title in the browse list at the top of the results screen was very confusing
- names of libraries didn't sound like library names
- the whole screen was too busy and everything was too bold (hard to see what's the most important information)
- the directions to the user looked like clickable links (but weren't)
- there was confusion between purpose of buttons in the top frame and buttons in the main frame
- after searching journals-only subset, users got stuck there and did subsequent searches without realizing they were still only searching journals (should be very obvious - different background color, perhaps?)
- back button in browser and back button on screens didn't always work as expected
- users could not understand journal holdings - if print is not explicitly
stated, they assumed there was no print version, also could not figure out date ranges

- the term "words adjacent" caused confusion - people didn't know what it meant

- users were annoyed by the fact that clicking on the advanced search button to go back to that screen cleared out everything they had previously typed there

- one good thing: on the basic search screen in the scrolling menu - all 4 options are visible at once - this was helpful

ExLibris: McGill - MUSE

- users never clicked on the line number to access the full record (it was as if the full record didn't exist)

- number of copies owned/our (i.e. 1/0) - users commented that it the zero makes you think that's how many are available - but it's the reverse - they had to think about it for a bit

- "words adjacent: yes, no" -- this option caused confusion, users weren't clear what it meant

- screen that popped up showing holdings sometimes appeared to come up blank - that's because it took longer to load than most people are willing to wait (for a lengthy holdings list) (and there was no que in the pop-up window that something was still happening - no status bar)

- screen that popped up showing holdings was generally confusing with too much information and the important information not clearly jumping out at you

- users were confused by so many links and possible choices at top of page (some are abbreviations "CRL")

- there was confusion between choices in pop-down menu that tell you what fields you're searching, with options that tell you what sub-set of the collection you are searching - users looked for format choices in the menu

- having so many choices in the pop-down menu for browsing caused confusion ("what is 'Subject - Cutter?'")

- sometimes the name of a library didn't sound like a library (MacDonald campus)

- there was some confusion about where clicking on "results" should take you (it doesn't go back to the browse list)

- URL was not hyperlinked in holdings, only in full record, and on holdings screen it was very difficult to notice near the top of the screen

- limit screen has many options (didn't notice the note that said "You may select only one limit at a time.")
II. Some suggested solutions

1. Find a way to make it clear to users the difference between keyword and browse searching.
   Some possibilities:
   combine them into one menu, like U Iowa?
   http://infohawk.uiowa.edu:4545/ALEPH
   (with clear descriptions, such as "book/journal title beginning with..." or "keyword in title")
   or like BC
   http://ecs100.bc.edu:4545/ALEPH
   "exact author"
   "exact subject"
   "exact title"
   "keyword search"
   On McGill's screen they have 2 different input boxes with descriptions of the difference - but most people don't read the descriptions and just use whichever box is first. (In this case, Browse)

   Other possibilities have to do with the appearance of the Browse list results screen. There needs to be a way to make it clear that this is very different from a keyword results screen - that it's a continuous list that you are just looking at part of. It's difficult since most users are used to keyword search engines on the Internet and never come across browse lists like libraries have.

2. Give instructions (& examples, if room) of how to input the data (even then people will still make the mistake - we saw it even when it was indicated at BC) - but we should at least do it.
   such as on BC's screen:
   http://ecs100.bc.edu:4545/ALEPH
   exact author (last name first)
   exact title (omit initial articles)

3. Consider adding the limit choices to the first basic search screen, since this is such a basic and important feature. Especially limiting by format is important to be able to find easily. Make the list of formats very user friendly (don't use words like "realia," for example).

4. Journal holdings information needs a lot of work. Part is an issue about the cataloging records themselves and part is an issue about screen design.

   For the catalog records:
   a) Is it possible to add "- present" to open date ranges? So that:
      1970 -
      becomes
      1970 - present

   b) Is it possible to add the word "print" somewhere? When the words "microfiche" and "internet e-journal" appear, but no word "print" appears anywhere, people assume we don't have the print version. The
call number alone is not enough.

For the screen display:
a) In the pop-up window that appears when clicking on holdings, is it possible to put only the holdings summary, then make a link for more detailed information? The long lists of holdings for each issue is preventing the window from displaying anything at all in a timely manner - so people just see a blank screen and close it before anything appears.

b) Must it be a pop-up window for the holdings? If it must be, considering leaving the navigation on the window (like BC, not like McGill) so that the user can tell that something is happening while waiting for the screen contents to appear.

c) Would it be possible or desirable to include the holdings (summary) in the brief display?

d) Can we make URLs clickable on the holdings screen? (not just the full record display) (URLs should be clickable wherever they appear - there is no sense in showing a URL without being able to click on it!)

5. No one ever clicked on the line number to see the full record. It was as if the full record didn't exist. We need to make it more obvious. Since this supposedly can't be changed, the best work-around I've seen is what U Iowa does -- adding a text link that says: "[display full record]"

6. Brief display needs to have enough info in it to tell which format something is and what date it is (or date range). Important elements to include: Author, title, publisher, date, format, location (i.e. library name and call number or URL).

Ideally URL should be displayed and clickable on the brief display. Consider using the list form of the display instead of the table form (since it can hold more info). See U Iowa for an example.

7. Look into no frames options. The trainer said you loose some functionality without frames. I think we should investigate the details of this.

III. Summary

In general, we were amazed at the things people have trouble with that we take for granted! Also this gave us a new appreciation for the Barton we already have, since there is a certain simplicity to the screens compared to most ExLibris screens.

Though it is a challenge, we are hopeful that we can solve most of these basic problems and make it much easier for most of our users to succeed at the basic tasks of using our catalog. We'll conduct more tests as soon as we have our first draft of screens working with a test database.