
Using Informal Learning Spaces and Non-Traditional Methods to Assess Student Success

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Abstract

“Student success” and the “user experience” are terms that have increasingly gained prominence in conversations around assessment and student support. Understanding these terms not only involves fostering dialogue among librarians and administrators, but also incorporating and prioritizing student voices into discussions surrounding academic libraries and their contributions to the university community. In 2015, in an effort to incorporate student voices into this ongoing conversation, librarians at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) began a longitudinal ethnographic whiteboard study. The study utilized whiteboards to examine the role of the library as a learning community and to investigate how students’ experiences, habits, interests, and preferences, both within the library and throughout campus, create and inform this learning community. This lightning talk will summarize and report on the methods of the 2015 ethnographic whiteboard study conducted at UTK, as well as a subsequent iteration of the study conducted in 2016 at both UTK and the University of Richmond (UR), while focusing on the long-term planning required for the project, best practices in communicating internally and externally, lessons learned through multiple project iterations, and findings related specifically to students’ understanding of what success means to them and the ways in which libraries affect that success.

Introduction

For many colleges and universities, student retention, graduation, and engagement represent priorities to address at both the institutional level and through individual colleges or units. Over the past decade, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, these priorities have led to the renovation of existing library spaces and the creation of new

ones. More recently, the libraries have expanded their focus on student success with the creation of new functional roles that specifically tie to the university’s work to improve retention, provide core student support, and promote graduation in four years. Librarians have long acknowledged that the way that students interact with, use, and understand the library differs from the ways in which they, as librarians, do. Moreover, just as the library represents one entity of the larger campus community to which it belongs, students’ experiences with the library represent solely one aspect of their experience on campus. Librarians’ interest in hearing, in students’ own words, about their experiences, habits, interests, and preferences, both within the library and throughout campus, led to conversations that planted the seeds of this research project and informed a second iteration that involved both UTK and the University of Richmond.

Project Background

The idea of a whiteboard assessment project emerged through conversations regarding assessment opportunities beyond traditional surveys. Through their own experiences, the researchers had encountered some of the limitations of surveys as an assessment methodology, including: data gathering that, at times, missed the target population; the lack of flexibility in multiple-choice responses; and the lack of a clear path forward gleaned from close-ended responses. The researchers’ previous experiences with surveys also led them to see the value in creating open-ended questions and to brainstorm opportunities to tap into this value. This brainstorming led to the decision to utilize inexpensive dry-erase boards as a forum for non-traditional assessment.

The two universities' libraries acted as a sounding board for the creation of the questions being asked of students. Before the first iteration of the project at UTK, the researchers developed a list of daily questions that were to be disseminated in different functional areas throughout UTK's central library. They then brought these questions to the UT Libraries' Assessment Committee, where members reviewed and suggested edits to the methodology as well as the wording of particular questions. The group also added additional questions for consideration. The researchers then shared this list of questions, as well as their plans for project sites, to colleagues across the UT Libraries through an all-staff Listserv. The dissemination of these questions and the communications describing the context of the whiteboard study acted as a means of marketing the study throughout the UT Libraries. This process not only led to a more comprehensive list of questions that incorporated multiple voices and perspectives; it also encouraged buy-in and built interest in the project throughout the months that followed.

Methodology

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researchers launched the whiteboard project in spring 2015. Given the public nature of the project, the researchers requested and received a waiver of informed consent under the four factors of 45 CFR 46.116(d) by demonstrating that there was no more than minimal risk to participants; that the rights and welfare of participants were not adversely affected; that the research could not be carried out without the waiver; and that the researchers would provide their contact information in an informed consent statement posted in a highly visible location on each of the whiteboards.

During this first iteration, the researchers placed three whiteboards—large, two-sided, dry-erase surfaces—in public spaces within UTK's main campus library, Hodges. One board was positioned in a central floor lobby, near the library's main entrance, its public services and research desks, a Starbucks, and a mini-market. The second was placed within the "studio," a collaborative space with specialized software and assistance for visual and audio projects that is also located on Hodges Library's central floor. The third board was placed on an upper-level, quiet study floor near elevators, bathrooms, and individual carrels. Each day, for a period of thirty days, the

researchers wrote an open-ended question on each of the whiteboards, utilizing the list that they had developed through collaboration with colleagues. These questions focused on four central categories: demographics; habits and preferences; dialogue and community opportunities; and student success. The following morning, the researchers photographed responses, erased the question and wrote a new one. The researchers then uploaded the photographs to a password-protected shared drive.

The second iteration of this project, launched in spring 2016, incorporated several changes from its first version a year earlier. Chief among these were the inclusion of UR's main campus library as a second study location. Two whiteboards were placed at this library. At UTK, three whiteboards were again placed in Hodges Library. Based on a low rate of responses and high rate of board removal or erasure in the studio during 2015, the 2016 iteration moved this board from that location to a group study floor, where it was placed near the elevators, bathrooms, and digital signage. The two other whiteboard locations at UTK remained the same.

Another change implemented during the project's spring 2016 iteration was to change the study period from 30 days of questions to 8 days. Rather than posting a new question each day as in 2015, the researchers posted one question a week, left that question up to collect responses for a period of approximately 24 hours, and then photographed and erased the whiteboards. This change was implemented to prevent a sense of "whiteboard fatigue" that seemed to emerge in the 2015 iteration, as the number of responses began to decrease during the second half of the 30-day study period. This change in format also made it easier for the researchers to oversee the project while balancing their day-to-day responsibilities.

As with the first iteration, the researchers again incorporated feedback from across their libraries about both questions and project sites. Researchers incorporated several questions from their colleagues into this second iteration and then shared follow-up e-mails with all of those who had submitted a suggestion for a question, in order to let these individuals know how or if the question had been incorporated. In some instances, questions were bookmarked for future iterations because they seemed more applicable to fall versus spring semesters or duplicated existing questions.

Considerations in Project Design

Gathering data for this study presented several unforeseen challenges. Among the challenges were the facts that whiteboards could be erased or moved, particularly during overnight hours. The whiteboard in Hodges Library's studio proved especially susceptible to being erased or moved, often into one of the group study rooms that bordered the space, resulting in the decision not to use this location in a second project iteration. Winter weather also proved a challenge in 2015, leading to several days when the university was closed or had a delayed opening, which led to some question prompts staying in place for more than 24 hours. The open-ended approach that the study took also meant that responses were difficult to decipher at times, whether due to handwriting or to having responses written on top of each other. Students not only responded with text; they also incorporated illustrations, emoji, and check marks, and would draw arrows and lines to emphasize other students' responses, which presented an additional consideration in transcribing and coding.

Despite these challenges, data gathering also presented opportunities not available in other assessment methods. The public nature of the project, as well as the open-ended approach that the question prompts offered, enabled participants to not only respond to the original question but also to comment, agree or disagree with, or expand upon other responses. It also provided a real-time opportunity for both participants and those who simply observed the whiteboards on their travels through the libraries to see study data. This approach created excitement and buy-in from library staff, who discussed and offered opinions on the data as it was being added to the boards.

Posting a question on three whiteboards for a period of 30 days in spring 2015 resulted in more than 1,200 responses. This large amount of data, combined with the variety in types of responses (i.e., text, illustrations, emoji, and symbols) led to the understanding of a need to develop rules for transcription. The researchers developed these rules after their second iteration of the project in 2016 and then applied these rules to transcribe the data from both project iterations in a manner that would help ensure consistency. The transcription process involved graduate and undergraduate students, who, after signing a pledge of confidentiality, each focused on transcribing one of the three sets of data

(UT Libraries' spring 2015 and spring 2016 data sets and UR's spring 2016 data set). Each day of photos was transcribed onto a separate Microsoft Word document and saved with a filename that included the day (e.g., UTK_WBStudy_Day1_2015). Each document also included subsections that listed the location of the whiteboard and the total number of responses on that board for that particular day. Following the initial coding, each student reviewed the two other sets of transcriptions and noted any areas in which they disagreed or had questions. The researchers then reviewed all of the transcriptions, with particular focus on areas of disagreement, to develop a final set of transcriptions from which to begin coding.

When initially planning the project, the researchers had created a thematic legend for coding, recognizing that, depending upon the popularity of the whiteboards, coding could become cumbersome. Given that consideration, the researchers identified demographics, habits and preferences, dialogue and community opportunities, and student success as the project's four central categories. These codes provided a starting point not only for analyzing responses, but also for discussing actionable items related to the themes that emerged.

Conclusion

The researchers began their work to code responses with an eye towards actionable items related to specific student requests (e.g., more whiteboards throughout the libraries, better signage, particularly for quiet study areas, and enhanced communication regarding existing library services and resources). Preliminary coding, above all, encouraged the researchers to reflect on the vastness and diversity of students' experiences, and, through the second iteration, to examine commonalities and differences across two campuses. At this stage in their development, students are still defining themselves and creating their worldview. As librarians, interactions with students often involve only one persona, rather than reflecting the multiple identities that students have and are continuing to develop. At a reference desk transaction or instruction session, students may not be able to or feel comfortable with verbalizing their larger issues or concerns, whether they involve academic or personal spheres. A project such as this provides an opportunity for students to voice such issues and concerns and, by doing so, perhaps to recognize that there are others who share them or can provide insight on them.

The nature of academic libraries is one of evolution and change, as is the culture of the student body. As students develop and evolve their identities, librarians' skill sets and the ways in which librarians communicate with students also benefit from reflection, adaptation, and a consideration of their own student body and campus community, in addition to larger, aggregate data generally provided by surveys. Both student success initiatives and library assessment related to such work can benefit from looking beyond traditional

assessment techniques and methods. Letting students define and describe both their spaces and their worldview through a project such as this nontraditional whiteboard assessment provides a unique opportunity for librarians to create services and spaces that better meet students' needs, and consequently, enables librarians to best be of value to the continually evolving populations that they serve.

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