Developing Guidelines for Observing Users in the Library Building

Observations are used to study the behavior of people in real-world settings. To involve all library staff in a building observation project, the organizers must:

- Set clear goals for the observations.
- Create tools for consistency.
- Ensure that all participants understand the measurement guidelines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Parameters?</th>
<th>Unobtrusive: conducted without the participants’ awareness</th>
<th>Nonparticipant: conducted without the observer participating in the events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What to Observe?</td>
<td>Event sampling: observe certain activities, events, or behaviors</td>
<td>Time sampling: observe behaviors during specified time periods and durations</td>
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<tr>
<td>What to Record?</td>
<td>Qualitative, open-ended: record descriptions of all behaviors in context; analyze data for patterns</td>
<td>Quantitative, focused: record behaviors in certain categories and for certain durations</td>
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<tr>
<td>What Tools to Use?</td>
<td>Observation schedules or checklists</td>
<td>Floor plans and categories of behaviors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Continuous Observation: A Powerful Assessment Tool
Ann Medalie, Reference and Instruction Librarian, University of Nevada, Reno

Redesign of the UNR Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center’s Popular Reading and Reference Areas

Purpose
To make the Popular Reading and Reference areas more conducive to student use.

Method
Building observations were conducted by library staff before and after the redesign.

Findings
Before the redesign, we observed:

- Heavy use of laptops and mobile devices
- Use by both individuals and groups
- Use by both students and community
- Both studying and socializing
- Need to spread out materials
- Underuse of the Reference area
- Underuse of Reference and Popular Reading materials
- A constant “buzz” in the area

How could we:

- Facilitate the better use of the materials and furniture?
- Allow for more group work?
- Make the areas more welcoming and comfortable?

The Redesign
Building Operations Manager Alden Kamanu flipped and redesigned both areas so that:

- There were more comfortable furniture choices and arrangements in both spaces.
- Popular reading materials were better displayed.
- A Microsoft surface table and video displays of news events were added to the Popular Reading area.
- More tables for group work were added to the Reference area.
- The arrangement of furniture allowed for better traffic patterns and noise control.

The figure to the left shows an observation schedule and floor plan that was used to record data.

The Value of Involving Library Staff in Building Observations

This assessment activity helps our library staff work toward an organizational priority: learning to view the library from the users’ perspective and better understand user behavior.

Because observations take so much time and effort to conduct, this “crowdsourcing with staff” approach helps to solve this problem.

Initially, Library Design Consultant Aaron Schmidt instructed our staff about how to conduct, analyze, and share building observations.

Calls for new observations now go out on a regular basis. Results are communicated throughout the library. The data is used by the library’s Onsite User Experience Committee to inform decision making.

References