Basing arguments on evidence: the unexpected outcome of a cultural probe

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Background

Lund University is a comprehensive university with eight faculties. The University has 42,000 students and more than 7,000 employees, which makes it the largest university in Sweden. Each faculty has a library organisation, and the faculty libraries form together with the centrally financed University Library a decentralised network, with around 200 staff members.

Like most academic libraries, the library organisation has for many years offered services to disabled students, and especially to students with any kind of reading and/or writing impairment. Disabled students have the right to get all mandatory course literature adapted according to their needs, in most cases as talking books. They also have longer lending periods and we provide some assistive software to support reading and writing. A few faculty libraries also offer a study room with assistive technology.

The content of the service has varied and evolved, mainly due to technology changes. We had not previously made a user study to get more knowledge about disabled students' need of services and support.

Figure 1   Assistive technology at Lund University.

Going into UX

When in Autumn 2016 I was commissioned to do an investigation of the Lund University Libraries' services to disabled students, including recommendations for improving these services, it felt like a good opportunity and high time to include a user study. I was lucky enough to be able to engage my colleague Ingela Wahlgren to collaborate with me in planning and conducting the study. This was advantageous for the project for many reasons. Ingela has a greater knowledge about UX methods and I have quite a lot of experience of working with support to disabled students, so together we could complement each other. In my opinion the collaboration also promoted creativity and new ways of thinking.

In the study we wanted to focus on how disabled students experience their study situation in general, not specifically on library services and support. Ingela and I had previously worked together with UX methods to explore and understand the public space of our library, and decided to use UX also in this new study. We decided to make a cultural probe. A cultural probe is an ethnographic method where the participants themselves collect data about the specific activity/environment that you want to observe. The documentation techniques vary: participants can be asked to write diaries, take photos, make audio recordings etc.

In our cultural probe the participants were asked to take photos of their everyday study life during a week (7 days in a row). They were asked to take at least three photos every day. When finished we met for an individual interview based on the photos. There were several advantages with the method. Since the study population were disabled students, many with reading and writing impairments, it was good to use a method which does not involve reading or writing. As the participants collect the data themselves, we could actually 'observe' them in their own environment, be it at home or in the lecture hall. Also, the participants were free to document anything they found relevant for the task; they were not confined to the library space and services.

Mainly due to time constraints, we only managed to recruit three dyslexic students and one visually impaired student. However, even though the study was small it resulted in many insights. The students documented lectures, labs, group work and studying in the library; they also took photos of their study environment at home, showing the organisation of their desk or how they listened to talking books when preparing dinner or doing dishes; other photos showed computer screens with assistive software or Learning Management systems.

Findings

We identified many obstacles for the students. In the analysis we clustered the findings into different categories in order to get an understanding of the everyday study life for these students, and the obstacles they encountered. The categories we identified were:

- Reading
- Getting access to course information and using the Learning Management System
- Taking notes and writing assignments and papers
- Using the study environment
- Organising and planning studies
- Teachers' pedagogics and attitudes
- Support from the accessibility officers
- Library services and support.[1]

One factor recurs throughout the findings, and that is the issue of time. For these students the studies were extremely time-consuming.

The findings cover many different issues, and not all of them are owned by the Library. This is not so surprising as we did not ask the participants to focus on the Library Service when they documented their study situation. As a consequence, they documented aspects which were important for them, regardless of the University organisation. This did mean that once the analysis was completed and the report written, I was faced with the problem of how to spread the results to all the relevant parts of Lund University.

Some of the findings concerned the Library organisation and were very useful for my investigation about library services to disabled students. I could base recommendations about improvements to our services directly on identified obstacles.

Text-To-Speech software

One obstacle was reading text which had not been adapted into talking books, i.e. web pages, course instructions in the Learning Management System, handouts on paper, and inaccessible e-books and pdf-documents. It would be quite easy

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1   We have written a short report about the study, describing the results in detail. If you are interested in reading the report, please contact the author.

to eliminate this obstacle, by simply providing a campus licence for a Text-To-Speech (TTS) software package. This is what most Swedish universities do. But even though such software is not unreasonably expensive, at Lund University it has not been possible to identify an owner of the issue. This fact may at least in part be due to a complex and very decentralised organisation: the Accessibility Office supports individual students and does not have anything to do with infrastructure; the library network is only concerned with literature and not with the curriculum and teaching environment; the IT department does not have its own budget to buy licences for software, etc.

More or less parallel to our study, we have raised the issue of a campus licence for TTS in a Lund University committee for developing the pedagogical use of technology. Immediately after we had finished the analysis of the study, I was called to the University's Education Board to present a proposal to purchase a campus licence. I knew beforehand that the Board was sympathetic to such an idea, but did not consider it their responsibility to finance it. I had received an email stating that I was welcome to make a presentation on behalf of the committee and that the Board would give the committee advice on how to proceed. Thanks to the findings in our study, I was able to build my presentation on actual and very concrete evidence given by the participating Lund University students and on the obstacles they experienced when trying to use the Learning Management System and other inaccessible but necessary digital learning environments and texts. After having listened to the stories of the students, the Board members approved the proposal! The University Library has been appointed to manage the licence, we have purchased it and are now in the process of getting the information about the TTS out to students and staff.

Pedagogies

A part of the findings in our study are concerned with what is usually called Higher Education teaching and learning. Not all teachers are aware about the support their students can get. Most teachers are also very engaged in their students' learning, but not all have the necessary knowledge, including accessible pedagogies.

The Division for Higher Education development at Lund University launched a course about blended learning in Autumn 2017. The course contains a couple of hours about pedagogy, for which the report of the study will be used as discussion material, in order to raise awareness amongst the course participants. The course

will run eight times during the next two years, so many teachers will have the possibility to take it.

Some reflections

The cultural probe was a very suitable method for our study. The participating students had no problem understanding the task, they could easily take the photos with a smartphone and they appreciated talking about the photos during the interview.

Even though the study was very small, it gave very interesting information and insights. This did actually have some impact, since the findings gave indications of concrete obstacles facing disabled students at Lund University, and therefore they could not be dismissed as someone else's problem.

One lesson learned was that although our qualitative UX method was limited and not perfect, it was better to conduct a small study than no study at all!

Further reading

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