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UXLabs: Help! I need somebody!

Using Personal Construct Psychology to explore the types of help students would like to receive in a library context

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For UXLabs, I presented some research conducted by our brilliant UX Intern, Jamie Sutcliffe, a Psychology PhD student who spent 12 weeks working with the Subject Team at the University of Huddersfield at the start of 2018. During her short time with us, we were able to accomplish so much and further embed UX practices into our library service. For the last few weeks of her internship, Jamie started researching what kinds of library and IT help undergraduate students wanted when they visited the library. We currently have a single help desk known as the Help Centre where students can ask library- and IT-related questions and receive more in-depth research help. Increasingly, the type of help students have sought has been IT support. Other types of enquires have reduced, so a service desk review was commissioned by Senior Management. As part of this investigation, the Customer Service librarian tasked Jamie to find out how students wanted to receive help. What would be their ideal help desk of the future?

This was a difficult area to research and none of the usual UX methods sprang to mind. However, Jamie thought she could use Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), a theory within psychology with its own research methods, that she had used for her PhD. She first trialled the idea on me to see if it would work, using pictures of a variety of help desk scenarios, e.g. the traditional help desk, online chat, library mobile apps, webcam, self-service. She selected three of the images (see Figure 1) and asked me to pick out two that were the same, and one which was different. This is known in PCP language as a construct elicitation task. I selected images 4 and 6 as being similar as they both provided face-to-face help, whereas the help provided by image 12 was virtual. I had to use a single word or phrase to explain what the two related cards had in common and why the single card was different – so face-to-face (images 4 and 6) versus virtual (image 12). She then

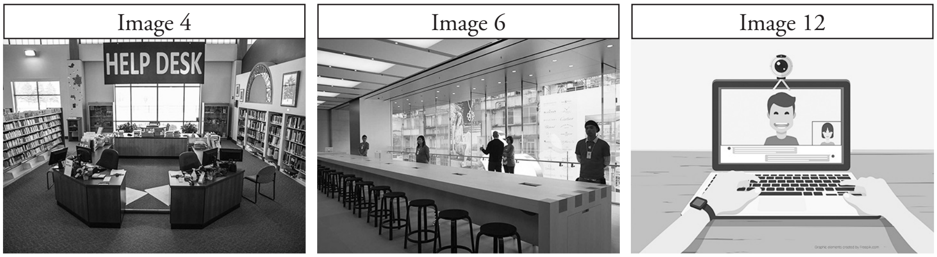


Figure 1 Help desk scenarios.

quizzed me, using a technique known as 'laddering', to further explore my gut reaction towards the images. She repeatedly asked me why I preferred one form of help over another. I liked this method and thought we could use it to have honest conversations with our students and elicit more significant findings that would help in the redesign and repurposing of the help desk. So, in discussion with Customer Service staff and Subject Librarians, we came up with 14 help scenarios that could be shown to the students. Jamie mentioned the research to her PhD supervisors, one of whom is an editor for the Journal of Constructivist Psychology. She thought that although PCP had been conducted for market research, it had not yet been done in a library context and was quite excited for her student to be engaged in this work.

So Jamie conducted the research, spending one hour each with 9 undergraduate students, mostly from the Business School, who were offered the incentive of a £10 Amazon voucher.

11
8
13
Get that job!
5
14
12
10
1
order

Figure 2 14 images featuring different help desk scenarios.

For UXLabs, rather than having a poster, Jamie designed a handout for me to give out to delegates detailing: why the research was done; the sample; methods; and preliminary findings as she hadn't yet conducted the data analysis. She also compiled some examples of laddering.

I intended also to get delegates to have a go, repeat the exercise I describe above and then question them further using laddering to explore the reasons for their choice. I knew this would have its challenges but thought I'd give it a go!

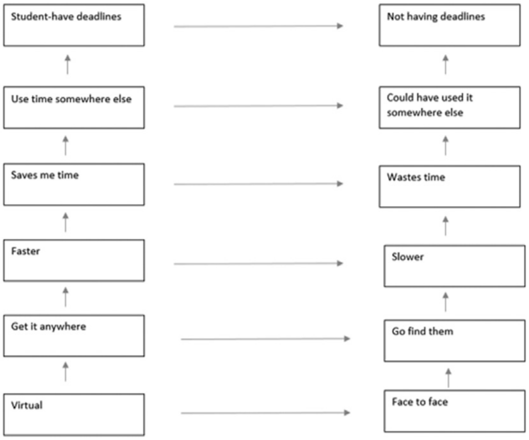


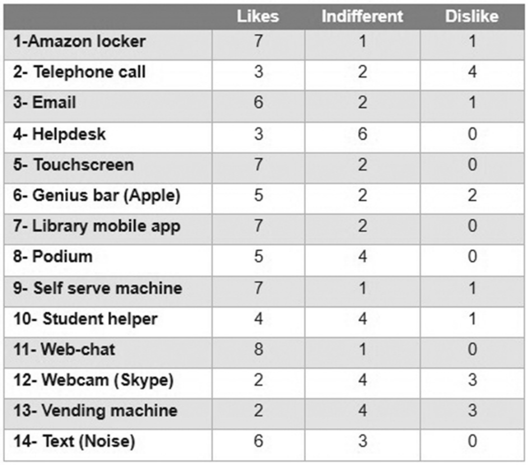
Figure 3 Example of laddering from our research.

On the day I was able to trial the construct elicitation task and the laddering method on the first person who approached my display, and it was useful to have the example pinned up to help explain the concept to delegates. The exercise was intriguing as the volunteer made her decisions based not on her own preferences, but on the type of interaction with library staff she assumed the students would want, which was face-to-face support as opposed to the virtual. Interestingly, her answer was in direct contrast to the laddering example I had taken with me resulting from our research with an undergraduate student, who when interviewed claimed to prefer online help as s/he could access it from a distance, it was faster, saved them time and enabled them to meet their deadline. Time was a very important factor to them, as it was to a number of students. They felt the face-to-face approach was slower and wastes valuable time.

Delegates were interested in the work and I only had two of the 30 handouts that I had taken left at the end of the session. The different methods of providing library help is a topical subject and I hope people were interested in the research technique used, although the conversations ended up being less about this and more about the findings and the benefits of having a UX intern!

So what has happened since?

Jamie has now completed the data analysis, compiled a report detailing the key findings and also come up with some recommendations that have been discussed by our Senior Management Team. What surprised her most about the interviews that she conducted with students was the difference between the findings from the scenario exercise (where students were asked to place the images into three



	Likes	Indifferent	Dislike
1-Amazon locker	7	1	1
2- Telephone call	3	2	4
3- Email	6	2	1
4- Helpdesk	3	6	0
5- Touchscreen	7	2	0
6- Genius bar (Apple)	5	2	2
7- Library mobile app	7	2	0
8- Podium	5	4	0
9- Self serve machine	7	1	1
10- Student helper	4	4	1
11- Web-chat	8	1	0
12- Webcam (Skype)	2	4	3
13- Vending machine	2	4	3
14- Text (Noise)	6	3	0

Figure 4 Findings from the scenario exercise.

separate piles to indicate their preferences – see Figure 4) and those that emerged from the construct elicitation task and the laddering research method. So whilst students might say that they prefer virtual/self-help over face-to-face contact, when they were probed further they did say that there were situations in which they would prefer human contact. Overall, the findings indicate that participants had a preference for human contact over virtual, but only just (5 participants over 4 for virtual). So one of the main conclusions from the research was to provide a wide variety of help modes.

Future research

It may be useful to carry out future research which takes some of the constructs elicited from the 9 participants and then ask a larger sample of participants from a wider range of subject disciplines for their preferences. This would allow for a greater overview of what it is that students at the university value from services offered to them. There may also be merit in someone with a professional library background looking over the data as they may pick up on other issues that Jamie discarded as she was not a qualified librarian.

In conclusion, we would definitely recommend using PCP research methods as a technique for conducting UX research.

Further reading

Burr, V., King, N. And Butt, T., 2014. Personal construct psychology methods for qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17(4), pp. 341–355. doi: 10.1080/13645579.2012.730702.

Butt, T., 2008. *George Kelly: the psychology of personal constructs*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

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