A prototype calm reading room being tested at the University of Wolverhampton's Harrison Library with walls painted by an MA Arts student, Rebecca Collins, and kitted out with cheap beanbags, deck chairs and some astroturf. – Photo © Jon Granger.

UX Research & Design

Prototyping: prioritising user testing and agility over detail

> ## "The prototype spaces and services you test should be inexpensive and quick to implement.

It is no accident that for the New Year my column has the additional word "design" in the title. User Experience research is hugely valuable but unless such efforts translate into new products, policies or services then the benefits will inevitably be limited. UX design is the next logical step in the process. This is best accomplished by turning your user research findings into ideas and concepts that can be tested and prototyped with users.

Try stuff out first

Testing and prototyping doesn't come naturally to library workers, in fact I would go so far as to say it is antithetical to the natural preferences of many in the profession, my own included when I ran libraries. Rather than trying stuff out and seeing if new ideas have legs, instead we are far more interested in devising complete and perfect services. We spend a great deal of time discussing and planning new initiatives, and tend to only launch them when fully formed. We are too interested in the finer details. We are also obsessed with getting things right first time.

Factor in the users

Unfortunately, this is an approach which is diametrically opposed both to the effective creation of user-centric services and to the agile principles that underpin UX. Planning and considering all the details for a new service might make us feel more comfortable but can be a waste of time when the value of such an initiative is not yet proved. The detail can come later. More importantly, by attempting to release fully-formed services first time we are inevitably excluding the feedback and experiences of our users.

Naturally, far more valuable and user-centric services can be built if they are actually tested on users before they are developed further, factoring in

their responses and ideas and iterating accordingly. Adopting this process requires us to climb down from a stance that we know what is good for our users. The reality is that we can't know better than our users which services work best with their routines or suit their study preferences. We must factor them into the process.

Fail fast, fail cheap

The prototype spaces and services you test should be inexpensive and quick to implement. The motto here is "fail fast, fail cheap" – in other words, if it doesn't work and users don't find value in it, it doesn't matter as you've spent very little. Incidentally, this is also why UX is a perfect fit for these times where budgets are rapidly decreasing.

Testing prototypes

To give you an idea of library space prototypes, here are some that I've recently helped implement and are currently being tested with users at a UK university library: a calm fiction room with walls painted with a garden theme as a place for inspiration and respite from the stress of coursework; a furniture showcase area where users can test out and respond to possible new library desks and chairs; positioning of additional staff helpdesks around a library to improve staff visibility; a comfortable silent reading room in response to the finding that users don't always want to work in formal surroundings; and group study rooms with new murals produced by users themselves to emphasise their ownership of the space and encourage good citizenship.

All of the above have been created extremely cheaply and already they are receiving positive feedback and, more importantly, lots of use. The next stage at this library is to iterate in response and to deliver even more relevant and effective user-centric spaces going forwards.

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So, the next time you're developing a prototype service or space: try something quickly, forget the details, don't spend money and ensure it is tested on your users. This is UX design and your research process is nothing without it.

The 5th annual UX in Libraries conference will take place at Royal Holloway, University of London between 17-19 June 2019. Our Call for Papers is open until 8 February 2019. Find out more at: http://uxlib.org **IP**