

Peter Oleksik
User Study Comparison
CAML
February 18, 2009

MOAC II vs. HEDAP: Explorations into Digital Resource User Studies

User studies are a great resource for cultural institutions to assess themselves and how they are presenting information to their user group. Traditionally, institutions have used what Randi Korn describes as a “summative evaluation¹”. After an exhibition has been installed or a program has been ended, the institution will gather information about users experiences to gauge how well received their work was and how to best go forward. While an effect approach to gather data about how well the institution is doing in serving its public, there is little impact on the actual shaping of the event that is being evaluated. Korn suggestions that somewhat recently, new evaluation processes have become standard practice in the initial conception and also during the development of exhibitions; known as front-end evaluations and formative evaluations respectively. The user study of an institution has evolved from a simple “how am I doing?” to a complex, well researched effort to provide better access to information for the intended user group. While these studies have mainly been aimed at assessing brick and mortar institutions and how they serve their public, increasing attention is being given to the digital presence of institutions and how users are interacting with the information presented in this new environment. I looked at the Museums and Online Archive of California User Evaluation (MOAC II) and the Higher Education in the Digital Age Project (HEDAP) to see how libraries, archives and museums are coming together to provide a breadth of digital

¹ Korn, Randi. “Studying Your Visitor: Where to Begin”. History News. 49:2 (March/April 94) pg 1

content to users. While both come after a “build it and they will come” approach to their initial digital repositories, the findings of these user studies will help shape how to best present the material and allow for an organic, ever evolving relationship between the user study and the nature of the repository.

The Museum and Online Archive of California User Evaluation (MOAC II) was intended to follow up on work done during the first “iteration” of MOAC in 1997. 11 California museums began to work with the California Digital Library to integrate access to their various collections through the internet and other digital resources². This was to provide the public with unparalleled access to a wealth of resources while also serving as a test to develop best practices and assist other institutions in making the transition to digital access. Using the Online Archive of California (OAC) as the digital infrastructure, libraries, museums and archives across California collaborated to fill this repository with resources from their various collections. It was decided to use the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) guides or finding aides as the schema for organizing the material and metadata. Because material in each of the separate institutions was organized differently, the EAD was decided as the best way to communicate between the three different types of organizations as they each organized their material based on a finding aid of some sort. Great consideration was given to the building and implementation of the repository, but no real user data was collected during the first MOAC, thus necessitating MOAC II.

MOAC II aimed to see user response to the OAC and “...knowing whether the current structure and content of MOAC are the most effective for use by our intended

² Rinehart, Richard. “MOAC website”.
<<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/moac/classic/>>

audiences, and, even more importantly, perhaps, whether those audiences find the material we have selected for inclusion to be interesting and of use.³” MOAC II is a good example of a summative evaluation, in which the user survey is conducted after the content is already in place. Using a wide user group survey of K-12 teachers, university students, academics in the humanities and social sciences, museum professionals, librarians and archivists, the MOAC II hopes to find strategies on improving the usability of the resource while also encouraging its use. Though summative in many of its characteristics, the survey is actually a combination of both summative and formative evaluations as the results will help shape future iterations of the OAC. In effect, this user survey can be seen as a dialogue between the different institutions and their public to allow for progressive change in how people are receiving and processing the information delivered to them by the OAC repository.

In contrast to the MOAC II user survey, the Higher Education in the Digital Age Project (HEDAP) looked at both repositories and users to get a broad picture of what Digital Resources are out there and how they are being used. This user study was aimed to see how “...use and users can benefit the integration of resources into undergraduate teaching⁴”. By focusing on the user and keeping the definition for “resources” loose, the survey allowed for an in depth analysis of the current digital environment from the user’s perspective and to then come up with recommendations on how to best serve this particular set of users. The three explicit goals were to: scan the digital resource universe specific to humanities and social sciences and how the user fits in, survey a wide

³ We're Building It, Will They Use It? The MOAC II Evaluation Project. <
<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2004/papers/g-swetland/g-swetland.html>>

⁴ Harley, Diane. et al. “Use and Users of Digital Resources: Focus on Undergraduate Education in the Humanities and Social Sciences” April 5, 2006. P. 1-1

breadth of users to glean information on what and how they use material, and finally to bring these findings to site owners and user researchers to better facilitate the delivery of resources to their users⁵. This focus on the user first is interesting, as the survey allowed for the collection of vital data that will be of interest to a variety of content providers. In effect, this user study was conducted for the content provider without them asking for it.

The Higher Education in the Digital Age is similar with the MOAC II user survey in a notable way. While MOAC II analyzed how users interacted with the OAC repository, the Higher Education in the Digital Age Project was aimed at gleaning user information to help improve a large number of content resources and to open up a dialogue between the user and the resource. MOAC II is a very specific user study while HEDAP is the broader version. These summative/formative evaluations are aimed to understand how people are interacting with digital content. As both have addressed in their reports, and best described by the HEDAP, “[a] build it and they will come” approach to many university digitization initiatives has precluded systematic investigations of the demand for these resources⁶. The MOAC project was started in an attempt to help lead the charge into the “digital revolution” for other institutions with minor consideration given to actual use. It seems that most resources were built to serve an amorphous, vague group of users without much consideration given to how these people were actually interacting and using the material.

With these digital user surveys, new methodologies have emerged that allow for more nuanced user data. Traditionally, surveys were conducted as paper questionnaires, in person or telephone interviews and a lot of data mining to tease out the information.

⁵ Harley, Diane. et al. p. 2-4.

⁶ Harley, Diane. et al. p.1-1.

With the digital user survey, researchers can monitor how users are engaging with the content by tracking their actions while on the site. These transaction log analysis (TLA) allow for a non-intrusive method to collecting user data without the user even aware its happening. Much like observational studies, these TLAs give an accurate picture of what is resonating with users and what is not and can give clues to deficiencies in the design, content, etc for further iterations of the repositories.

Both of these user surveys show an increasing awareness to “external catalysts”. In the OCLC report on collaborations between libraries, museums and archives, they list external catalysts/users as a crucial part of collaboration. The user is not merely being served but engaging in a dialogue with the institution in how the information is presented and received. Now that institutions such as archives, libraries and museums are swinging open their digital gates, more thoughtful consideration is being given to not just presenting the material correctly, but how to structure it to best meet the needs of the intended audience. While traditional brick and mortar institutions actively survey their users in a variety of ways to gauge responses from the public, increasing attention is finally being made on how the digital presence of these institutions is reaching a far greater and diverse user group. The HEDAP is an attempt on opening the dialogue between users and resources, which will be an active, ever changing discussion as technology continues to progress and the ability to bring more content to users exponentially expands. Both of these surveys are nice broad overviews that will allow further exploration on more granular levels to see how the interaction between users and institutions can progress.