

Project title:

Sense-Making the information confluence:

The whys and hows of college and university user satisficing of information needs

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Abstract:

Massive amounts of research have studied electronic information use -- who the users are, what they use, and where they get access. Yet, LIS researchers and practitioners increasingly agree that research has failed to serve practice -- system design or service. The primary reason given is contradictions in research findings.

One explanation for the chaos is that research has not been making sense of user diversities because it has not given sufficient attention to user whys and hows. The second is that there are yawning gaps in how different research users -- practitioners, researchers, and theorists -- look at research. The challenge is that research will better inform practice if we: a) conduct research that links user whys and hows to specific moments of use of specific features of systems; and b) bring diversities of research user interpretations to bear.

To address these challenges, Ohio State University and OCLC have planned a \$1,004,844 project for which they are requesting \$480,543. The proposed two-year project will: (1) provide useful findings on the whys and hows of electronic information use and how system design features fit in; and (2) apply diverse research user interpretations to the inquiry. The aim is to focus not only on centralities in findings and interpretations but also on diversities and to develop boundary bridging concepts that enable more effective application and collaboration in both system design and research.

The research team has been developed to represent diversities: a) Brenda Dervin, communication theory; pioneer of user-oriented research in LIS; b) Lynn Silipigni Connaway, LIS educator, practitioner and researcher; and c) Lorraine Normore, cognitive psychologist and human-computer interaction researcher. The investigators also represent three research use perspectives (theory, research, and practice); and three user research approaches (survey interviews, focus groups, and structured observations).

The proposal is for a multi-phased study of electronic information user whys and hows. We propose: 1) Applying established procedures for dialogue to identify multiplicities of interpretations from theorists, researchers, and practitioners; and 2) Conducting a four-phase empirical study of users. In Phase I, we will review research literatures, charting and accounting for disagreements. In Phases II, III, and IV, we will conduct a user study with survey interviews, focus group interviews, and structured observations to dig deeper and deeper in turn into user whys and hows and determine linkages to specific system features. All research approaches will use: a) in-depth contextually anchored interviews and observations; b) quantitative and qualitative data analysis approaches; and c) established procedures for dialogue to make sense of contradictions and diversities arising from literature reviews, findings, and research user interpretations.

Our exemplar population is information users in college and university communities -- faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, and netLibrary subscribers from 44 central Ohio colleges and universities. Four samples of 100, stratified by institutional size, will be selected randomly. All respondents will be interviewed online and by phone in Phase II. In Phase III, 192 will participate in 24 focus group interview sessions; in Phase IV, 32 will be observed in task situations in natural settings. Units of analysis will include the person, and the instance of use. Advisory committees for obtaining diversities of views will consist of: university and public

library directors serving the 44 communities; and a group of 10 nationally-prominent user-oriented researchers from multiple fields and perspectives.

Project outcomes will include four formal reports and a series of nine conference papers and nine journal articles. We will report empirical findings and implications and provide a model for research that identifies unities and bridges diversities across communities of interest and practice.