

Let the People Speak: Developing an Iterative Processing Model Based on User Research

Jodi Berkowitz, North Carolina State University Libraries



Introduction

Between April 2013 and March 2014 the North Carolina State University Libraries Special Collections Research Center conducted a series of three user studies to assess the feasibility of conducting meaningful research using materials at varying levels of processing. In the first study, participants were asked to complete research tasks using a large, unprocessed collection for which only minimal description was available. In the second study, an initial finding aid for the same collection was presented. A more complete finding aid was provided for the third study. Content of each of the finding aids reflected the input of subjects from the previous studies. These studies were conducted as part of “Acting for Animals: Revealing the Records of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare Movements,” a two-year project funded by a CLIR Hidden Collections grant.

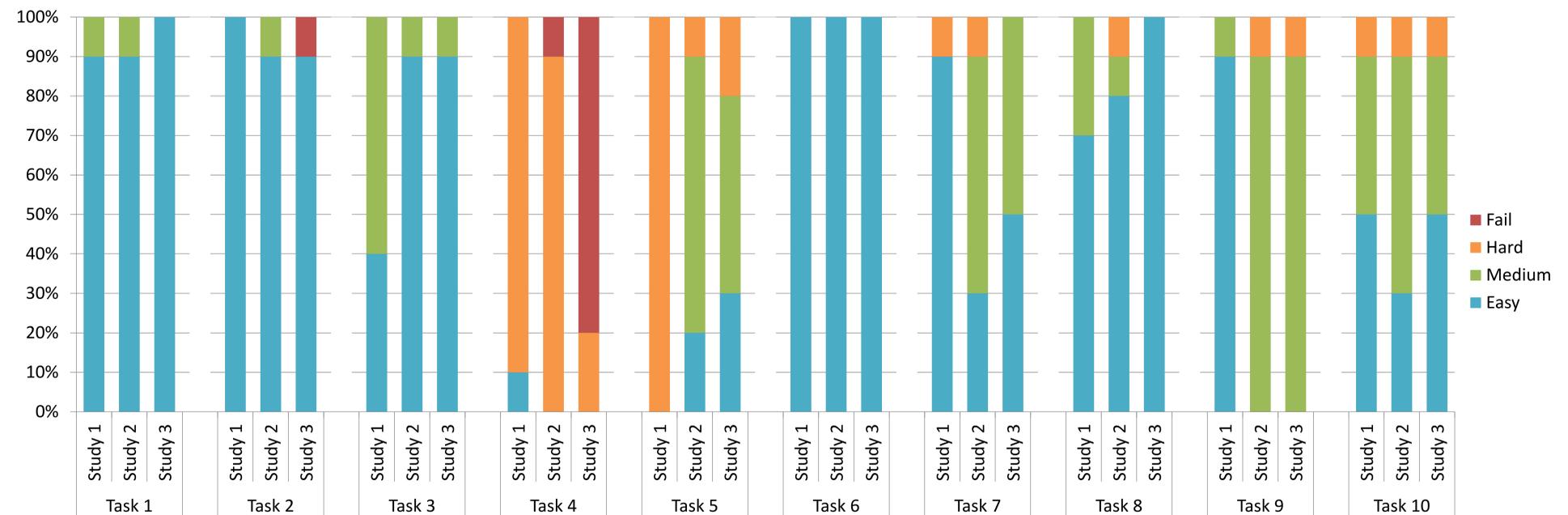
Method and Participants

Ten participants with previous experience conducting research with special collections materials were recruited for the first study. All were current graduate students at NCSU, and most were studying history or education. In the second study, 7 of the original subjects participated again, and 3 additional subjects were recruited, all studying veterinary medicine. For the third study, 9 of the subjects from study 2 were available, and an additional veterinary medicine student was recruited.

The studies consisted of short introductory questions, a series of research tasks to be completed using the presented descriptive tool, and follow-up questions. The tasks were presented as research scenarios where the subject had to determine whether the collection would be useful for their research. A different descriptive tool was presented for each group of studies but all other sections remained consistent throughout the series. Each session was facilitated by the Project Librarian and recorded using Morae Recorder software.

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Results



- As finding aid was refined, task performance improved for 4 tasks (40%), remained the same for 3 tasks (30%) and decreased for 3 tasks (30%)
 - In tasks 3, 5 performance improved as more description was available matching key words in the given research scenario.
 - Task 4 consistently perplexed subjects. In studies 1 and 2 subjects identified potential materials, with difficulty, that were not what the facilitator was seeking. In study 3, a key search phrase appeared verbatim in the finding aid: this phrase was used by 60% of participants who saw the phrase highlighted in a scope and content note, but still did not pause to read this note. Subjects then gave up and did not identify any materials for use in the scenario.
 - Tasks 7, 9 involved multiple search variables. These variables appeared together and in smaller number in the initial box list used in study 1 and appeared more frequently and more independently in the folder-level finding aids presented in studies 2 and 3.
 - Task 10 performance was largely dependent on the search term selected by the subject.

Participant Feedback

- 100% of subjects in study 3 stated that more description would not help them perform tasks more quickly/efficiently
 - “too much description would be overwhelming”
 - “could get lost with more than a few sentences in scope and content notes”
- 100% of subjects in study 3 who had participated in all studies (70%) commented on improvements in display and navigability compared to studies 1 and 2
 - series links popular: “I like being able to click to different sections without scrolling;” “[the series links] make the page easier to navigate; “if I can identify a series, it helps to limit my searching”
- On suggested improvements to the finding aid: “this organization is good; it’s impossible to anticipate everything everyone is going to search so this is pretty good as is”

Conclusions

- Researchers are satisfied with the amount of description made available, as long as some is provided. Subjects in study 1 were undaunted by the box list and confident in their work.
- Despite participants’ impressions in study 1, more archivist intervention is needed before making this or a similar collection open for research. Participants did not realize that the collection was unfolded and disorganized.
- Exclusive use of in-document search, even with the knowledge that description was minimal and not encompassing of the whole collection, shows “Find” function is an asset but also a limitation.
- Some improvements desired by subjects are design changes to be considered when refining delivery: an advanced search feature and more in-document links were highly requested.