‘WhoHas?’ – Executive Summary

WhoHas, the first Futurelib project to conducted, arose from user experience research that uncovered a significant amount of sub-lending activity among University of Cambridge students (predominantly undergraduates). Students were found to be organising the sharing of print resources through Facebook groups and beginning their book requests with the phrase: ‘Who has...?’ This project sought to explore if we could facilitate sub-lending and effectively legitimise what was regarded as something of a ‘black market’ activity.

Prototyping

A new ‘WhoHas’ prototype service was developed utilising Facebook Groups: a deliberate decision to adapt to the existing behaviours of our users, rather than trying to intervene with technologies hosted by libraries, or other platforms that they may be unfamiliar. In this way the service could be more effectively trialled and also provide valuable insights without being too costly.

Participants and Methodology

• 174 students participated in the study, including English Faculty undergraduates, Wolfson College Law Faculty students and Medical students.
• Diary studies were conducted in order to detail borrowing activity, information about availability of resources and actions taken when participants could not find resources they needed.
• Exit interviews were also held to further explore the behaviours students had recorded.

Results and Findings

• During the prototype trial only 1 successful transaction took place and 4 requests were made.
• 22 non-WhoHas sub-lending transactions took place during the course of the study, an average of 2 transactions per person, so sub-lending was taking place away from the prototype.
• Exit interviews with student participants revealed reasons for the lack of service use: Easter Term may not a busy sub-lending time; students prefer to share resources within their own social circles; in some groups reading patterns helped books to circulate unofficially. The fact that the service was library-mediated must of course have been another factor.
• Some key findings included: the fact that students prefer ebooks to ‘reference only’ copies and renew books to avoid the inconvenience of having to return them; that emotional barriers prevent the recalling of books and there is paradox in the way resource-seekers and resource-holders perceive each other; and there is marked reluctance among students to ask for help from librarians.

Recommendations

Despite the failure of the prototype, a variety of service recommendation and developments were suggested to improve user experience, some of which included:

• The need for a retooled recall process using more informal language and prompts
• The possibility of book drop-off points around the city for books to encourage faster return
• The need for greater visibility of ebooks
• Wider adoption across Cambridge of anonymised library help channels.


The Futurelib Programme is managed and funded by Cambridge University Library. Email: futurelib@lib.cam.ac.uk