'Tracker' project – Executive Summary

The Tracker project examined the ways in which library users approach and navigate physical library spaces and collections. This was achieved through prototyping signage and other navigational aids in four of Cambridge University's libraries, testing the usability of these through eyetracking, shadowing, observation and interviews with library users.

Methodology

- Task-based eyetracking sessions conducted with users of the libraries under study. This involved equipping participants with digital eyetracking glasses in order to see precisely where they looked for cues and assistance whilst navigating the physical library spaces. Participants were shadowed and closely observed while completing their tasks.
- Interviews with participants after the eyetracking sessions, allowing for further exploration of the processes they went through and the difficulties they encountered.
- Observations conducted within library spaces, exploring people's behaviour in, and use of, them.
- Prototyping low-fidelity design interventions based on the eyetracking research, iterating on and refining the prototype designs based on the results of continued testing with users.

Key Findings

- Individuals have expectations of how libraries will work and this affects how they approach tasks such as finding books and other resources.
- When unable to successfully navigate physical library spaces and collections people often blame themselves, rather than the systems in place.
- Library-specific terminology and signage causes confusion.
- There is a hierarchy present in the process of navigating a library and looking for resources.
- Local context is extremely important: users of different libraries approach the task of navigating physical library spaces and collections in different ways.

Design Suggestions

- Consistent terminology should be used at all stages of the navigational process. The same words and phrases should be present in the digital and physical environment, i.e. on the library catalogue, on maps, signs and labels and in any other instruction tools.
- User-friendly, intuitive terminology should be used in navigational tools and instruction wherever possible and traditional library terminology should not be used when it is not understood by users.
- Navigational instruction should be provided in stages and only at the point that it is needed.
- The physical environment should instruct so that in-person instruction is not essential.
- Signage and navigational tools should be based on the existing approaches and behaviours of the local user population.
- All signage and navigational tools should be tested in context.

Signage Designs

- The Tracker project report contains examples of signage designs for the four libraries in which the research was conducted, along with explanations for their individual elements.

The full Tracker project report can be found here: http://bit.ly/trackerproject