

Telling the First Year Experience: Visual Techniques to Assess First Year Students and Their Information Seeking Behaviours

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Abstract:

Who are first year students and how do they use the academic library? This presentation explores how to apply visual assessment techniques to understand more about first year students and their information seeking behaviors. The paper will address the challenges of first year students through three university libraries: two in Korea (Kyung Hee University and Sogang University) and one in the United States and utilize a case study at Fresno State in California to address these issues. The case study explores how these two techniques: photovoice and ethno-mapping can provide new understandings of first year students for any institution to apply in their user experience studies. Ultimately, these techniques will provide more stories and backgrounds of first year students that can lead to new library services and resources to support student success and retention.

Keywords: academic librarianship, library instruction, user experience, first year students and assessment

Introduction

Do you know who your first year students are? How, where, why, and when do they spend their time in the library? If not, why is that the case? Can you tell a complete story about a typical first year student in your institution? These questions are important to consider when thinking about library users, particularly those who are in vulnerable positions. First year students often experience a difficult transition to the academic culture. Their challenges are very unique and important to solve – answering the questions above may be able to create new library services and resources to support first year students successfully.

This paper addresses the nature of first year students in two universities in Korea and in California State University, Fresno (also known as Fresno State), a university in the United States. The paper offers two visual techniques to assess first year students to better understand how they use library services, resources and spaces for their research/information-seeking needs. The paper provides a case study on

how these two techniques were applied at Fresno State to create a fuller picture of the first year student and his/her experiences in using the library.

At Fresno State, librarians were curious about the experiences of first year students and their challenges in using the library. To find more about these students and their challenges in using the library, the first year student success librarian created a student library group made up of freshmen. Each student participated in a study that employed the photovoice technique which is an anthropological research method. It studies participants and their observations/perspectives through a series of photos that participants capture in their phones/cameras based on selected prompts.

In another activity called ethno-mapping, students had to draw the map of their library and discussed what they know and didn't know. These kinds of research methods can inform librarians what users see in the library and how they actually use the library and most importantly, gave a bigger picture of who these first year students are, and how and why do they use the library today. The outcome of this study resulted in a new orientation video that captured the experiences and "traditionally" missed opportunities of the first year student in the library. Ultimately, the data collected from these assessments can allow libraries to create better marketing strategies to promote their services to marginalized or underrepresented groups as well.

First Year Students at Fresno State in the United States

First year students often confront a new set of cultural and academic expectations when they enter college. It's a difficult period when they make the transition – learn new values, skills, language and norms that will enable them to become successful in the academic community. First year students at Fresno State have several unique challenges: more than 2/3 of the university's undergraduates are first in their families to attend college and only 43% of entering first-generation freshmen graduate within six years.

Fresno State is a public university located in Central Valley, California. It is part of the California State University system. There are 21,000 undergraduates and 5,000 first year students. It is a diverse campus with students from Hispanic, Hmong, Cambodian and Chinese heritages. First year students can generally be quiet in the library. Many of them often search for specific materials but do not know where to begin. They find out about the library through the lecturers or friends.

The library at Fresno State is an interesting space: it also provides tutoring services, some technology support and services for students with disabilities and more. So students may come to the library but may be seeking for these other services and resources that are not part of the library. Generally, first year students enjoy the library's study spaces based on a number of assessments.

Lecturers often request that students to go to the library to retrieve books, ask for help to use the databases or to speak to a librarian for support. All first year students have to take general education courses such as First Year Writing, First Year Communication Studies and University One (equivalent to a first year seminar on academic preparedness). These foundational courses often require librarians to create an information literacy workshop. Since there are slightly over 5,000 first year students, it is actually not scalable or sustainable to have librarians teach all first year information literacy workshops to this large group.

To support information literacy, librarians create digital learning objects and tutorials that are embedded in classes like First Year Writing for students to use. Some drop-in workshops are also scheduled but typically, students and faculty are encouraged to use these online modules since they can cover a lot of basics of first year research. What is challenging is that not all students are aware of library services and resources for them, even after they complete their first year.

One way to solve this issue is to organize a first year student library group where first year students can meet to share news, updates and resources about the library. This was organized recently and can provide librarians with a view of first year students and their experiences in using the library. However, the visual techniques: photovoice and ethno-mapping are some of the selected activities that can create a fuller picture of first year students and their information seeking behavior which will be discussed in the paper.

First Year Students in Two Korean Universities: Kyung Hee University and Sogang University

In Kyung Hee University, a private research university in Seoul with over 25,000 undergraduate students, the first year students are often self-sufficient. At the circulation desk, they ask very basic questions like how to borrow, how to search or how many books they can borrow, but once they figured it out they do not ask many follow-on questions, which is not surprising behavior at all.

For first year library instruction classes, most of them think it may be tedious because it is also mandatory. Teaching librarians have been integrating interactive elements such as using Kahoot in their library workshops. The library instruction program collaborates with the Writing Center in a program called “글쓰기 1(Writing 101)” and it is a mandatory class for all first year students. Each first year students will take a library instruction workshop at least once during their year. Instruction class is normally one hour and provides basic information on library resources, library services, and search tips using portal site (such as Google Scholar and Academic Naver). Students are asked to complete a Google survey at the end of every class, which provide in Korean, English and Chinese. One hour is insufficient to explain specific information about library services, so if the lecturer wants to do more advanced classes, they ask a teaching librarian for customized classes.

In addition, from our observation, students sometimes receive information about the library through the school’s unofficial social media channels such as the Facebook page, which are managed by students who are juniors or seniors.

In the first year experience, librarians often introduce students to the facilities in the library and how they can use them. Based on the librarian’s observation, students are very impressed at these services, resources and spaces (such as seminar room, Group DVD-viewing room, and computer labs, etc.) in the library. First year students have access to many different e-resources and e-books. The first year students often ask questions to the librarians about the school’s WIFI password or campus licensed software programs. Librarians have also found that many undergraduate students demand more resources related to gaining employment, so it was important to include the Career Development Center’s database which is specifically for writing a resume or looking for job information on the library’s homepage so student can access it more easily.

From the librarian’s perspective, librarians need to cooperate more with other departments at the campus, so students can get helpful information for learning and research all at once. In addition, librarians informed students about K-MOOC or KOCW (Korea Open Course Ware) which they can use to take other universities high-quality classes in Korea for free, and added links on the library homepage.

One important method of promoting the library to first year students is through a school orientation before the semester begins. The Office of Student Affairs organize these efforts and they create marketing resources such as fliers which can contain information about the school’s library, hospital or the Center for Teaching and Learning, etc. From the librarian’s observation, this resource may need to expand to other marketing activities to engage with first year students. These experiences in Kyung Hee University demonstrate how librarians can play an important roll to enhance the first year program.

In Sogang University, a private university in Seoul with slightly over 12,000 undergraduate students, first year Korean students behave similarly. They usually do not ask questions and they tend to be self-sufficient: they find out about the library’s facilities, services and resources by themselves.

The librarians provide a short library instruction workshop and a brochure, which contain basic information about the library, to all first year students at the beginning of the semester. In addition, the library creates a temporary guide desk for new students during the first week of the semester and students tend to ask questions about basic information like entering the library, how to find and to borrow the library materials. The library also provides library tours for new students during the first week of the semester. New students can apply to join and get information about the library facilities. The librarians also conduct the tour in English for the new exchange students every semester.

First year students can get more information about the library by using online tutorials through the computer or mobile phone. The library provides 15 short videos including 12 Korean videos and 3 English videos. It shows how to use the library facilities and resources including offline materials and online materials. Students also can take 'Information Retrieval Instruction', focused on searching information by using the library materials and other websites such as Google Scholar, RISS (Research Information Sharing Service site managed by Korea Education and Research Information Science), in the library lecture room.

At Sogang University, all first year students have to take a library instruction in a required class called "읽기와 쓰기 (Reading and Writing)." This class is typically one hour and scheduled ahead of time. It is also optional for lecturers to schedule the library workshop if they request it. Most professors request this workshop and librarians provide basic information on how to use the library's facilities and website. The librarians inform about services such as finding library materials, recommending places to study in the library, using library databases, online resources, and multimedia materials and how to access materials from other university libraries. These classes are important for first year students and librarians at Sogang University to discover new ways of using the library and inform the first year students about the library.

Some of the first year students find out about the library through their professors, typically in the humanities such as English literature. The professors encourage students to use the library for writing research papers since they have often requested library instruction for their classes. However, students majored in Economics or Business tend to use the library for studying.

From the observation, first year students in Sogang University learned about the library by themselves, sharing their information with their friends, library workshop and through library instruction. They used the library for different purposes throughout the day, evening and weekend. Some students came to the library to find specific books or materials instructed by their professors, whilst others came to the library to study in the nearest reading rooms and some students found books to read for leisure use.

First year students in both Korean universities share similar information seeking behaviors: they are often self-sufficient. However, we found that first year students often found difficulty in assessing how they actually use the library space. Library instruction workshops, orientations and tours may provide important information to students but there could also be other user experience assessments to understand what are important services to first year students or what kind of services to first year students often seek out in their libraries.

Applying Photovoice as a User-Assessment Technique for Library Services

This paper has shared some of the common library service challenges met by first year students, internationally. If librarians are interested in telling a story about their first year students, they can consider several creative methods to gather qualitative data about their students.

Photovoice, a term coined by Caroline Wang (1997) is a "process which people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique." The practice has been predominately applied in the fields of public health and anthropology. Photovoice has three main goals:

“1. Enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, 2. To promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs and 3. to reach policymakers” (Wang, 1997).

In library sciences, photovoice has emerged as an invaluable participatory research method to study and analyze how patrons understand how information/library services can be perceived (Given, 2011). In this case study, photovoice can be applied on the first year experience in the library context. In a series of focus groups at Fresno State, six first year students were asked to take pictures of the library when they used it. Using Google Slide as the anchor for photo repository, students took pictures based on certain prompts over a couple of weeks during the semester: Where in the library do you study the most? What has been the most challenging resource to use? Where do you study at night in the library?

Once these images were captured, the group met again to discuss their findings and explored how and why they took certain pictures. This kind of approach can be engaging for other students to hear and learn about through their peers. They ask questions, discuss why they had certain images based on what they experienced. Librarians can apply this technique to understand what students are doing in the library at certain periods of the semester. Do they actually know about services or resources like other students do?

In another task, the students shared their experiences through Snapchat, a popular mobile app that can share images but does not “save” these images in the app, so viewers will have only a few seconds to see the image/video from the sender. This kind of social media engagement can develop better relationships with students who use them and also to understand real-time assessment: where are students studying and what are they doing in the library? If they are not in the library, what is keeping them from visiting? These approaches reveal the “studying lives” and stories of first year students and their experiences using the library at Fresno State.

Librarians who often teach online workshops or classes can employ this technique to encourage students to visit their libraries, take pictures with their phones and share it in Google Slide so others can view the image in the next session in class and discuss these images in meaningful ways. Ultimately, photovoice is a purposeful technique to empower those voices that are marginalized or are weak, and can lead to shaping new policy. In this case, first year students were baffled by the outdated elevators in the library, this information was shared with administrators along with other reasons why the elevators needed serious upgrades. Eventually the elevators were updated. First year students also did not know that certain sofas could be shaped into a bed as others had discovered . They also did not know that computers were available in certain areas of the library. This kind of information was shared and discussed through the images captured by other students. The power of photovoice can drive new direction of community building through sharing information and resources.

Applying Ethno-mapping as a User-Assessment Technique for Library Services

For those who prefer to hands-on, formative assessment approach – they can consider ethno-mapping as a way to understand how students perceive space and resources through maps. Through ethno-mapping activity, you can have students draw a map of the library including services and resources.

To understand how students see their library through the maps can reveal a lot about their knowledge and gaps. Students who draw the library in complete detail may spend more time in the library than other students who do not have a complete picture of it. This activity was used in a library workshop for first year students. Students drew maps of the library using different markers. Some of the maps were thoroughly drawn; others were very incomplete and missing details. However, there are no “correct” or “incorrect” maps.

All these maps tell you that students may or may not spend time in the library. The ones that do not have complete details of the library can be prompted with a few questions: how often do you spend time

in the library? One first year student said he did not spend any time at the library because he was working in three jobs and did not have time to go to the library to study. Another student said she prefers to study at home. Others who drew the map in detail said that they visit the library every day.

These responses provide an understanding of how students spend their time in the library, if any. The formative assessment part can be integrated into a group discussion. Students share with each other what they have drawn and compare their maps. Students can learn from others responses and understand that there are key services or resources at the library that they had not discovered. This kind of discussion is similar to the photovoice technique; it empowers students to think critically about space and resources in the library and encourages community building through the process.

This technique can also be applied to library's website. What do students recall from the library site? If they do not recall anything, do they know that the library has a website at all? For those who do recall, what services do they use the most? They can draw the library's site and demonstrate how often they use the library site or if they know about the complete services or resources provided by the library. These experiences can reveal the stories of our users, how they search for and use information, and can create meaningful stories through this data.

Conclusion

To tell more about first year students, there needs to be more focus on these students and their information seeking behaviors. What are they doing in the library at certain hours of the day? How much do they know or do not know about the library services or resources? These are important questions that academic librarians and administrators may consider addressing for their library services. This paper provided a general overview of first year students from different perspectives; and it covered how to apply visual techniques such as photovoice and ethno-mapping to assess students, patrons or communities, which can be done in any context regardless of library or institution.

In the future, the research would go beyond one case study and explore the process and reception of these techniques in other university libraries such Sogang and Kyung Hee Universities. The qualitative data collected from these experiences may generate new discussions on how to support different student groups in a homogenous population or in non-U.S. academic library context. In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that these visual techniques could provide general overview of a sample group for those interested in user experience and assessment. Today, our library user groups are constantly evolving into sophisticated researchers throughout their academic journey, and librarians need to continue to think of innovative ways to assess their needs, tell their stories and market the library resources, services and spaces creatively.

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