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Seek and You Shall Find? An Observational Study of Music Students' Library Catalog Search Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This observational study examined the strategies that music students used to locate scores and media items in an academic library's online public access catalog (OPAC). During a usability test, investigators tracked students' search strategies and behaviors, and measured their success in identifying appropriate items. Students experienced briefer, less complicated, and more successful queries for media items than for music scores (the latter of which they struggled to find and properly identify). Class standing, library catalog experience, and prior library instruction had no significant effect on positive outcomes. Searches for music scores were highly sensitive to variations in query wording, and students frequently struggled to revise their searches.

Introduction

Librarians typically possess a keen interest in how their patrons find needed materials. This is particularly true in the case of music librarians, since so much of the needed content is now available for purchase or free download online. Further, performances and other recordings may be accessed via YouTube or from a variety of streaming services. Since the library is now just one possible source for obtaining such items, it is imperative that librarians understand the strategies, difficulties, and success rates for students seeking music-related items in their OPAC.

Locating academic materials is often more problematic for music students than those in other disciplines due to unique issues surrounding music formats, foreign languages, composition nicknames, and generic titles. One composition can yield a number of manifestations, including audio recordings (both streaming and CDs), scores, and video recordings (streaming and DVDs). The score of one composition could take many forms, including an authoritative scholarly edition, a small study score, a performance edition with individual parts, a facsimile of the original, or an arrangement for various instrumentations.

Given that a library's electronic catalog is the gateway to much of its physical and virtual content, a more comprehensive understanding of student success rates, search strategies, and obstacles might help professionals with both instruction and catalog design. Since familiarity and ease of use are important factors, the authors raised the following questions: (1) How successful are music students in locating specific items in the library's online catalog? (2) How comfortable are they

using the catalog? (3) Do success rates vary between music-specific formats (specifically media and scores)?, and (4) Does performance differ by major, class standing, previous OPAC experience, and/or whether students received OPAC instruction?

To explore students' behaviors while searching for music items, the authors conducted a usability test with six realistic search tasks that music students might encounter during their coursework or research. Three tasks required finding scores, while three others required finding physical media (CDs or DVDs). Prompts included instructions or clarifications that an instructor may include in an assignment. The task assignment sheet is included in [Appendix A](#).

Literature review

Actual usability studies addressing OPAC music searches are few, although some inquiries provide insights to user experiences, perceptions, and preferences. Wolfert's 1957 study, which surveyed University of Chicago patrons' methods of discovering music scores in the card catalog, found that the composers' entry was by far the most common access point for music scores (Wolfert, 1959). Drone's 1981 investigation into the use of the University of Illinois' sound and book/music card catalogs observed significant success rates through both catalogs, and with an 8.5% higher rate for sound recordings (Drone, 1984). Through the implementation of a student focus group and faculty interviews, Hume investigated how music users conducted OPAC searches to find media items, concluding that participants primarily used keyword searches and were critical of Library of Congress subject

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headings (Hume, 1995). Itoh's examination of OPAC transaction logs from a Music College in Japan revealed that more than half of the initial music searches involved more than one access point (Itoh, 2000). King's, 2005 literature review summarizes the results of the aforementioned studies (along with others) on music catalog searching, and as well as their recommendations to improve discoverability (King, 2005).

Discovery tools have become very common in American university libraries because they offer "one-stop" searches that include local catalog content, subscribed e-content, and article-level records. Several articles discussed considerations for librarians selecting and implementing a discovery tool with music patrons in mind (Belford, 2014; Newcomer, 2011). Music librarians have also written about the locating music items in discovery tools, with contradictory perspectives. Breckbill suggested that discovery tools are not ideal for music, and that the traditional online catalog, complete with authority records and uniformed titles, are better suited for serious music researchers (Breckbill, 2012). In contrast, Majors and Mantz submitted that discovery tools are well suited for music (Majors & Mantz, 2011). Snyder also found some advantages with discovery tools that are not available to music searches in the traditional OPAC (Snyder, 2010).

When examining the attitudes and behaviors of music students, Clark and Johnstone (in press) found that undergraduates at Kent State University "indicated a high level of comfort with, and frequent use of, the KentLINK local library catalog and the consortial Ohio catalog (OhioLINK)" (Clark & Johnstone, 13). Dougan reported that in 2011, 96% of survey respondents looking for scores and/or sound recordings used the library's electronic catalog (Dougan, 2012). Knop also found that the library's catalog was the most frequently used means of finding music-related materials (Knop, 2015).

However, music students do not always search exclusively among library resources. Dougan observed that they used both library and non-library resources when selecting scores and recordings (Dougan, 2015). Further, these students have reported difficulties in locating items in the online library catalog. They "agreed that both the discovery layer and the catalog are not effective for music-related searching, for any format," and "indicated difficulties searching the catalog for scores, audio, and video" (Mayer, 2015, p. 416). Mayer goes on to say that "one student has such a difficult time finding music scores that she resorts to buying scores by default" (Mayer, 2015, p. 415).

Background and methodology

The Kent State School of Music is served by the Performing Arts Library. Located in the same building as the School of Music, the library has 2.5 FTE professional librarians, and is open 62 h weekly during the fall and spring semesters. The School of Music has approximately 185 undergraduate students and 65 graduate students (Masters and Doctoral) in residence.

The local university OPAC is an Innovative Interface, Inc. product, and the university's discovery layer, Discovery@KentState, is the Ebsco discovery product. While featured prominently on the Main Library's webpage, the Performing Arts Library site does not directly link to the discovery tool. The library includes links to its local and consortial catalogs on the homepage, as librarians believe it provides a better search tool for local scores, books, and media items. Because information literacy is not thoroughly integrated into the undergraduate music curriculum, librarians primarily rely on bibliographic one-shots and individual consultations to teach information literacy skills to undergraduates. Graduate students are required to take a research course that includes many information literacy concepts.

Kent State University's Institutional Review Board approved this study. The authors incentivized participation with \$15 of Flashcash, the campus currency. The primary investigator recruited fifteen subjects from the School of Music: five underclass (freshman/sophomore), five upperclass (junior/senior), and five graduate students.

The primary investigator scheduled a time for each student to complete the usability test. Sessions took place in Kent State's School of Library and Information Science Usability Lab. Tobii Studio 3.2 software recorded all of the students' web activities, along with eye-tracking, video, and audio recordings of their facial expressions and comments. At the beginning of each session, the web interface began in the OPAC, which investigators asked students to stay in the OPAC and not venture out onto the web. The sessions were open-ended. Students recorded their final responses on paper task sheets.

After finishing the search tasks, students completed a questionnaire about the usability of the OPAC (see Appendix B). John Brooke's System Usability Scale (SUS) measured this (Brooke, 1996). They also answered demographic questions about their age, gender, major, frequency of OPAC use, and whether or not they had received formal OPAC training from librarians.

After data collection, the researchers reviewed the video and rated observations on four key usability metrics: whether the student completed the task correctly; the total amount of time spent on each task; the number of queries used to complete the task; and the number of "steps" taken to complete the task.

- To determine completion time, the authors recorded the time-stamps corresponding to the start and end of an attempt at a particular task. Each commenced when the student first acted to search for an item and ended when they wrote down their final answer or switched to a different one. Therefore, the completion time was the cumulative amount of time spent on a particular task, but did not include time spent reading the prompts or writing the call numbers.
- The authors counted a query whenever the user clicked the "submit query" button. This included several instances of students re-submitting a query without modification. If the individual began to alter a query but abandoned those changes in favor of another action (such as clicking on a navigation element), it was not counted.
- Researchers considered a "step" as any user action that submitted an interaction to the system and required the user to make a decision about how to advance their progress. One-step actions included 1) specifying a query (regardless of how many options it used) and then submitting it, 2) clicking the back button, and 3) clicking on any navigation element. The absolute minimum number of steps required to complete a task was one step; this occurred when a user submitted a query that took them directly to an item record page that they selected as their answer.

Given their interest in students' search behaviors, the authors monitored the use of selected "advanced search" features and coded these as being "present" or "absent" if the student used one at least once during a search task:

- "Advanced interface": Coded as "present" if the user submitted at least one query via the advanced search interface (see Fig. 1), regardless of how they got to that screen.
- Boolean: Coded "Yes" if the user submitted at least one query that used an AND, OR, or NOT operator.
- "Title, author, or subject search": Coded "Yes" if the user submitted at least one query with title searching, author searching, subject searching, or "note" field searching. Students could either use the field dropdowns on the advanced search screen (see Fig. 1), or could navigate to the "Author", "Title", or "Subject" search tabs. Note that this technique did not count query language that used the author's name or words from the title of the selection.
- Format limiter: Coded "Yes" if the student submitted at least one query using one or more of the three format limiters in the OPAC: Material Type, Audio, or Video.

After reaching consensus about the coding, the authors analyzed their observations using R version 3.3.3 (R Core Team, 2017).

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