Assessing graduate student use and skill with the Summon discovery service

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Research Question

How effectively do graduate students use Summon? At Virginia Tech Summon is taught extensively in First Year Experience courses, but not for graduate research. Graduate students are expected to have strong library research skills, but is this an assumption?

Methodology

Usability Test: 5 search tasks to measure skill

1. Find any full-text, online, peer reviewed article about the emotional effects of obesity on adolescents that was published between 2009 and 2012. Save the citation for the article in APA style and email it to tgilmore@vt.edu
2. Find the following book: The Cairo consensus: demographic surveys, women’s empowerment, and regime change, by Saul E. Hafon.
5. Scenario: You are writing an exhaustive literature review for a research paper on “current trends on animal assisted therapy”
   - Use keywords to retrieve articles
   - Modify search to increase relevance
   - Ensure only scholarly materials are returned
   - Limit results to less than 300

Implementation

QuickTime Player was used as the screen capture software. All participants began the test from the same Summon starting page, and timed recordings of each user’s screen movements were captured. Participation took no more than 20 minutes from start to finish and all were required to sign a consent form prior to beginning the test in accordance with the Virginia Tech IRB protocol. Undergraduates and faculty were tested to compare the skill levels between the 3 groups.

Results

Graduate students only used advanced search 8% of the time. The expectation was that these students would use a more targeted and skilled approach to searching.

Graduate students used both natural language and Boolean at a fairly equal rate. Use of Boolean demonstrates skill in use of subject terms.

83% of graduate students were able to find scholarly peer-reviewed articles, this is a primary focus for graduate research.

83% of graduate students were able to find full-text articles. The ability to find full-text articles is a major feature of Summon. However only 42% of graduate students were able to do so.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The usability test sought to evaluate graduate students research skills with the Summon tool as well as their use of enhanced features such as:

- the appropriate use of Summon facets
- the ability to save resources
- the ability to use citation formatting
- the ability to share citations via email
- The ability find eBooks and limit to online only

Each task was timed and deemed successful if the objective was met regardless of the method used to achieve the result.

Overall the study indicates that graduate students used the Summon tool more effectively than faculty or undergraduate students. However undergraduates completed tasks faster than any other group. An area for future research would be to study whether the effective use of Summon correlates to the frequency and type of library instruction that graduate students receive.

For future assessment, it is recommended that all participants are asked about prior IL courses before taking the the usability test to better assess if skill level is attributed to training.

Literature Consulted


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