

ICS 132: Organizational Information Systems

Winter 2004

Project

ICS 132 is about information systems in organizations. One of the objectives of the course is to have each student learn and apply the rudiments of “field work” skills that will make it possible to discover what other people experience as a user of an organizational information system. To that end, the first half of the class has focused on conceptual frameworks for understanding the relationship between organizations, information, technology, people and practices. The second half of the class will start to put some of this into practice through project work.

UCI is an organization with three missions – teaching, research and public service. A key resource for UCI faculty, staff and students is the UCI Library. As you can imagine, the Library has many routine administrative problems to cope with. Some of these are computerized; some are not. In addition, the Library has to provide a service to many people, including students, faculty, staff, visitors and other users, each of whom have different perspectives, different needs, and different ways of going about meeting them. There are computerized systems available to help the Library provide its services.

The first part of this project is to experience the Library’s information systems that help Library users find what they need. These systems, called On-Line Public Access Catalogs (or “OPACs” in library-speak) are available through terminals and networked computers in the library. They are also accessible via the campus networks, and via dial-in communications (as well as increasingly via the Web).

The second part of the project is to construct an interview guide – a set of questions – and use it to get others’ experiences using the OPACS in the Library.

Mission 1: User Experience with UCI’s OPAC Systems

You are now a “user” of the Library. You need things it has, or that it can get for you. You will need to use the OPACS for this purpose. Complete the following tasks:

1. Go to either the Main Library or the Science Library.
2. Take notes on all the ways in which you can find pointers to what you are looking for as a user of the library. Try to consider this information from the perspective of the different potential user groups (including the library staff themselves).
3. Note any and all computer-based information systems available to help you. What are they called? What do they do? How do you find out about them?
4. Find the OPAC terminals or computers. Why are they located where they are?
5. Explore what you can do to get what you might need as a Library user.
6. Describe in your notes, in detail, your experience using the OPAC capabilities. What features of the capabilities did you like? What features of the capabilities did you dislike?
7. What was difficult for you as a user, and what made it difficult?
8. Note any and all changes you think should be made to the system or systems.

Save the notes that you take at this stage. You will need them later.

NOTE: You might already know (or think you know) a lot about using the OPACS. You might think that you can forget about these instructions and simply write up what you already know. You can't. There's a big difference between walking in somewhere as an unreflective user, and walking in with an "ethnographic eye." Please execute the instructions as they are written here, even if you think you already know the answers. Walk through the process, and observe the detail of it; it's the details that matter.

Mission 2: The Experience of Other Users

Okay, so you have some idea of your experience as a user. The second two parts of the project are concerned with getting a sense of other peoples' experiences.

Hang around for a while. What are other people doing with the OPAC terminals? Are the terminals busy or not? Do people use them for short bursts or long periods? Why? How is the use of the OPACs integrated into their other activities? Of course, not all OPAC uses happens at the library, and most library tasks are connected to other activities (research, classes, or whatever). How does people's behavior suggest that their activities are connected to other things going on outside the library?

Don't ask people anyway, at this point; just observe, and *keep notes*.

Mission 3: Getting Other Users' Experiences with UCI's OPAC Systems

In Mission 1 & 2, the job was to experience these systems as a user who has little or no power to change them. You get them as they come. The point of the first two exercises was to defamiliarize you with them a little, and help you stand back and ask some questions about the systems, their roles, and function, how they fit into broader patterns of information use, as well as to see a broader picture of what it might be like to be a different users. After you sort that out, and building on your ideas, Mission 3 requires you to interview people who have used the same system to see what their reactions to the system are.

Imagine that you are a consultant, hired by the library to determine the effectiveness of their online systems. Being a student in 132, you know that it's not sufficiently simply to accept the organization's view of what's going on, but rather, to look at the detail of what the users do in order to understand their experience of the system.

Draw up an interview guide which identifies the information you feel is important about the use of the OPACs. Draw on your experiences and observations in the two earlier sections of the project. Your interview guide should be about ten (major) questions long, although you should also include prompts and follow-up questions that will help you conduct the interview. (Good interview guides often come from generating a lot more questions than that, and then boiling them down.) Remember, you need both broad background information and more specific information about the detail of their use. Remember too that you're not simply after information about how much they use the system, but also about their experience of using it – how it fits into the larger pattern of their activities. Bear in mind that different sorts of people will have quite different experiences of using the system.

Find *four* people to interview. They can be anyone at all *except another student taking 132*. Using your guide to help you, interview these people and take detailed notes on their experiences. Follow up with probing questions as necessary. Conduct the interviews one at a time, and take enough time between them to write up your notes and think about the issues that arise. Get everything you can from your informants about their experience using these OPAC capabilities.

Again, save these notes. You will need them later.

What kinds of questions should you ask? It depends on what you want to know, and what you think is important. Mission 1 should have sensitized you to a set of issues around the use of the system – you might have been particularly concerned about user interface issues, for example, or questions of access to information, or how information flows between different systems, or what sorts of knowledge you need in order to make use of the system. You should use your experiences from the first part of the exercise to determine what sorts of questions to ask. However, be careful not to impose your own view of the issues on your informants. They may not have encountered the same problems and opportunities that you did, but might have completely different issues of your own. Your goal is to find out *their* experience of the system. Follow up on topics they introduce.

How long is an interview? Again, it depends. Remember that the goal of the interview is to get different kind of information than you get from a survey. So, if you're just firing simple questions at someone ("how often do you go to the library?"), and just writing down their answers ("once a week"), you're not really getting the best out of the interview. You want to learn something from your interviews; so ask open-ended questions, and probe. The goal is not to get it over with!

Report

Having now explored the use of OPACs from a number of perspectives – your own as well as those of your informants – it's time to put together a report on the use of the OPACs.

Your report should be in two parts. The first part is the "body" of the report. In your capacity as a consultant to the University Library service, you should describe your findings. What things do the OPACs do well, and what things do they do poorly? What kinds of problems do people encounter, and what kinds of tasks can they achieve with the system? What sort of changes do you recommend, and why? Draw on all three missions (although the *primary* goal of the first two missions is to help you shape up an interview guide for section 3.)

The second part is an appendix of related material. In the appendix to the report, include all the materials you gathered from both parts of the project. You should include your initial rough notes, your write-up of your experiences and of each interview, and your interview guide.

How long should the report be? It can be as long or as short as you like; it's quality, not quantity that matters. A short report that's both pithy and observant will do well; and I'd rather have five pages of analysis than ten pages of endless and unnecessary detail. However, as a rule of thumb, reports shorter than fifteen double-spaced pages often don't have the space to develop an idea strongly, and if you write seventy pages, you should probably stop.

Remember, the class is about organizational information systems, not about user interface design. So your report should not be just a list of user interface problems on the web sites. Use the concepts that have been presented in class to analyze your materials and find the relevant organizational issues.

PROJECT DUE DATE: THURSDAY, MARCH 18, 2004.