

7 *habits of a highly effective UX researcher*

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16 June 26



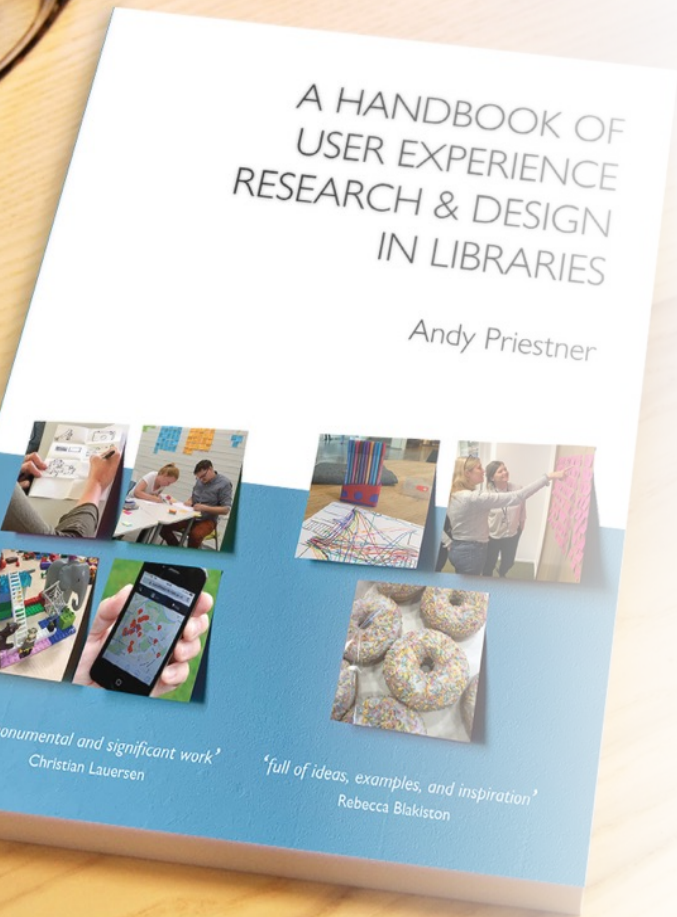
About me

I am now a full-time consultant and trainer in User Experience, but for around 20 years I was a librarian in both public and academic libraries.

What is User Experience (UX) work?

My definition: *'Actively researching the needs and behaviours of users and responding to this data by designing new physical or digital services and spaces.'*

For me being introduced to UX work was almost like a **religious experience**. Following these methods I immediately made the library I was running far **more relevant and valuable to its users** and I was keen to share the techniques more widely...



After seeking to convert other library staff at Cambridge University to the **wonders of UX** I left my very comfortable job as Cambridge's head business librarian behind to follow a risky road as a freelancer. I have since trained and consulted in UX methods in libraries all over the world.

My handbook on **UX Research & Design** in Libraries was published in 2021. In many ways, like this presentation, it seeks to **distill the habits** needed to successfully apply UX to libraries.



Whether you have tried out UX methods before or they are new to you, in this talk I hope to describe the **mindset, activities and skills** you need in order to conduct **effective User Experience work in libraries.**

As I have been lucky enough to focus almost solely on UX work for 10 years I'm confident that these habits really do work.

As we take this 30-minute journey together I would like you to consider **which habit is the most important...**

1

~ *Research openly* ~

1

~ Research openly ~

>> Who here is **confident** that they know what **problems** their users experience in their library?

I used to think so too. But when I actually started researching more directly with users, employing UX methods like interviews and observation, I discovered that my **assumptions were often wrong**.

Now, when I conduct UX research, I always remind myself that my mindset needs to start as **openly** as possible.

And that I must **avoid any preconceptions** that I or others may have about the problems I might discover, or how I might solve them.



1

~ Research openly ~

However, sometimes I am brought in to libraries to solve what library staff consider (subconsciously or not) to be ‘the problem’ and to enact their solutions.

I say ‘If its there in the data then I will respond to it.’

Unfortunately, staff assumptions about problems and solutions are often regarded as accepted facts.

But usually, UX research reveals that they are exaggerations, false, far too simplistic, or much less important than other issues. The reality is usually fascinatingly different.





1

~ Pursue research rather than validation ~

However, UX research with students revealed:

- loud noise was only upsetting a **minority** of students
- there were actually plenty of **quiet spaces** to study
- Noise **banning/removing** staircases/**sealing up** spaces was not the solution

The actual problems were complex and different:

- Not enough **group study rooms**
- Poor **zoning** and **wayfinding**
- Poor **location** of quiet and loud study spaces
- Study **furniture** failing to signal appropriate behaviour



1

~ Research openly ~

Recently I asked one of my greatest Swedish friends and collaborators, Daniel Forsman, what was the most important thing he had learned about UX work

His reply was: 'UX keeps me humble'

He went on to explain what he meant by that:
'It is so easy to speculate and assume when you have experience, but every time you do UX work you discover something you didn't know or which changes your perspective.'



1

~ Research openly ~

I agree with Daniel completely. This is always my experience too. And this is why if you are ever conducting user research, you should do so **openly**.

Don't start from what you think you know or what others tell you.

The reality of user experience - their needs and behaviours - will always be more **different, complex and nuanced** than you think.



1

~ Research openly ~

A few years ago, I wrote a biography of an acting teacher from a UK acting school: **Rudi Shelly**.

He is best known as the teacher who acclaimed actor **Daniel Day-Lewis** cited as his biggest influence and inspiration.

Shelly would end each acting lesson by advising Day-Lewis and his fellow students not to just take his word for it, but to “**Go and find out!**”

Anyone conducting UX work should follow this motto too.
Never assume. Go and find out.



2

*~ Connect with users
and elevate their voices ~*

2

~ *Connect with users and
elevate their voices* ~

>> Who here enjoys talking with and listening to their users?

There is nothing more important in UX work than **authentic and direct connection** with your users.

Getting into the habit of curiously just **sitting** with your users, **listening** to them, and **transcribing** what they say.

Clients regularly expect me to ask for **pre-arranged workshops with users** to be set-up before I arrive...

Instead, I will just go out into libraries and **spend time with users *ad hoc*** as it's far more effective and productive.



When researching in Ireland recently this simple approach led me to meet:



Laidback second year student **Declan** studying mechanical engineering. He was repeating several modules and hoping to complete them successfully this time, while holding down a full-time job. He was easily distracted and wanted more private study spaces.



Nigerian-born **Amara**. An endlessly optimistic and hard-working mature student and mother of two children, in her first year, studying social care. She explained to me how she learned best by discussing topics with her friends immediately after class in the library and as a result needed access to more group study rooms.



Nour from Gaza, studying Cyber Security. Top of his class before war interrupted his studies and his university was destroyed, who felt fortunate to be in Ireland with his family. Nour worked too hard and needed the library to provide wellbeing spaces so he could take breaks.

The above names and courses have been changed to protect anonymity but their stories are real.

2

~ Connect with users and
elevate their voices ~

When connecting with users in this way I record **exact quotes** as I know that they will be more **compelling** to decision-makers than my own summary of what was said.

Although I mostly work *ad hoc* it is worth mentioning that you absolutely do need to ensure that you elevate **minoritised voices** and **under-recognised groups** as you research.

The more **inclusive** your research approach, the more **valuable and applicable** your findings will be.

"they don't like
us to sit + work
in groups here
- Sometimes it
feels like
a crime!"

"if the library had
vending machines I
wouldn't need to
disrupt my study
time by leaving
the library to
get food"

2

~ Connect with users and
elevate their voices ~

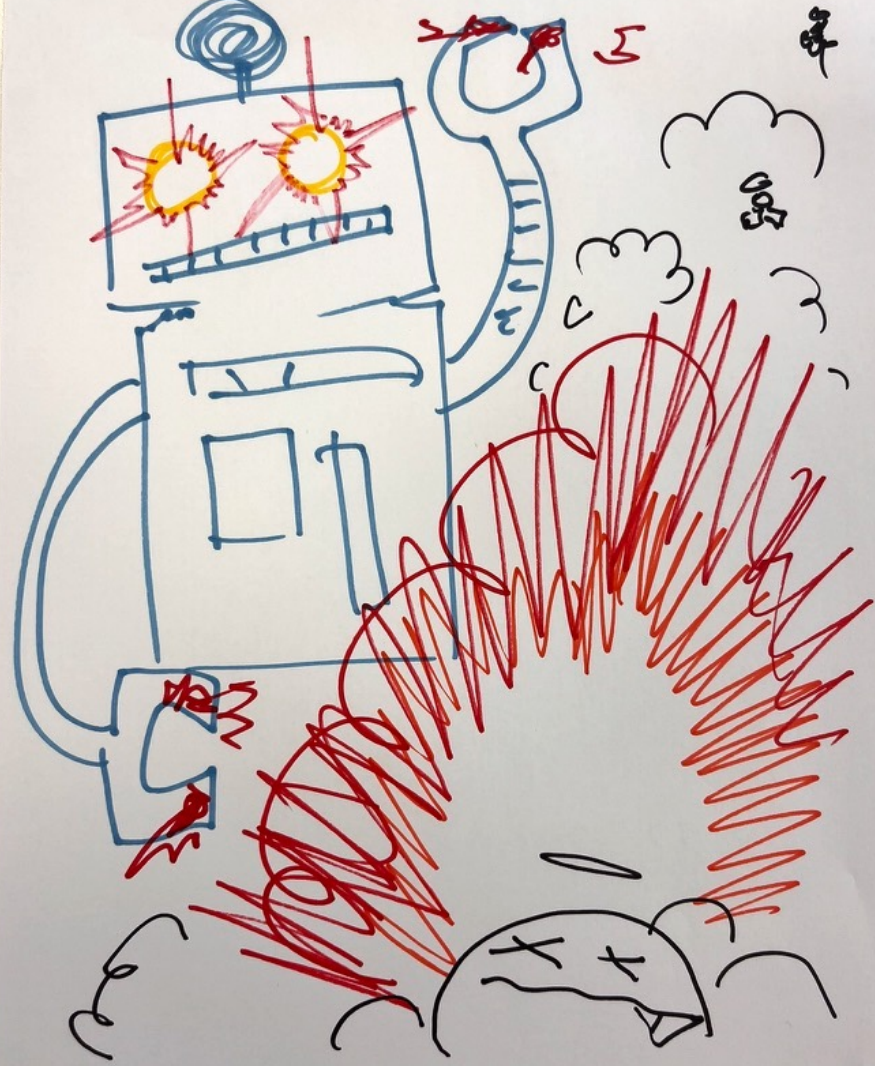
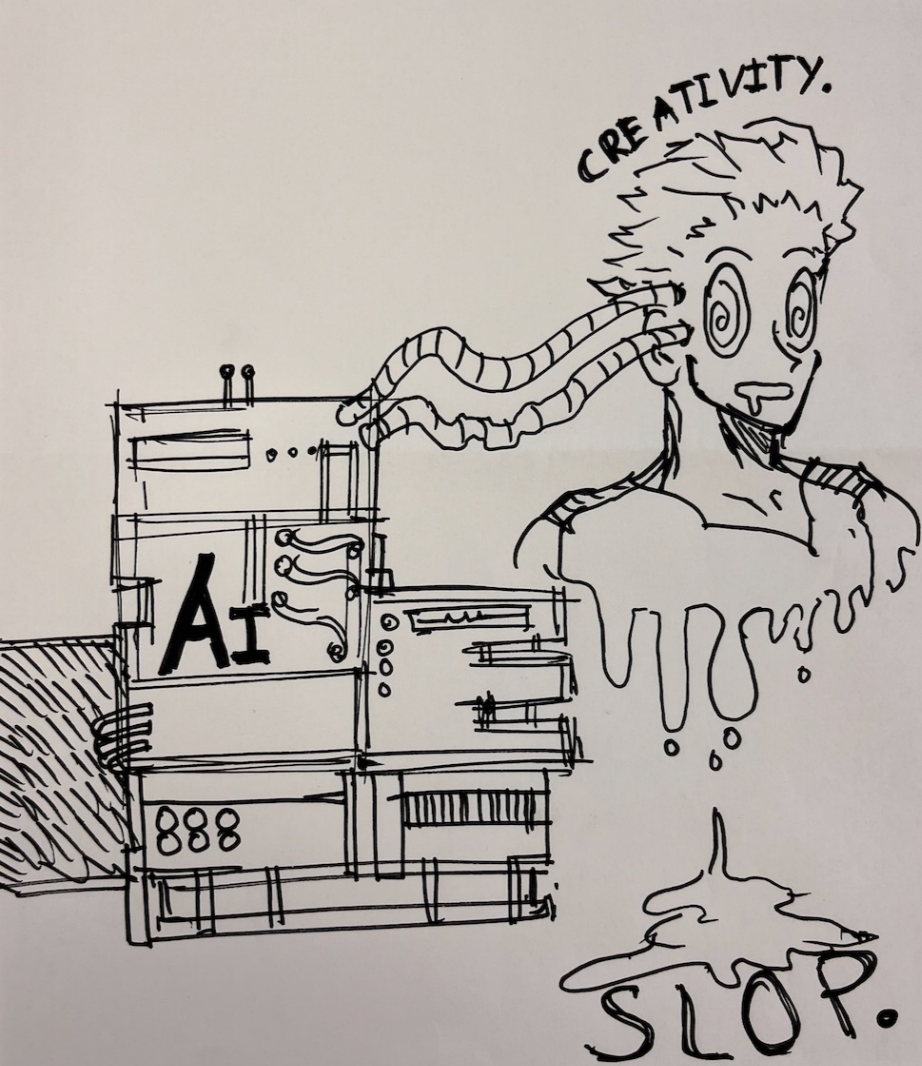
As well as recording the user voice via interviews I also employ techniques which produce more **creative research artefacts**...

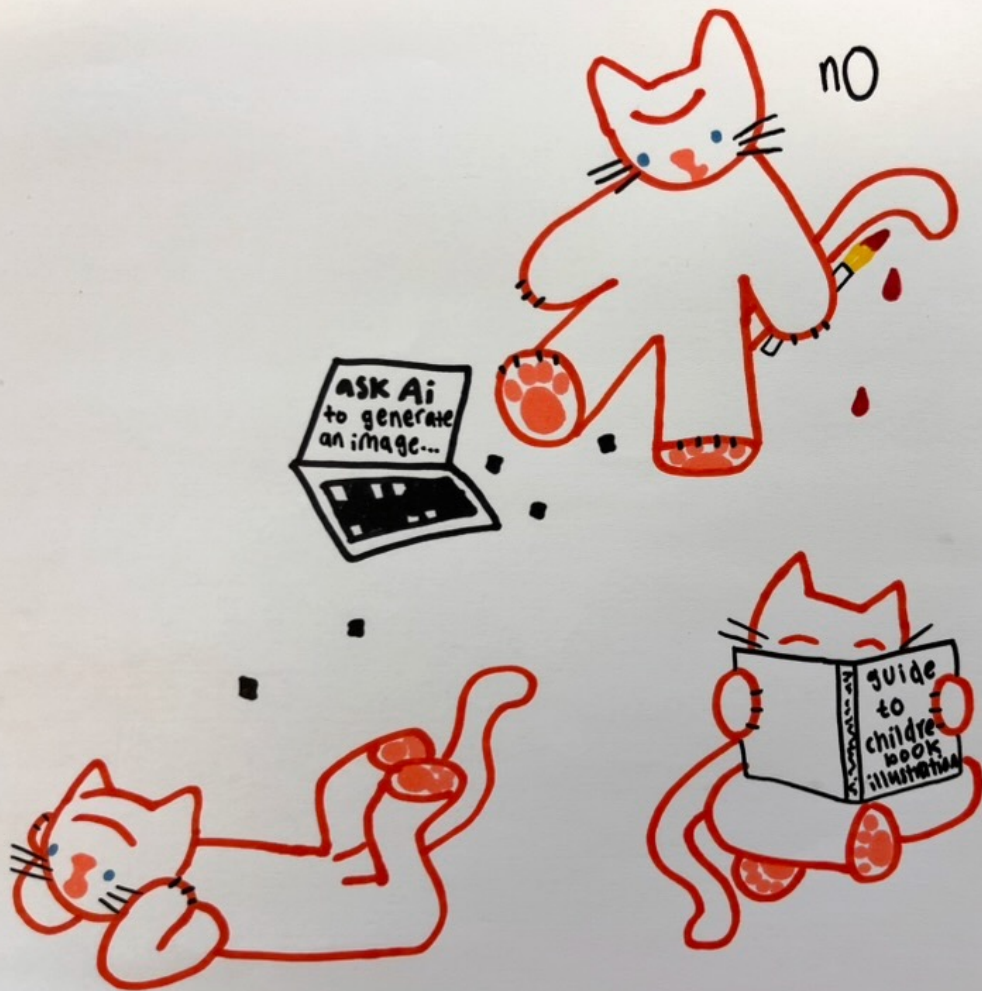
Asking users to either: write **break-up letters** to the library as if they were a boyfriend or girlfriend they are breaking up with; having them **take photographs** of things they like or dislike in the library; or simply getting them to **draw their experiences**.

In London recently I used this method at a University art school to find out how students felt about Gen AI...

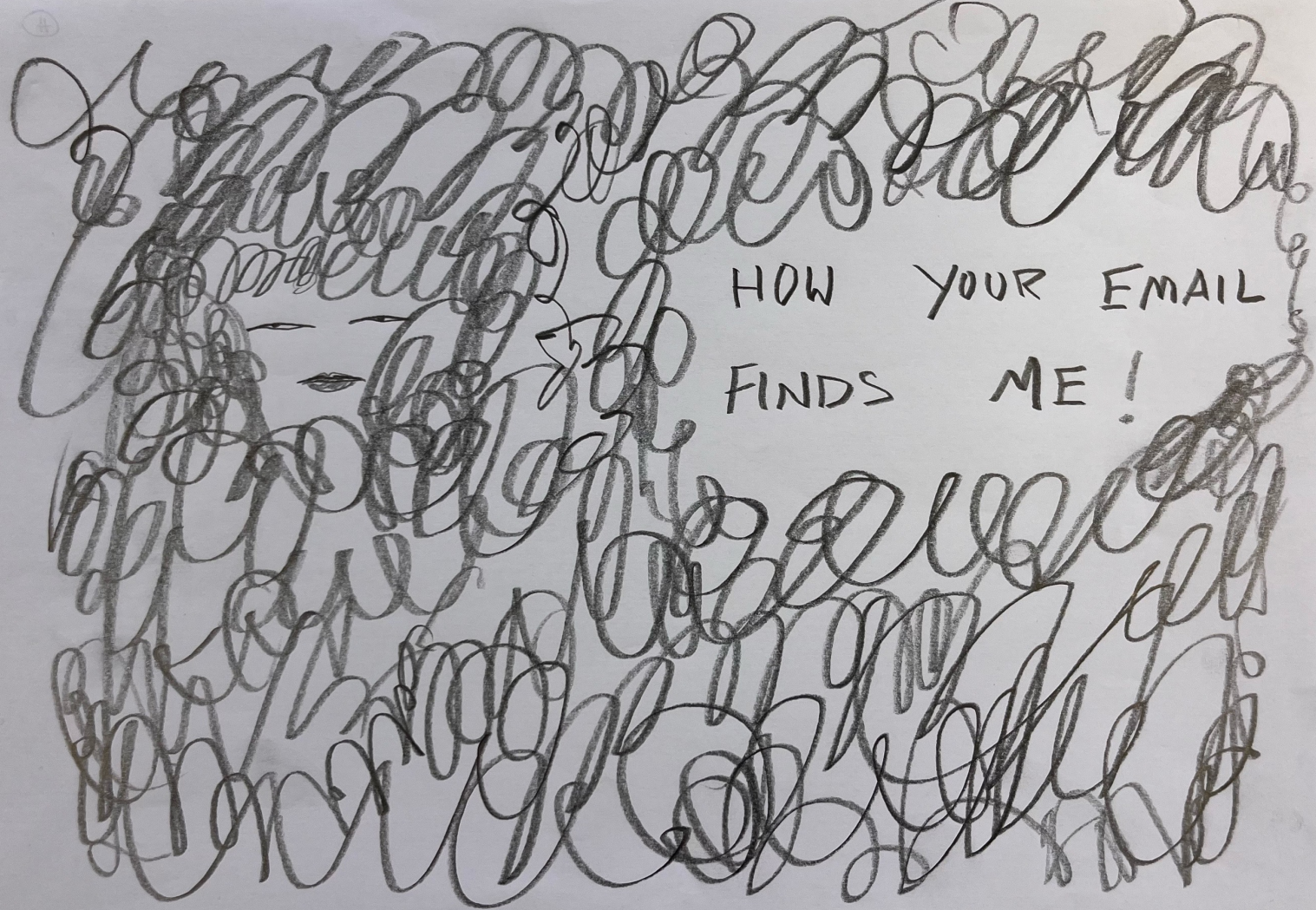








Emails from
the Library...



3

*~ Recognise the
power of observation ~*

3

~ Recognise the power of observation ~

>> Who here loves people watching?

Despite what I've said about the value of just going out into the library and talking and listening to users...

...it's important to remember that you can **learn just as much** by installing yourself in a library space, and **sitting back and watching**.

You also get to play with lots of coloured pens.
What's not to love?





3

~ Recognise the power of observation ~

Since then, I always look out for all the following:

- Annoyances and irritations
- Most and least travelled routes
- Looping
- Unmet needs
- Unused spaces and equipment

On that latter point I urge that we all stop wasting money on the most unused digital equipment in libraries today: **Digital screens and digital wayfinding** (people neither look at or interact with them)



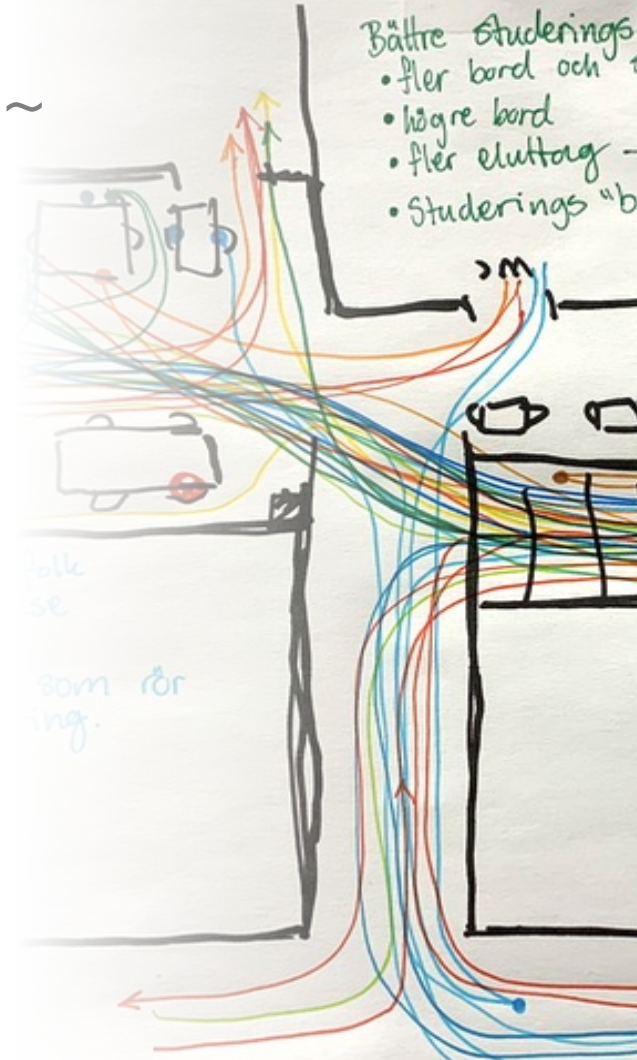
3

~ Recognise the power of observation ~

When observing you will see things that people would **never tell you** about and also which you think would **never happen**.

It is important to remember that library users are not always completely reliable when they tell you how they use the library...

...only by also **watching and mapping the routes they take and the furniture they use** will you get the full picture.



4

*~ Make your data
tangible and immerse
yourself in it ~*

4

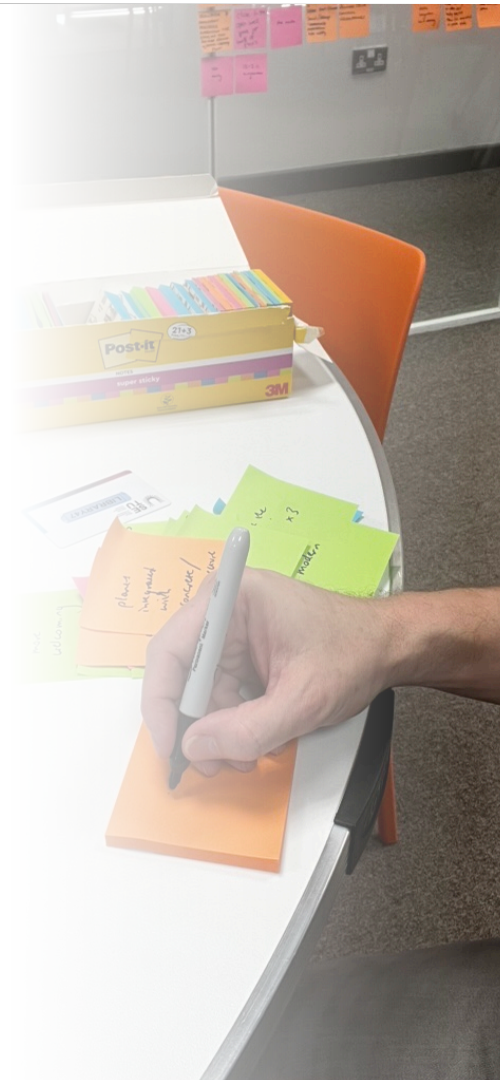
~ *Make your data tangible
and immerse yourself in it* ~

>> Who here likes Post-It notes?

I LOVE a Post-It note. But I didn't always...

The designers who first taught me about UX were always reaching for Post-Its and I would sigh every time, until I realised how much more **useful** they were than my scrappy handwritten notes!

What changed was my sudden appreciation that on Post-Its user data could be **sorted** and was more **tangible, accessible** and **persuasive**.





- Colourful and engaging
- Themes and concentrations
- Elevates user voices
- Transparent process

~ Make your data tangible
and immerse yourself in it ~

People from the outside looking in often describe my process as just a wall of Post-Its, but I see it as an accessible wall of **user voices, behaviours and journeys**, which represents **concrete evidence** and instantly communicates that users have been consulted.



5

*~ Accept and value
complexity and failure ~*

5

~ Accept and value complexity and failure ~

>> Who here is comfortable with failure?

Failure is essential to my process, particularly when its time to move from research to design. I actively welcome it!

Some of the ideas for new services tested on users will fail spectacularly and that's how it should be.

Through prototyping I quickly learn what service ideas work for users and which do not. Our ideas will often fail because I am not the user and neither are you.

But the joy of failure is that you are always learning and failing forwards towards the right solution.



Failing forwards in Adelaide

Problems: library users feeling stressed and not enough library seats facing windows and the outside world.

Solution: staff decided to project moving pictures of calming aquariums on walls near desks and by the time they started to test had fallen in love with this solution

What failed: library users found them far too distracting and wanted a simpler more static solution instead.

Learning: we just needed to put up window views, first tested on paper and then as decals.





Failing forwards in Perth

Problem: students felt that the library didn't offer enough spaces for wellbeing and relaxation.

Solution: staff created a scale model of a 'Zen room' taken to students for them to interact with and change.

What failed: students ripped out all the zen elements and turned the model into a space full of group study rooms instead!

Learning: when it comes to library spaces some issues are more of a priority for users than others (but you only find this out through testing and failing)



We must risk failure

As my good friend Anneli Friberg once told a conference audience in the UK:

*“I used to be frustrated by the fact that we often said **it was OK to fail, but we never did...** mainly because we hardly ever tried new things unless we were 100% certain they would succeed.”*

She urged the audience to take risks and to remember that **failure is success in progress.**

And I urge you to do the same today.

5

~ Accept and value complexity and failure ~

I've linked complexity with failure because it too involves a journey towards true understanding.

Part of this complexity is the fact that:

- Users are **different to each other**; and
- Users have **different needs and behaviours at different times** depending on what they are trying to achieve.

UX work is often about complexity due to **conflicting data/needs**.

But what do you do when you have conflicting data points?
(e.g. some people find the library too warm, some find it too cold)

Answer: **Don't choose one, try to respond to and support both.**



6

*~ Align, communicate
and collaborate ~*

6

~ *Align, communicate and collaborate* ~

>> Who here aligns the UX work they do with organisational goals, aims and values?

UX like everything else in working life requires an awareness of **organisational politics** and **alignment**.

If you can prove that your UX findings and recommendations directly align with **strategic objectives**, **ambitions** or **values** then you are far more likely to win support and influence.

Library colleagues and the Library leadership team are a good start, but you should also foster wider relations with **Estates, IT and Marketing**.



6

~ *Align, communicate and collaborate* ~

I realise am in a privileged position as an external consultant, but you too should try to talk and communicate with **anyone and everyone** who might help get your UX work over the line.

I always try to balance my time between **researching** and **communicating** the findings and insights that I uncover.

Invite people to meet you beside your **data**, tell them user stories and problems and get them excited about your process. This can be **just as important** an activity as researching!





UX RESEARCH + DESIGN LAB





① Anger on passwords, systems & doors not working. She has to focus too much on administrative aspects of being an FHS member than her education/learning. Also she gets stressed by having to approach security with questions because she is a civilian - culture clash.

② Oh... she loves the friends she has here, the gym, & the reading which is excellent.

③ Specific things that don't work: doors, printers, wifi, campus password, IT systems, lack of groupwork spaces in building.

Also... 'blythe is where all the old furniture is put down down for hygiene etc'.

'there are meant to be 5 group rooms but they are often in use for lessons'.

'best chairs on the right side of the building'.



1 & 2 = Me finally leaving FHS after a day at school, into air and space where I can breathe.

3 = Free interpretation of the artwork in investigation.

A storyboard about me moving to Stockholm (1), meeting new friends (2), and now being at FHS studying (3).



People

Feeling... Sorry!!!

for open hours - 20/12 is light, environment and my inspiring environment.

It's hard to get that you can't see your room in the building.

I should have to be more active for my health. You can't see your room in a building.



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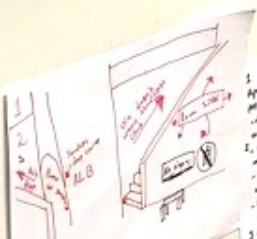
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6

~ *Align, communicate and collaborate* ~

It is also worth mentioning that **collaboration** is key to UX work too. As tempting as it might be, there's no point in burning yourself out by **trying to do it all alone**.

It is vital that you explore the user experience of your libraries with your colleagues. Share the load and feed off each other's ideas and energies.

As another Swedish friend and colleague of mine, Anna Kågedal, declares in my UX Handbook: '**UX is a team sport**'

You should always take the UX journey **together!**



7

~ *Trust the process* ~

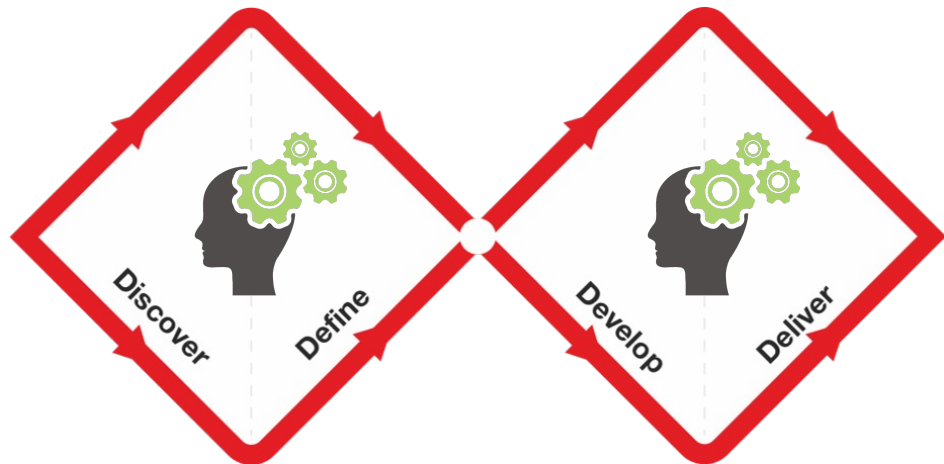
7

~ *Trust the process* ~

I don't allow myself to get stressed about any User Experience work I take on as I know I can **trust the process**: moving from **research** to **data sorting** to **ideation** to **prototyping** and **testing**.

It is a process that is used **internationally** every day.

And as with the 7 habits I've outlined, it's about mindset as much as techniques.



The UX Process (also known as 'The Double Diamond Model')

7



While working in Ireland recently, I knew that by the end of the consultancy I was required to provide several **highly detailed floorplans** for a reimagined large 3-floor library. Initially, I felt **overwhelmed**.

But once I had spent a few weeks **researching, data sorting, prototyping** and **testing with users**, the gaping white spaces on these plans were **quickly filled** with suddenly obvious furniture choices, zoning and functions.

I just needed to **trust the process**. All the data I had needed had been right there waiting for me out in the library with its users.

7

~ *Trust the process* ~

If you trust the process, you do not have to rely on **guesswork** or **assumptions**.

Following it guides you to **actual** user needs and problems and the best solutions.

The UX Process:

- leads to concrete data and evidence
- encourages iteration and refinement
- persuades colleagues and decision makers
- ensures money is spent on the right things
- places users at the centre

The UX Process will always support you.



~ *My 7 Habits* ~

1. Research openly
2. Connect with users and elevate their voices
3. Recognise the power of observation
4. Make your data tangible and immerse yourself in it
5. Accept and value complexity and failure
6. Align, communicate and collaborate
7. Trust the process

>> But which is the most important?

‘Go and find out!’

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