

ICS 132: Organizational Information Systems Winter 2001

Project

This is a course about information systems in organizations. Part of the objective of the course is to have each student experience, first hand, what it is like to be a user of an organizational information system, and learn 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. This second component is something that will be carried out in considerably more depth in the follow-on class, 135; but we want to make sure you get your hands dirty as soon as possible, since experience is the best teacher for these sorts of skills.

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. There are computerized systems available to help provide such a service.

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.
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 these notes. 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. 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.

Mission 2: Getting Other Users' Experiences with UCI's OPAC Systems

In Mission 1, 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. What do you think of these systems? Do you like them? Are they everything you think they should be? How would do differently what they are doing? After you sort that out, Mission 2 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. It should be about ten (major) questions long, although you should also include prompts and follow-up questions that will help you conduct the interview. 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 three 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.

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.

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?

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. However, if it's short, you have to make sure you include enough detail to back up your observations and suggestions; and if it's long, you have to make sure that you don't repeat yourself and that you're actually analysing the information rather than simply regurgitating it. Probably, the body of your report should be four or five pages long.

PROJECT DUE DATE: MARCH 5, 2001.