

The User Experience: Creating a Culture of Self-Evaluation through Usability Testing

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Background

In the summer of 2012, the University Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library launched a new website. The Archives wanted a well-designed website that would make it easy for users to complete tasks quickly and efficiently, but found that the new design tended to hinder the user experience. In an effort to improve the website and create a culture of self-evaluation, the University Archives conducted a series of usability tests. Archival staff members with reference service duties comprised the internal user group and researchers, visiting scholars, university faculty and students comprised the external user group. In the first phase of usability testing, the Archives sought to gain immediate feedback by focusing on the internal user group.

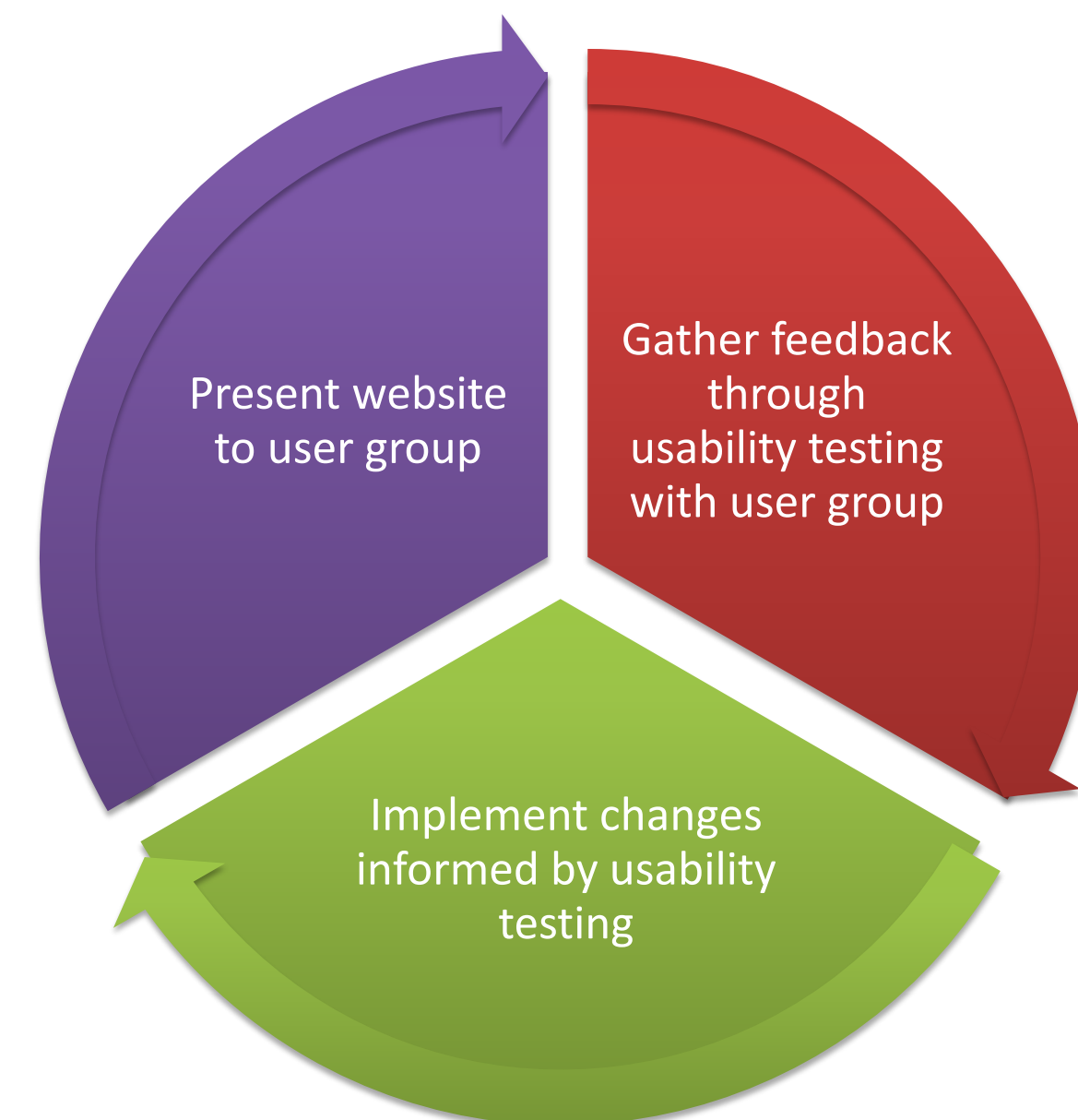
Methodology

To learn if the website redesign accomplished the goal of creating a site that allows quick and efficient task completion by both internal and external users, the archives designed a usability test that asks the user to complete tasks that are commonly completed by these two groups. Seven members of the archival staff devoted one hour of their time in completing an interactive web usability test led by the author. This phase of testing has followed the usability cycle depicted below. The usability cycle shows how seeking feedback on the functionality of a website from primary user groups is a continuous circle. By testing frequently, the archives staff has begun to anticipate regular website changes, and constant evaluation is becoming the norm, with changes implemented based on test results followed by more testing. The cycle ensures that the website continues to be effective and provides an enjoyable user experience.

Usability Questions

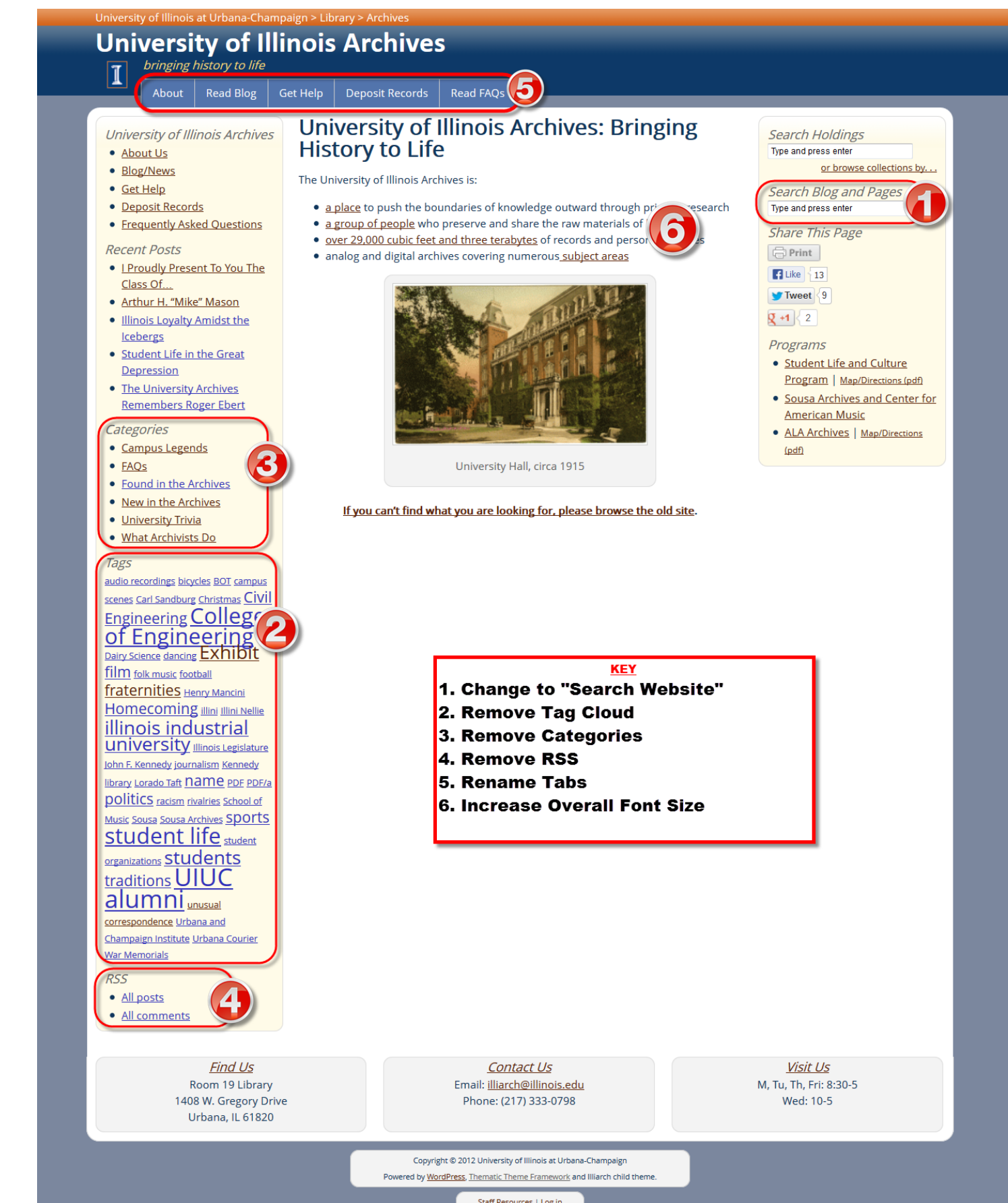
1. Please locate the *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Archives, Agreement on Duplicating Textual Archival & Manuscript Materials* form.
2. A faculty member is interested in transferring their personal papers to the University Archives. They have already spoken with one of the archivists but they would like to read over the *Transfer Guidelines* again, and they cannot recall where they are on the website.
3. Please locate the ARLIS(Art Libraries Society of North America) Archives website.
4. A researcher planning to visit the archives soon would like to know if the fee schedule is available on line for reference.
5. You are developing an exhibit about the first intercollegiate basketball team at the University of Illinois, and you recalled seeing a guide to *Sports Research Resources* on the website. It might be helpful for your topic.
6. Please locate the Archon record for the *Avery Brundage Collection*.
7. Do you have any comments/feedback?
8. If you had a magic button that would change this website once pressed, how would it change?

Usability Cycle



Results

After completing seven usability tests with internal users, we were able to identify numerous navigation issues that hindered the user experience. For this phase of informal testing, we decided to focus on six areas of the website for proposed changes.



Findings & Next Steps

Findings

The internal user group should always be included in user studies. The interactive nature of archival reference services requires a greater focus on staff usability issues, because archival reference services often become a collaborative effort between the researcher and the staff member. Reference staff will interact with the website in many of the same ways and with the same goals as researchers. By following the usability cycle, you are constantly adapting your website to your users' most relevant needs and encouraging an environment that expects and welcomes constant evaluation.

Next Steps

This informal phase of usability testing identified six concrete areas of the website for redesign or elimination. The second phase of usability testing will address those six areas, and include members from both the external and internal user groups.