

Students Studying Students

The SOSA Majors/Killam Library Student Study



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Usually, students come to the library to study, but in the case of the Social Anthropology and Sociology Majors/Killam Library Student Study, the library went to the students to study... students! Last fall, the entire Sociology and Social Anthropology (SOSA) Majors Seminar Class, their professor, Margaret Dechman, and I, a Killam librarian, embarked on a socio-ethnographic study of Dalhousie students and how they interact with the Killam Library's space, services, and website. The SOSA Majors Seminar provides students with experiential learning opportunities. Applying their knowledge of research methods in sociology and social anthropology to a library study not only fulfilled this requirement, it also appealed to the entire class of students who agreed to conduct the study with me. The information gleaned from this study aimed to help the library make changes to better suit students' academic learning, information-seeking and study behaviours.

The study consisted of three modules:

Participant Observation—the SOSA majors each spent two hours observing how students utilized space within the Killam Library;

Interview Surveys—over the course of two days, the SOSA majors conducted interviews with students in the Student Union and Management buildings to learn more about student research and work habits; and

Website Focus Groups—three focus groups were held by SOSA majors to learn more about how students use the current library website, and to gain student input into the design of a new homepage.

The findings of these study modules were very revealing. We discovered through participant observation which areas of the Killam Library are conducive to individual study and group work and which were not. The website focus groups provided excellent student feedback on our new homepage design with a simplified homepage and less text and direct access to the search tools they use the most. We are also finding some significant differences in how students learn to do research between the different disciplines and based on personal characteristics such as gender. The analysis of the data is still on-going.

The fact that we are continuing to sort through the interview survey data means, yes, we were short on class time at the end of the semester. The SOSA majors completed each study module, but we only had enough time to analyze and discuss findings from the participant-observation study and the website focus groups. In order to take advantage of an opportunity to impact the web renewal project, we shifted our concentration mid-stream from the interview survey data to the website focus group findings; in doing so, the majors learned firsthand about prioritizing work. I believe this was a valuable lesson

for the students.

If I was to do a project like this again (and I would love to) I would expect to benefit from past experience and would be able to plan the study modules further ahead of time; however, I would still hope for more unexpected

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obstacles—because this is reality, and reality provides such great experiential learning opportunities. Together we handled: low responses to focus group recruitment efforts, sudden changes to internal workflows, difficulties arranging table space for interview surveys, and restrictive rules imposed on the table rentals.

Aside from negotiating real-world obstacles, throughout the

course of this project the SOSA majors learned, experientially, the pitfalls of observer bias, interviewing methods, how to organize and formulate interview questions, how to effectively conduct focus groups, and how to work as a team. I was more than pleased to hear from one major at the end of the semester that she had secured a job thanks in part to the experience of conducting a focus group for this study.

I was also a learner throughout this project. This was my first time using some of these research methods and I learned both experientially and directly from

the SOSA majors as they shared their knowledge in the areas of sociology and social anthropology. I also learned from their first-hand knowledge of being a student and using the library. Meeting with them on a regular basis to discuss the progress of the project, I was able to ask them many questions, which they happily answered. I find it doesn't matter how much we read, there's always more to learn from/about students—simply by asking.

When you collaborate with students on a real-life project, you take on a certain responsibility; not only for their learning outcomes,

but also for the project outcomes. I hoped in the beginning that it would be a good investment of my time as a librarian, and that the SOSA majors would benefit from the study activities. I am now happy to say that this project was not just a win-win, it was a win-win-win-win. The Majors had an opportunity for experiential learning, the Killam library completed three student studies, I gained insights and experience about the library and working with students, and the Dalhousie student population gained a better library.

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