



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

Imagining the future of library services at University of Cambridge.



WhoHas?: findings of a pilot study exploring the value of a peer-to-peer sub-lending service for users of Cambridge University libraries

~

Prepared by Andy Priestner and Modern Human, September 2015

What is Futurelib?

Futurelib is an open innovation programme exploring the future role of academic libraries within the University of Cambridge. It employs ethnographic research methods and human-centred design techniques to examine the current user experience (UX) of libraries and draws on the skills of librarians from around the institution to test new service concepts. It is funded by the University Library and supported by design practice and innovation consultancy Modern Human. The project is managed by Andy Priestner and led by Sue Mehrer, Deputy Librarian, Cambridge University Library.

WhoHas? Project Team

Rose Giles, Isla Kuhn, Sue Mehrer, Jo Milton, Helen Murphy, Andy Priestner, David Rushmer, Laurence Smith, Elizabeth Tilley, Meg Westbury

What is WhoHas?

The WhoHas project is part of the Futurelib innovation programme which is actively seeking to uncover and then design for the genuine needs of today's students, researchers and academics at Cambridge University. WhoHas was the name given to the first Futurelib project to be tested in the field by real users. It explored the potential value of a peer-to-peer sub-lending service and was named after the common phrase used by students on Facebook to initiate sub-lending interactions with other students: 'Who has...?' The project would examine whether the legitimising of what is effectively a black market activity would be welcomed or rejected.

The WhoHas? concept

It was decided that WhoHas would be an embedded service within other library channels and that there would be no need for a specific WhoHas app or website. Instead it would appear as an option for all users from both the search and from a Libraries App when an item was out on loan. When an item was out on loan users would be able to request a transfer from the person who had borrowed it. The request would then be sent to their app. If they did not use the app, they would be emailed a link. The two people could then agree to transfer the item one to the other or they could find a way to share the resource. It was anticipated that a pilot of the WhoHas concept and accompanying research would provide us with insights into the actual behaviour and requirements of students as they sought to get hold of, borrow and lend library resources. See diagram opposite for full details of the service blueprint.

WhoHas prototype

To pilot WhoHas, Facebook Groups were established for each set of students taking part. As sub-lending activity is dependent on a certain critical mass, we needed as many students participating in the pilot as possible. We reasoned that because students already had Facebook accounts and were already using it for WhoHas-style interactions, using this platform would maximise the number of students signing up to the pilot. The use of Facebook Groups, along with the manual monitoring of these groups by librarians, also helped to us to gain valuable insights without having to build any expensive prototypes. The decision to use Facebook as the medium for testing this pilot was therefore based on familiarity and cost-effectiveness, rather than on the suitability of the platform for any future solutions.

015

be



Pilot Aim and Methodology

The main aim of a pilot was to test the need for and viability of a concept before designing detailed mechanisms for its delivery. It was decided to pair the Facebook Group prototype with Diary Studies with students to develop a deeper understanding of user needs and behaviour. It was important for us to track the sub-lending behaviour of a small set of students, whether they used the Facebook Groups or not, in order to gain insights to inform the usage data. What we hoped to learn from each is detailed below.

From the Facebook Groups:

- Number of students in each Group
- Number of requests that happened on each Group
- Number of successful/unsuccessful transactions
- Amount of sub-lending on Facebook versus other methods
- Number of mentions of college or other faculties in transactions
- Does a network effect help us gain broad adoption?

From the Diary Studies:

- How many sub-lending transactions were taking place in total, across all methods
- Are students struggling to get hold of the resources they need? And, if so, how do they overcome this?
- What happened when a resource weren't available?
- Would students use an official sub-lending service if it meant they could get the resource they needed, or would they carry on with 'black market' methods?
- Do people who sub-lend know each other beforehand?
- Does the medium influence behaviour?

In addition to the Diary Studies, Exit Interviews were conducted with each Diary Study participant, in order to probe further into the activities they recorded.

Participants

In total 174 students participated, including English Faculty undergraduates, Wolfson College law students and Medical Library students.

Members of the WhoHas Facebook Groups (created for each student group, to provide them with a mechanism through which to share resources):

- Medical Library - 78
- English Faculty Library - 75
- Wolfson law students - 21 members

Participants in the WhoHas Diary Studies and Exit Interviews (Completed by members of each Facebook group, in order to capture their lending/borrowing behaviour/To probe further into the activities that participants recorded):

- Medical Library - 5
- English Faculty - 3
- Wolfson law students - 2

Results and Observations

Despite having 174 participants, only 1 successful transaction took place via the Facebook groups out of a total of 4 WhoHas requests. However, Diary Studies with 10 of the participants revealed 22 peer-to-peer sub-lending transactions throughout the duration of the study, an average of 2 transactions per person. This data therefore suggests the lack of activity on the Facebook Groups was not due to lack of sub-lending activity or need.

Exit interviews conducted with the 10 diary study participants suggested that the lack of activity on the Facebook Groups was instead due to the following 3 reasons.

1. *Easter term (the third and final term of the Cambridge academic year which runs from spring to summer) is not the best time to witness sub-lending activity:*

- “I’m not sure it was the right time of year for this study. The last 6 weeks haven’t really been representative as most text book reading is done during previous terms. By Easter I’m mostly consolidating and reading from my own notes, rather than scrambling for text books. During Easter term there’s a big shift from reading books to practising problems and exam questions.” (Law student)
- “The past 6 weeks have not been representative as we’ve only really needed one book. During other terms you need very specific books for short periods of time to write essays, so you go through a lot more books. Michaelmas is also dissertation time so people need all kinds of texts for that and won’t necessarily know who has the ones they need. WhoHas would be much more useful during those times.” (English student)

- “This period hasn’t really been representative. It’s a shame as I could probably have got more use out of it in the other terms. It would probably also be useful during dissertation time. This term we didn’t really have any direction so we could write about any topic we wanted as long as it was Shakespeare-related. Other terms everyone is clambering for the same book so it’s very different. During Michaelmas and Lent term I would probably have made about 10 more transactions over a 6 week period.” (English student)

2. *Students are uncomfortable asking for help outside of their immediate social circles:*

- “I only really exchange books with people I know on my course. There are only 3 in my college so we know each other and are used to our system as we’ve been doing it like this for 2 years now! I also think it’s an honour and trust system, more for people who know each other. If you didn’t know someone you’d probably be less likely to bother dealing with a stranger and negotiating. It’d be a lot easier to just recall the book, because it’s anonymous and then you also get to keep the book after!” (Law student)
- “People were probably reticent about using the WhoHas Facebook group as they don’t like asking other people for books. If you know people doing your course then that is normally sufficient. I have a wide network of people I can borrow from if I need anything, including 5 or 6 close friends on my course who are in other colleges, so I don’t really need the Facebook group.” (English student)
- “I don’t think I would ever use it because of posting publicly, plus no one else was using it and I wouldn’t want to be the first or only one. Maybe if everyone else was using it but posting publicly to borrow a book doesn’t seem necessary. I have WhatsApp groups with friends which already work very well for this. We also have a Facebook group for our college year group (10 people).” (Medical student)

3. *In the case of medical students, both the tight knit nature of their community and their reading patterns help books to circulate unofficially:*

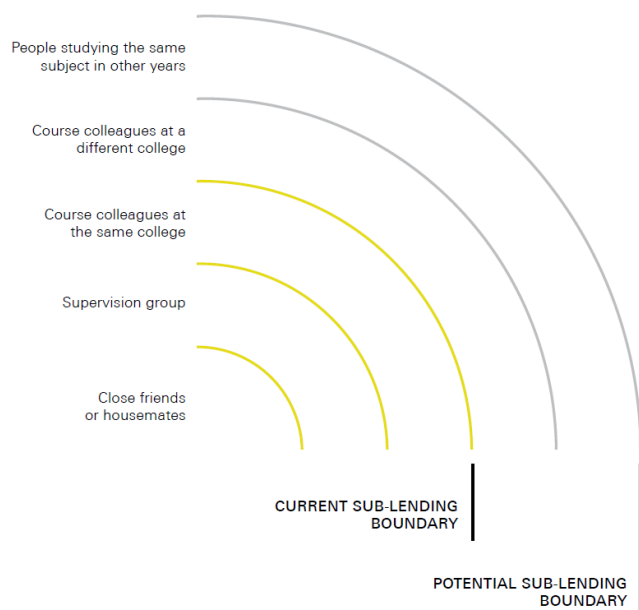
- “There never seems to be much of a problem getting hold of medical books. There are only really a few core texts you need and there are lots of copies of those in the libraries, or people also buy their own, so they’re not hard to get hold of. If someone needs a book the norm is to just ask around your friends/ course mates and it wouldn’t be long before you’d find someone who had it.” (Medical student)
- “I didn’t use the Facebook group. In fact I don’t think anyone used it. The medics have quite tight-knit groups so I don’t really think there’s much of a need for it. Also, as I said we have plenty of copies of the books available so there’s never much of a problem getting hold of anything.” (Medical student)
- “My college library is really good for the core recommended texts, and if I need something else they usually order it in for me. The college library always has what I want so there’s no need for me to buy them like some people do, I can just keep taking them out throughout the year! It also has longer loan periods than the medical library (3 weeks rather than 2) but I renew them all the time and I’ve never had a book recalled.” (Medical student)

Recommendations

Timing of the pilot: Almost every student in the Exit Interviews said that Easter term is not a representative time for sub-lending activity, due to stress, exams, and the fact that most people have done their critical reading by this stage in the year and are working off notes instead. If we are to test any sub-lending related solutions in future, it would therefore be best to do this in the first two terms of the academic year, when there would be more activity.

Anticipating demand: Medical students reported there being “loads of copies” of books in high demand and very few of them seemed to have any trouble getting hold of the resources they needed. By contrast, English students who were set an essay topic on a particular book, reported there being only 3 copies of the book, despite 8 people needing it for the same piece of work. A future solution should generate data that can be used by librarians to identify both past and future demand patterns. Data could be shared across libraries so that macro-level patterns could be identified. Recognising particular demand patterns may point up new strategies and solutions to cope with peak demand.

Sub-lending networks could be enlarged: This concentric model (below right) shows that the opportunity for increasing the amount of sub-lending activity is large. During the pilot, it was obvious that students weren’t making the most of this opportunity due to feelings of discomfort around asking for help outside of their immediate social circles. Encouraging students to exchange textbooks beyond their usual sub-lending circles would help those with smaller networks locate and use the resources they need. Enabling effective sub-lending would also maximise the usage of the physical inventory across the library system and reduce the number of books that college librarians are asked to purchase. A future solution could provide students with access to this wider sub-lending network, without them having to step outside of their comfort zones.



Related Findings and Possible Solutions

A number of observations and conclusions arose from the WhoHas Project's Diary Studies and Exit Interviews which extended beyond the issue of sub-lending into the areas of resource provision, circulation and ebooks.

1. *Students prefer ebooks to 'reference only' copies.*

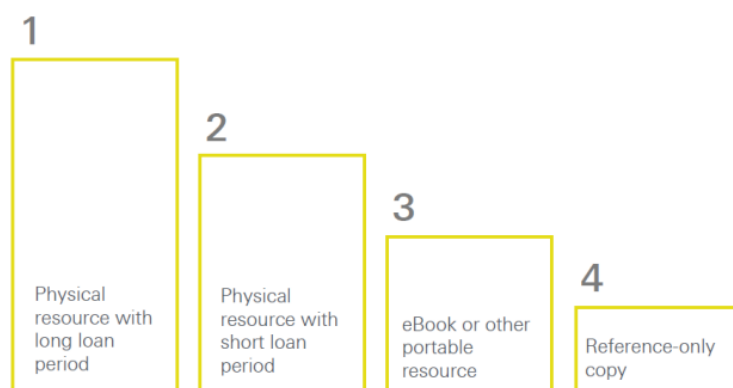
A key observation was that convenience, timing, and place now appear to trump resource format. When some students come across reference-only copies, rather than staying in the library to use it they create their own digital resources. One student spent a long time photographing 60 pages of a reference-only copy so she could use it in her room, whilst another group of students created a Word document of passages taken from a reference-only copy so they could access it when and where they liked. In both these cases, the availability of an actual ebook could have saved these students a lot of time.

- "I couldn't get hold of an original copy so ended up taking photos of every page of the ref-only copy on my phone (50-60 pages). I didn't want to have to keep going to the library to read it because I like writing my essays in my room. Also, it's too expensive to photocopy (4p/page)!" (English student)
- "Three of us went online and used Gutenberg, a resource for pre-copyright primary texts online, to find what we needed. This involves copying the start and end of passages from the original text in the library and writing them into Gutenberg where we can retrieve the full passages. We then copy and paste these full passages into a word document, which we can all access wherever we like." (English student)

That students are more willing to put up with the imperfect interface of an ebook (sometimes their own makeshift version of an ebook) than sit in the library to write their essay is not a failing of libraries but a movement in user

expectations. The internet and advances in device technology have created an expectation that information is portable.

It is our conceit that the ebook has effectively replaced the reference copy as the copy of last resort.



Order of preference for university resources

The interviews we conducted revealed that ebooks were chiefly considered to be valuable because: if the original resource was large and heavy, students could use the ebook as a reference when they were out and about, rather than carrying the physical copy around with them; while the fact that an ebook could be used anywhere and at any time also made it more useful than a reference-only copy in a library.

Some students we talked to were clearly unaware of the ebooks we subscribe to here in Cambridge and talked of using excerpts from Google Books or finding sections of books online:

- “At the beginning of the year, when everyone was super keen, I really struggled to get hold of some books, so I just muddled by, searching online and using Google books. I still wouldn’t have used the Facebook Group though. I’m not a pioneer and that would just be plain embarrassing. It’d be a bit weird and uncomfortable writing in a group of people you don’t know. Maybe this is just a teenage problem though?!” (English student)

We recommend that the visibility of ebooks and other resources also needs to be improved so that when physical resources are unavailable electronic ones are easily and intuitively found without additional user effort. Our interviews indicated that there are some existing library services of which students are just not aware. A good example is that some librarians will scan and send students the chapter of a book they need but, as we have already recounted, students are coming into the library and photographing pages from books themselves. It seems that students won’t ask for a service if they don’t know it exists and are creating their own workarounds no matter how laborious these might be. A key problem is that when a student doesn’t find what they are looking for, there is no signposting to suggest what they should do next. The fact that students don’t know what they can and can’t ask for is a service discovery issue. This could be solved by mapping the user experience of ebooks and introducing appropriate signposting, links and information, at relevant points of need.

Of all the sets of students we talked to Medical students appeared to be the most comfortable with ebook provision:

- “When we go away on placement we arrange between us which books we’ll take with us, so we don’t all take the same ones, or we just use ebooks.” (Medical student)
- “The Medical Library has a copy of all the essential texts as ebooks which is really handy for when you’re away. I normally read them online unless I’m on a long train journey or something, then you can download them as a short-term loan for 2-7 days depending on the publisher. I did all my studying for my Paediatrics and Obs & Gynae OSCE exams using ebooks” (Medical student)

2. Students renew books to avoid the inconvenience of having to return them.

Many of the students we spoke to admitted to renewing books over several months to avoid the inconvenience of returning them, rather than because they were actually using them. Items are therefore sitting unused on student bookshelves which could easily have been used by others. Additionally, none of these students claimed that they had ever had any of these books recalled.

- “There’s this “renew all” button in my library account. I press it all the time. I don’t think I even know which books I have out. We have so many books in our house that we just wait until the end of the year, then drop them all back to the libraries at the same time in the back of the car.” (Medical student)
- “I took the book out from my college at the beginning of the year and have never had to leave it back. It’s a core text, which everyone needs all the time. No one else has ever recalled it, even though there are 10 other medics in my college year group. Everyone else in my year group has ended up buying their own copy, but I haven’t really needed to as I’ve had the college copy the whole time.” (Medical student)

Perhaps this situation could be improved altered if it was made easier for students to return items when they no longer need them. A returns box in the Porters Lodge at each college or at other locations, with daily collections, could help decrease the number of unnecessary renewals. Another potential solution for this would be to include a simple nudge within the Library Management System at the point of renewal, asking the holder why they want to renew the book. Having to provide a reason may force a moment of reflection as to whether they really need to keep it. Introducing these kinds of solutions could help students get hold of the resources they need more quickly and easily, without stepping outside of their comfort zones and routines.

3. There are emotional barriers to recalling books and there is a paradox in how resource-seekers and resource-holders perceive each other

The current recall process appears to be underused due to the emotional barriers that surround the process. Students are reluctant to recall books from other students for fear of inconveniencing them. They readily put themselves in the other person’s shoes, and imagine how they would feel if someone tried to take a resource they needed away from them. The fact that people are holding on to books they don’t need because they assume no-one wants them, whilst others are avoiding recalling a book because they assume the person needs it, suggests that the current recall process needs to be reinvented or retooled in some way.

- “If the book has been taken out then that person obviously needs it, so I’m not going to recall it. I’d just find another way to get hold of it, or make do with another book.” (Law student)

- “If the book is out of the library then the person probably needs it for the same reason as me, so there’s no point in recalling it on them. I’ll just ask around my friends or do without.” (Medical student)
- “I sometimes work in the library after hours so if I need something, for example, when I need to renew a book, then I just email the library and they do it straight away without me having to come back into the library.” (Medical student)
- “I just renew the books if I can’t be bothered taking them back, as no one else seems to need them. If someone needs one of the books then they’ll recall it.” (Law student)

There is an opportunity to redesign the recall process from the points of view of both the seeker and the holder, in order to maximise the availability and use of University resources. One way of encouraging resource-seekers to recall the books they need would be to make the recall process less formal. For example, we could give the recall request a more friendly tone (“Someone needs this resource. Is anyone happy to give it up?”), and make the process more flexible by enabling the seeker and the holder to communicate anonymously with each other. Offering more control over the process could encourage students to use it more, but the exact implementation would have to be prototyped and tested.

4. There is a reluctance to ask for help from librarians and several instances of successful anonymised services

Although librarians want to help students, and make this clear in their communications with them, students are often unaware of the services available to them and reluctant to ask for too much help.

- “My librarian’s already done so much for me this year. I didn’t want to give her any more trouble by asking for another favour.” (English student)

Creating a sense of community by expanding on some current library practices, could help with this. For example, many libraries have students working as out-of- hours invigilators who feel that they contribute to the library and say they are happier to ask the library staff to do things for them. English Faculty Library staff members allow students to work off their fines by helping with re-shelving and other library-related activities. Anecdotally, these students are more aware of the library services on offer, and more likely to approach staff for help. Judge Business School runs a successful chat channel for library users on their website, which they can use to post anything from asking for help, reporting a MFD jam, to complaining about the noise made by other students around them. Although they are physically present in the same space as the library staff Judge students are often more comfortable to ask for help anonymously through this route rather than in

person. The English Faculty library also runs a text service so students can reserve books to collect later that students also use to ask for help inside the library, instead of approaching the issue desk. Although apparently more impersonal these approaches are eagerly adopted and could be implemented more widely across Cambridge libraries. Further studies, prototypes and pilots could usefully seek to create ways of encouraging students to ask for help when they most need it.

Conclusion

The WhoHas pilot did not offer a prototype that was successfully utilised by its student participants due to its testing at the wrong time of year; the reluctance of students to request items beyond their immediate social circles; and the presence of existing informal circulation networks. However, the Diary Studies and Exit Interviews conducted as part of the project revealed a myriad of related issues around resource availability and format. They also highlighted a significant mismatch between user perception and behaviour. We believe there is considerable potential to create a set of mutually reinforcing solutions to improve the availability and awareness of library resources across Cambridge University's libraries, some of which include: a retooled recall process using more informal language and prompts; drop-off points for books to encourage their return; greater visibility of ebooks; and wider adoption of anonymised library help channels.

This document is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY 4.0) license. This license means you and others are free to share and adapt this work for any purpose. That allows you to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. It allows you to remix, transform, and build upon the material. If you do, you must attribute Cambridge University Library. You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests Cambridge University Library endorses you or your use. Logos, icons and photographs used in this document remain the copyright of the original copyright holder.