TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY'S ONLINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOGUE PROJECT

By Mary Alice White, Leslie Deane and Brenda Livingston

*i*n 1994, Toronto Public Library (TPL) Literacy Advisory Committee (LAC) members discovered they had difficulty using the TPL online public access catalogue (OPAC). They weren't alone.

Following its mandate, LAC recommended an investigation to see if people with low or limited literacy skills could locate library materials using the OPAC.

The LAC is a library committee that meets six times per year to discuss issues related to literacy and libraries. LAC also advises TPL on its collections, programs and services as related to the current and developmental needs of the literacy community in Toronto. LAC membership includes library staff (both branch and literacy services staff) and a range of community representation (including literacy program staff, a public health nurse, a labor education officer, a literacy learner).

Purpose

The goal behind this investigation was to find out if people with low or limited literacy skills were able to effectively use TPL's OPAC (a DYNIX system), to document where people had difficulties with the OPAC, to make recommendations for modifications to the system, and to recommend products to support public use of TPL's OPAC.

Results

Eleven focus group sessions, with a total of 35 participants, were conducted. Participants included learners from community-based literacy programs, ESL learners, people enrolled in adult upgrading programs and six seniors. Difficulties were encountered in the following areas:

1) Lack of familiarity with libraries
"What's a call number?"
Focus group participants were unfamiliar with library organization and terminology. They had no knowledge of the Dewey Decimal System. They did not know that call numbers told them where nonfiction library materials were shelved.

"What does 'fiction' mean?"
"What's a 'feature'?"
Often participants did not understand basic terms like 'fiction', author', 'title' or 'feature'. Instead, they thought of stories, the person, the name of the book, and movies or films. People also did not know libraries shelve fiction by the author's last name.

"Asimov who?"
The example given on the TPL OPAC, 'Asimov, Isaac', was not useful. None of our participants was able to interpret this example correctly. They did not know, and were unable to infer, that to do an author search, they should enter the author's name in the form 'last name, first name'. Most did not recognize 'Asimov' as a last name.

2) Lack of keyboarding/ computer knowledge and skills
"Why won't this thing work?"
Some people did not leave a space between an author's last and first name, resulting in 'Kingstephen' to appear, instead of 'King, Stephen'.

"Can't I just use the card catalogue?"
Participants had a lot of difficulty because they were unfamiliar with the layout of the computer keyboard. Common problems included finding and using the return key, holding keys down too long, not leaving a space between author's first and last name, not knowing what 'enter' meant, being unable to correct mistakes because they didn't know the backspace key erased text.

3) Screen format
"Each screen has way too much print to read."
During our sessions, we discovered many people only read the centre of the screen. Often, they ignored the information on the left side of the screen, at the top and in the command line at the bottom of the screen. Participants rarely read above or below a line or highlighted bar.

"Why are some titles brighter?"
Because they were unaware of the significance of highlighted lines, important information was overlooked. Participants did not realize highlighted or brighter titles were owned by the branch where they were located.

"Why are some parts in all capitals?"
Capital letters are used as both a highlighting feature in the main menu and to signify on order titles in title listings. When queried, people thought it must be important, but did not know why. Research has shown that text in all upper case letters is more difficult difficult to read. The shape of the word is lost. Example: 'ELEPHANT' and 'elephant'.

"There's too much print on the screen."
Some screens (copy status, for example) require you to read back and forth and up and down. People found this screen dense and hard to read. They had trouble following a line across the screen. The seniors in our survey had additional difficulties with screen glare and often misread commands like 'So' and 'D' as '50' and '0'.

4) Language
"What does that mean?"
We encountered more difficulties here than in any other area. Without explanations of jargon, people were unable to continue searching. Examples: 'In transit'

Trace
Enter a line number
Placing a hold
Call number
Keyword
Fiction
Copy Status (CS)
Start Over (SO)
Truncated
Back (B)
Feature
Y/N
Series
Format
Select
Display (D)

In addition to the listed areas of difficulty, participants became disoriented and confused moving back and forth from screen to screen.

The findings of the OPAC focus groups are providing insight into the specific needs of users who are not familiar with libraries. These findings will inform the automation needs assessment that TPL is currently conducting. As well, the findings will be a consideration in the design of future OPAC (and electronic products) user aids/guides and training sessions.

For more information on OPAC displays, content, and presentation, see the University of Toronto Faculty of Information Studies Home Page, http://www.fis.utoronto.ca.

Brenda Livingston, Leslie Deane and Mary Alice White are literacy staff with Toronto Public Library's Literacy Service. The service is an independent unit within the library. Literacy staff are responsible for developing adult literacy collections in the library's 33 branches, providing training for branch staff, placing community literacy deposit collections on loan with community literacy programs, and generally liaising with the literacy community. They can be reached at Literacy Services, Toronto Public Library, c/o Parkdale Branch, 1303 Queen St. W, Toronto, Ont. M6K 1L6; (416) 393- 7606; FAX. (416) 3937705.