Chapter 13

The Effects of Using a Triangulation Approach of Evaluation Methodologies to Examine the Usability of a University Website

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The objective of this study was to evaluate the current University of Maryland, Baltimore County website and identify problems that could be addressed in an upcoming re-design project. In meeting this objective, we used a combination of evaluation methods in order to triangulate and collect different perspectives on the problems. Heuristic evaluations were performed to gain an overview of the problems with the website. A total of fifty-four Information Systems students participated in this particular portion of the study. Next, focus group sessions were conducted to seek out what individuals want and need from the site, along with specific problems encountered. And finally, thirteen subjects performed usability testing to examine specific issues concerning navigation. Together, these methods provide three different but synergistic perspectives. By gathering test data, observing users, and interviewing a range of individuals on campus, we were able to collect a wide variety of information that was compiled, analyzed, and formally reported to the design group. The analysis of the data collected from the three techniques revealed several key issues in which expert recommendations were made for website redesign. But more importantly, the result of using a triangulation approach in this research illustrates the value of combining
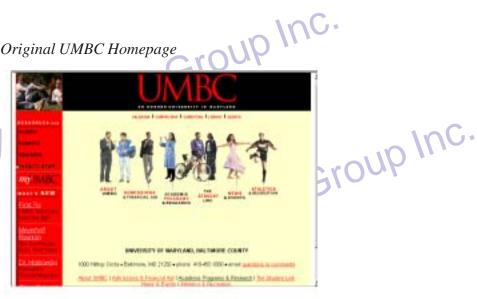
inspection methods and testing to identify usability problems on a University website.

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web has become an important tool that Universities use to market their institution to prospective students and provide University information and services to the campus community. A previous study performed at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) reported that the web is the third most important source of information about a University, following a campus visit and a conversation with current students (Hearne, 1999). As users become experienced with computer and Internet usage, they become dependent on the quick and useful information that websites provide. Information is the central theme of any website. The more a site helps people find the information they are looking for, the more usable it is (Spool, 1999).

Figure 1: Original UMBC Homepage

Considering the growing importance of the Web as a tool, UMBC performs periodic evaluations in the form of online surveys that collect opinions and usage information from site users. Whether user information and behaviors are collected via online surveys or are provided to system designers at each stage of the design process, it is clear that the user must be part of the process to achieve a usable system (Goodwin, 1987). Additional feedback was obtained from a Website Effectiveness Study (Hearn, 1999), performed in 1999 by an external entity; which supplied the university with the opinions of prospective students.

To further the evaluation process, the university requested from the Department of Information Systems a usability study of the website in which results will be

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