



SearchLight Focus Group Summary Sessions Conducted at UCLA and UCSB, Fall 2001

Goal: Gather feedback from users in order to guide and prioritize future SearchLight development decisions.

Focus Group Methodology: Focus group sessions were held at two campuses (Los Angeles and Santa Barbara); three sessions were conducted with undergraduate students and one with graduate students (see *Appendix A* for more details). Most of the participants had not used SearchLight prior to the sessions.

The format of the SearchLight discussion at each session was similar (see Appendix B for the discussion guide); it began by asking participants to discuss how they conducted research, followed by a PowerPoint presentation with screen shots of the SearchLight interface. Participants were then asked to comment on its interface and functionality (what they liked or disliked; what was missing, etc.) and to discuss what would entice them to use this tool (e.g. features, functionality, design elements, etc.).

Results

Focus Group Sessions Summary

Overall, participants were interested in SearchLight and thought it would be useful to some extent in their studies. Many stated that they liked that you could “just click and get it” (rather than going to each individual database). Several graduate and many undergraduate students stated that one of the challenges they face when starting research is discovering online resources relevant to their field of study. Many saw SearchLight as a way to help with this problem; it would allow them to enter a term and discover which database contained material relevant to that term. Regarding the SearchLight interface, many commented that they liked that the search results were organized by format and that, when you clicked on search results, the resource appeared in a new browser window.

When asked what they would change or what was missing from SearchLight, graduates students and some undergraduates expressed an interest in having an advanced search option.¹ Across all sessions, participants commented that they would like SearchLight to be faster. Another suggestion several participants made was to include a feature that would find alternate (variant or incorrect) spellings of a term similar to that used by Google.

Another feature that participants would like included in SearchLight is to have the results sorted by relevance.² Many undergraduates expressed interest in having an icon that indicates there is full text available before you click through to the resource or they would like to be able to limit their initial search to full-text materials only. A feature several graduate students and a few

¹ Search features named included refining your search by conducting a search of your initial search results, keyword browsing, fielded searches (such as date and author) and Boolean options.

² Several graduate students noted that if the results were ranked they would like to have an explanation of how they were ranked.

undergraduates wanted was a bibliographic citation manager that would convert their search results into the needed citation format. Regarding interface, most participants stated that having some results linked in the left-hand column and others not was confusing; several noted that they would probably ignore the unlinked items.³ In addition, several commented that, overall, the interface appeared confusing (in comparison to other search engines).

When asked how they approached research in a new area of study, across all groups, many of the participants stated that their first step was to consult the Internet; using directories such as Yahoo! and search engines such as Google. Several of the graduate students named specific databases with which they started (BIOSIS, INSPEC, Web of Science and WorldCat).

Further comments about SearchLight and other library services are listed below.

Additional SearchLight Comments

- Zero Results: there was no consensus as to the usefulness of displaying resources with zero results on the search results page; some stated that they would ignore them while others noted that it would be good to know which resources did not produce results for your search terms (so you could then go to that resource and re-phrase your search) (commented on only by the undergraduates)
- Subject Terms: there was no consensus regarding the use of subject terms, several said they would not use them; in fact they would want their search to be broader not narrower since their research was not that specialized. Others liked the option to choose more than one topic in order to narrow their search (commented on only by the undergraduates)
- Many appreciated that SearchLight was different than the web in that it contained refereed materials; whereas they felt that there was a lot of suspect material on the web (commented on only by the undergraduates)
- Email Search Results: Many wanted a feature that would allow them to email their SearchLight results to themselves, rather than waiting for the search to complete (noted only by graduate students)

Other Library Services (noted only by graduate students)

- Citations Output: they wanted to customize the format of a citation output. Currently, citations contain information that is not useful (e.g., id numbers); they would like to pick the few fields that are relevant for them and output those.
- Alert Service: when asked how they learned about new research in their area of study, they mentioned a variety of ways: going to conferences, using pre-print services, subscribing to journals and subscribing to alert services offered by journal publishers. Several commented that they would like for the library to create a page of links to alert listservs offered by journal publishers, sorted by discipline.
- Many participants commented that a feature that kept them informed about new books and articles in their field would be very useful

³ One suggestion was to link all results, but indicate with an asterisk those where you would have to re-do your search.

- Several participants commented that rather than having an alphabetical list of online resources on the library pages, they would like to see a list of databases and ejournal titles that are relevant to their discipline (noting that the names of databases were unintuitive, so having the list sorted by discipline or with better descriptions would be helpful)
- Regarding having a user profile that recommends (“pushes”) resources, some liked it while others did not. For those who did not like it, the reasons they gave were that they did not trust that a computer could know what they needed (which would result in a lot of irrelevant material); one person noted that getting pre-selected resources could bias your research. For those who liked the feature, they commented that they would like to be able to turn it on and off; they felt that it would be most useful for new areas of study or when they first approached their area of study, once they were familiar with the resources in their field they might not want this feature any longer.

General Library Comment

A theme that was evident across all sessions was that participants felt that libraries are not doing a good job of getting the word out about available library resources and tools.⁴ In addition, many commented that labels used on the library sites are not clear and do not entice you to want to use the features.

Suggestions for Improvement

Although we were able to gather a lot of good information from the focus group sessions, we did learn some lessons that will affect how we conduct focus groups in the future.

The participants in the undergraduate sessions at UCSB were primarily freshmen. At that level, since they do not do extensive original research involving literature searching and were new to the university and to using online library resources, they did not have a great deal to share regarding how they might use SearchLight or what functionality they would like for it to have. Focus groups exploring specific research methods or tools might best focus on juniors and seniors.

With regards to the graduate student session, the participants’ disciplines were varied (from linguistics to engineering to marine ecology); this led to an interesting discussion, but it might have been more directed if we had had a more homogenous group; for example, all humanities students or all engineering students.

⁴ One graduate student said that he was TA for a course of 3rd and 4th year undergraduates and many of them did not know there was a library web page.