

A participative approach to understanding the hidden curriculum: Lessons from three virtual information needs workshops

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ABSTRACT

Information needs are fundamental building blocks of the information behaviour and information retrieval literature. However, the concept of an “information need” is rarely discussed or defined, particularly in the context of everyday life information seeking (Borlund & Pharo, 2019). Furthermore, little is known about the means by which information needs are formulated within the “hidden university curriculum”: the informal learning space which comprises unspoken rules not taught in formal academic education (Alsubaie, 2015).

To generate knowledge of information needs in the context of the hidden university curriculum, three virtual information needs workshops were conducted with PhD students and early career researchers at Edinburgh Napier University over April and May 2021. In these workshops, a participative design methodology was utilised, driven by the goal of co-designing artefacts, workflows, and work environments to suit virtual collaboration and knowledge exchange (e.g. Spinuzzi, 2005). These workshops represented a virtual adaptation of information needs workshops that the lead researcher had delivered face-to-face in the past. Workshop facilitators used a combination of Microsoft Teams tools such as whiteboards, chat boxes, polls, and breakout rooms to support co-design. As a means of evaluating the effectiveness of the workshops, participants completed two questionnaires: one before the first workshop and one after the last workshop. Overall, the virtual workshops were successful in generating tangible outputs and elucidating attendees’ information needs. As a result of the workshops, a multitude of artefacts were produced in a collaborative manner:

- (1) Group values and rules;
- (2) Problem clusters such as ‘Reading and literature review’, ‘Skills/Information about institutional processes’, ‘Using interpersonal information’, and ‘Project management’;
- (3) Sub-topics of the cluster ‘Reading and literature review’;
- (4) ‘Causes’ and ‘Effects’ lists, which led to the co-production of three new clusters: ‘Information needs’, ‘Information sources’, and ‘Skills needed’;
- (5) Solutions and personal action plans.

Participants reported high degrees of satisfaction with the networking component of the workshops and the flexible use of virtual tools to support group work. Questionnaire responses indicated that 83% of participants felt that they had a sound understanding of information needs following the workshops. Prior to the first workshop, only 34% reported familiarity with the notion of ‘information needs’.

However, workshop activities were hindered by unforeseen technical issues at times. For instance, some participants did not have access to the whiteboard, or could not use their microphone, hence they could only communicate using the chat and voting features. To rectify such issues, participants and researchers agreed to nominate ‘information proxies’ (e.g. Newlands et al, 2018): attendees who had full access to the Teams platform and who would relay others’ messages to the group, so that all voices could be represented in some capacity.

It can be concluded that a co-design approach is effective in elucidating information needs within the hidden university curriculum. Moreover, a virtual format is an effective facilitator, albeit not without consideration of the specific constraints and affordances of the technological tools used to support co-design activities, and how equal participation opportunities could be provided to all participants.

KEYWORDS

information needs, participatory design, COVID-19 research adaptations, hidden curriculum

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