

# Testing the usability of e-book platforms

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*My name is Ilka Schiele and I am a German student of Library and Information Management at the Stuttgart Media University. I am currently in my fourth semester and doing a six-month internship that is compulsory in my course of studies. As I have already worked in a German library for two years, I decided to enhance my experience by doing this internship abroad. I've been working at Jyväskylä University Library since March. One part of my internship is the project I will describe in the following article.*

## Introduction

During the last few years, e-books have become more and more important for students, teachers, researchers, scientists and individuals, thus making them very interesting for libraries.

When deciding to buy e-books, a library can choose from a big variety of databases and platforms. The usability of four of them is being tested during this project, including ebrary, dawsonera and ebSCO e-books, which offer books by different publishers, and Springerlink, which solely offers books (and journals) by publisher Springer.

## Test-procedure

First, we tried to gather volunteers by sending an invitation to one of the students' mailing lists. The first replies were in within two hours and we found ten test persons, two of which had to cancel later on.

I designed a small survey that was sent to the test persons, asking for basic information like their age, gender, if they had visited the library or used e-books before and how confident they felt using them. We also scheduled everyone for test sessions that took place in the library.



Screenshot from the testing process.

For those test sessions, I designed another, bigger, survey. This one contained 21 exercises that the students were supposed to solve with the help of the different platforms. There were general exercises that were supposed to be done with all four platforms, like “Find books on the topic of ‘adult education’”, and more specific exercises, that not only asked to find a certain book, but also to use this book: Find out how to navigate, how to bookmark, how to print and are you allowed to print the whole book?

It was interesting to see how differently people approached the exercises and how different the paces were.

Using the think-aloud method, the test persons were video-taped while they were working on the exercises. They were instructed to tell us exactly what they were doing and what they were thinking, if they had difficulties with a task or if they liked a feature of one of the platforms a lot.

What was interesting to see was not only how differently people approached the exercises, but also how different the paces were. The quickest session only took 35 minutes; the longest took more than one and a half hours.



Student searching where to find e-books from the Library’s homepage.

After the exercises, the test persons were asked to describe their feelings towards the different platforms by picking out three to four words from a collection of 35 given words, ranging from ‘fast’ to ‘slow’, from ‘easy to use’ to ‘complicated’ and from ‘useful’ to ‘annoying’.

The test persons were also asked for their favorite and least favorite platforms. While the favorites are quite well divided with ebrary having the small advantage of being the platform most people were already familiar with, the least favorite platform was definitely springerlink. This might have a lot to do with the fact that this platform is not only used for e-books and was originally designed for e-journals, which have different functionalities and requirements.

The analysis of the videos and findings will be done during the next weeks and a project report will be written and sent to the test persons and presented to the library staff.

*Ilka Schiele*