

Where the Wild Books Are

Library Lab Final Report



Project Summary

We, the library, know when a physical book is checked out and when a book is returned, but we don't know anything about its use between those two points. Where the Wild Books Are is a project that aims to fill that data void.

To do this, we recruited Harvard Law School students for the Spring 2014 term and asked them to track their engagement with their checked out books using a mobile application we developed.

Accomplishments

Over the course of the Spring 2014 term we had 102 students participate in the study and they logged about 4200 contributions. Empirical data was gathered.



Figure 1: The Where the Wild Books logo hanging out on a shelf

Study participants were asked to log each interaction with each item throughout the term. For example, if the participant used five books, five times in one day, they'd use the Where the Wild Books Are mobile application 25 times that day.

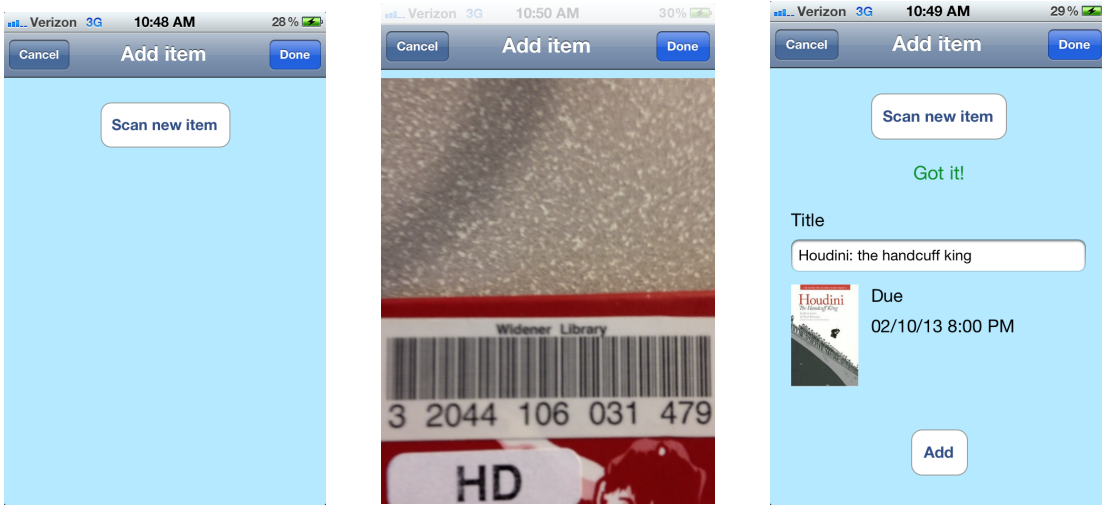


Figure 2. The one-time process a student would use to add an item to the mobile application

Each time a participant logged their engagement they'd report the item they were using and where they were located (library, cafe, etc. See Figure 3). We'd also record the time.

All of these reported engagements gave us a profile of how students interact with physical library items.

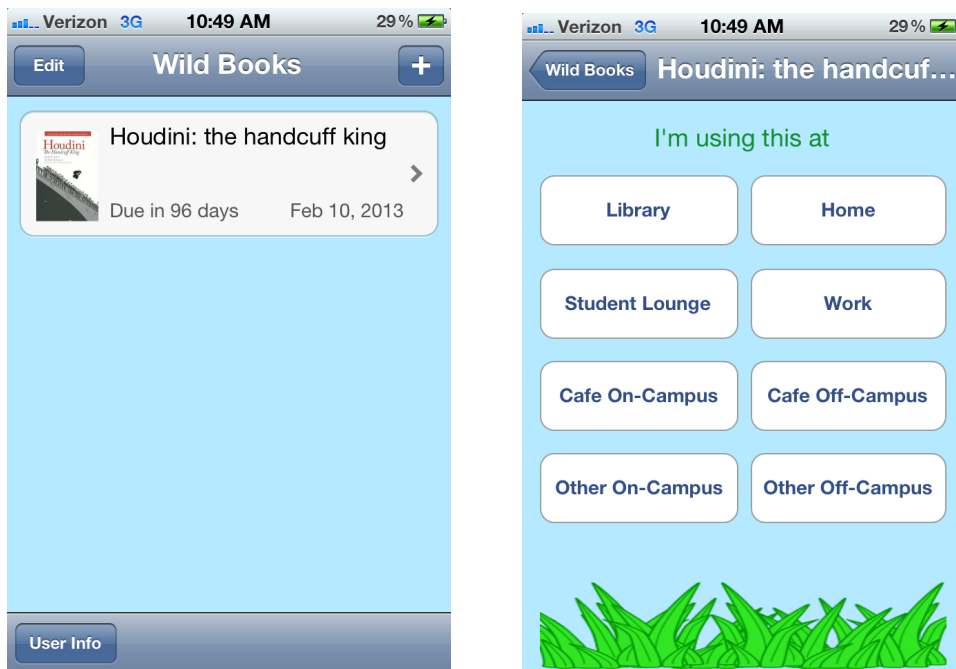


Figure 3. Once the item was added (Figure 2), the student would click on it to log use and location

Engagement

This study required a considerable amount of work from each participant. Remember, we asked each participant to log each interaction with each library item they used. This was a considerable request and to ensure our contributors kept sending us their data, we offered significant prizes.

Each participant was entered in a prize pool that contained 10 iPads, 20 Kindle Fire tablets, 20 Google Nexus tablets, and a number of smaller prizes like iPod shuffles and small-dollar coffee giftcards. These prizes significantly motivated our participants – we had excellent compliance throughout the study.

The prizes were given to the participants at random and we distributed the prizes over two sessions during lunch at the Law School dining facility

Challenges

In order to gather data from the students we had to receive approval to study human subjects from the Harvard Committee on the Use of Human Subjects. This process, also known as getting an IRB, was a challenge. We succeeded, but only after a lot of time and work. We encourage future library researchers to budget a significant chunk of time and effort for the IRB process. And, we encourage Library Lab to guide future funded projects through this process.

We also encountered challenges in our attempts to recruit participants. During the planning stages of the study we assumed that we'd be able to recruit students to participate by contacting them through existing school-held email lists. This was incorrect assumption -- getting current student email addresses is not an easy task. It requires approval from a number of different folks at different levels of the organization, and these approvals are siloed at each school. We quickly abandoned this "contact through an existing email list" approach and limited ourselves to students we could recruit through Love your Library Fest at the Law School Library and through flyers posted across the Law School campus.

Finally, we learned that developing mobile applications for two different operating systems, Android and iOS is a lot of work. In the future, we might stick to just one or more strongly pursue a web based solution that will work cross-platform.

Next steps

We need to finish processing our data and compile a report on what, if anything, our measurements mean and how we can use them here in the library to make informed decisions on policies, study room hours, and lending periods.

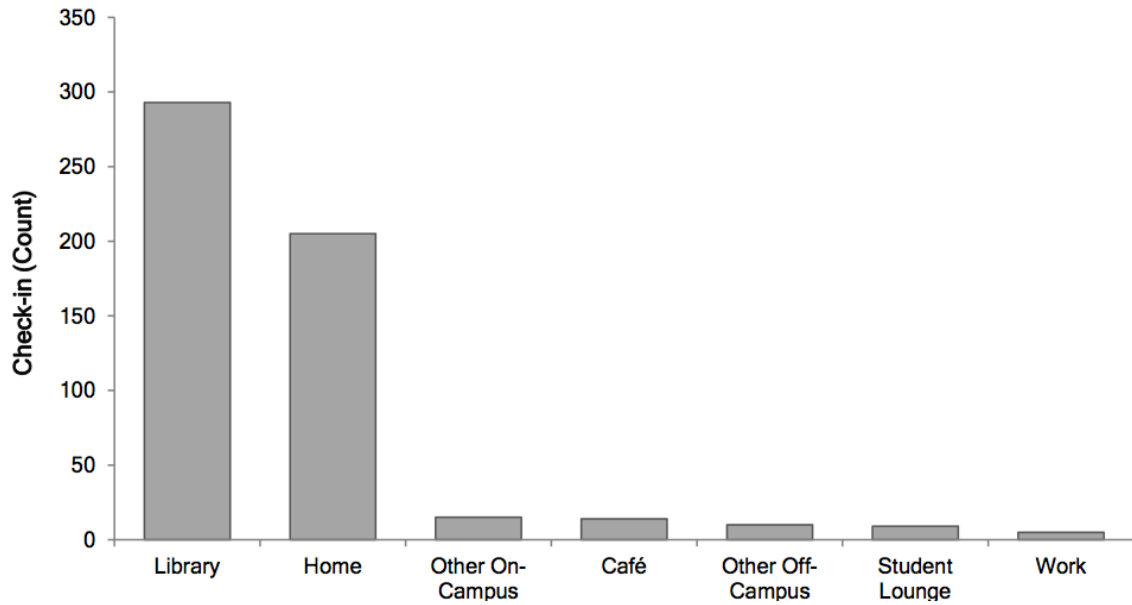


Figure 4. Our location data a few weeks into the study

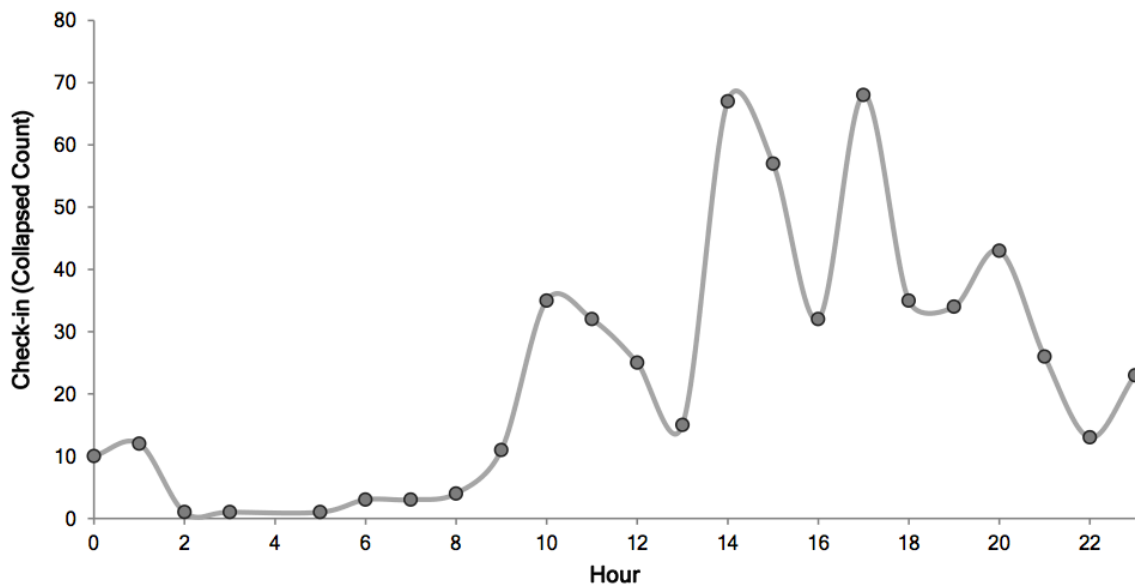


Figure 5. Our time data a few weeks into the study

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