



‘From problem to prototype’ – using a service design course to bridge gaps within a university

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For several years now the SLU University Library in Sweden has worked actively with user-centred research and design for the purpose of library development. One of the goals in our current strategy is that by 2025 the library ‘should become a hub for the university’s work with user-centred methods and will be characterised by an approach that centres the user perspective.’ To work towards this goal, the library has developed a service design course, aimed at all staff at the university. (Further below I will explain why we chose to call this endeavour a ‘service design course’ rather than a ‘UX course’.) The course has so far been offered and run during two semesters, in the spring and autumn of 2022, with 18 participants having completed the course. The aim was to raise awareness and the general skill level within the subject area, as well as bringing together colleagues from different parts of the university. Participants have come from the library, the communications department and student services, as well as administrative staff at the academic faculties.

The gaps

Why do we feel the need to bring together staff from various parts of the university? Because, besides the usual gaps that we might feel exist between departments, offices and functions at a university, at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) we also have the issue of long distances between our different campuses, with many administrative functions and the vice chancellor based in Uppsala (just north of Stockholm), but other staff and many students spread across Sweden, particularly at our other two main campuses: Alnarp outside Malmö in the far south and Umeå in the north of the country. For reference, the distance between Malmö and Umeå is around 1192 km (as the crow flies). The joke is that ‘SLU’ stands for ‘Sweden’s Longest University’!

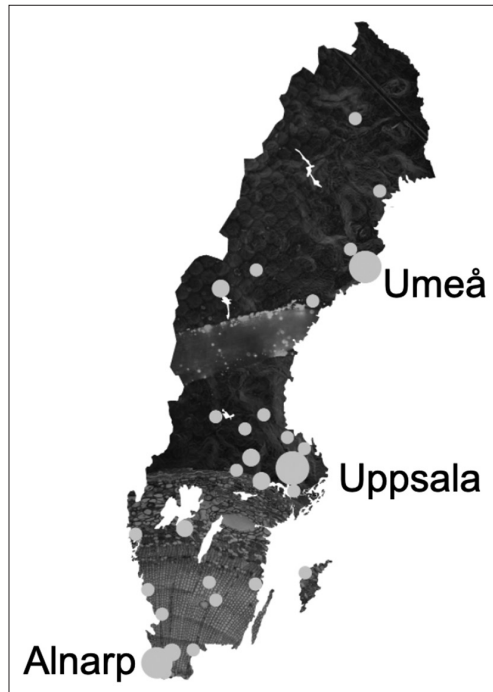


Figure 1 Sweden and its longest university with its three main campuses.

SLU was formed in the 1970s from three already existing schools or higher education institutions. Although there are lots of benefits from being a young university, there are perhaps some issues to do with making everyone feel that they are part of something bigger than just their own department or faculty. This might also be because the different campuses have different faculties and research and educational programmes: we have forestry in the north; veterinary sciences are almost exclusively in Uppsala; and our southern campus Alnarp is dominated by the faculty for landscape architecture, horticulture and crop production sciences.

The library, however, functions as one unit, with physical libraries at our three main campuses, as well as a few smaller ones at other SLU sites. Library staff, as well as departments and functions, are spread across the three main campuses. And within the library we have a group called 'the UX Button' that supports library colleagues in doing UX work.

Push the UX Button!

Since autumn 2018, the UX Button team has provided formal support for user-centred methods at the SLU Library. The team was established to facilitate the fulfilment of the goals in the strategy for the library that was then in force, which stated that: 'In 2020, the SLU library works strategically with user-centred methods to create relevant, coherent and uniform services.' The UX Button's mission is to work both operationally and strategically, where the introduction and training of colleagues on user-centred methods for business development is a natural part.

Today, two people work in the UX Button, but neither full time. The support offered is flexible and scalable and can range from a colleague raising a problem and ‘the Button’ suggesting possible research methods, to a Button member being part of a project team or even serving as project manager. The name ‘the UX Button’ aims to clarify the offer to colleagues – press the UX Button if you need help!

It is the UX Button (which is myself and Lisa Almqvist) and our former UX coordinator Kitte Dahrén who act as course teachers for the service design course.

The bridge

As mentioned above, we decided to work towards the quoted goal in our strategy by developing and delivering a service design course. It is open to all Swedish-speaking staff at the university and in an entirely online format, so that staff from all parts of the university, wherever they are located, can take part. As well as attending the timetabled online teaching, participants are expected to do some homework between course meetings. We market the course towards all staff by publishing a calendar event as well as a news item on our university staff website.



Service design

Service design is an iterative method or process for developing or improving services that meet user needs. It covers all aspects of a good development process:

We chose to create a service design course, and not a UX course, for several reasons. Among some colleagues, there may be a certain saturation around the concept of UX, which is what we otherwise use at the

library. Some colleagues see UX as a buzzword or a trend that might pass; some are just tired of hearing us talking about it. Some might feel that they have already had the UX training they need. We felt that if we chose 'service design' instead of 'UX' we could get more library colleagues interested in attending. We also feel that service design is a more well-known concept outside the library world, and may therefore be better suited to attract a broader target group within the university than just our library colleagues.

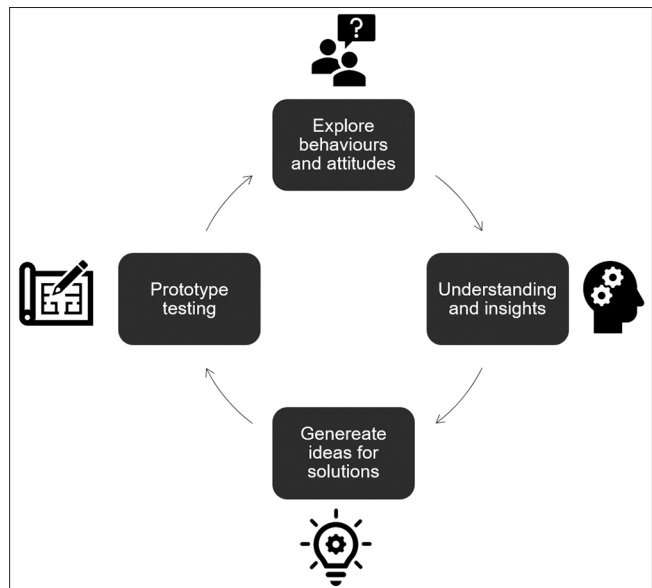


Figure 2 The service design process.

Course outline

Participants are asked to submit a case from their own organisation as part of their course application, and are encouraged to attend the course with a colleague – this helps them to relate the course to their daily operations and make the content less abstract. Attending with a colleague can also make it easier to work with service design after the course, as the individual is not alone in having learnt the method. In the course, we go through the basics of service design during three digital meetings

of 2–3 hours each, where we focus on interactivity during the course meetings. The course participants also receive assignments of about 5–10 hours of homework between each session.

Participants get to research the needs and behaviours of their target groups, generate ideas for solutions, and develop and test prototypes. We have set three learning objectives for the course participants:

After completing the course, you should have:

- developed your understanding of the needs of your target groups and your ability to view your organisation from their perspective;
- knowledge of methods for investigating the user perspective;
- knowledge of methods for generating ideas and testing prototypes.

Some examples of cases that course participants brought with them:

- Why do we so often have to answer these questions that are already in our online FAQ?
- The use of the library makerspace.
- How does the target group find a certain type of information on our website?
- Need for resource rooms for students with reading and writing difficulties.

At the first course session, the participants get a short introduction to service design and then they briefly present their cases to the whole group. We then go through a selection of methods to investigate the needs and behaviours of the participants' target groups, which is then followed by some group work where the participants discuss which methods could suit their respective cases.

After session one, the participants are asked to carry out their chosen line of research, and the results are then presented in groups during session two, with the opportunity to both give and receive feedback from other participants as well as from us course leaders. The participants then generate ideas for solutions together in groups, and the meeting ends with a brief presentation of proposed prototypes and pilots as the next step. The participants are then expected to create prototypes or pilots and test these on their users as their homework.

During the third and last meeting, the participants present their prototypes and explain how they have been received by the target groups during testing. They then have the opportunity to reflect on whether and how they could implement service

design as a method in their everyday work. We also saw this as part of the evaluation of the course. The ambition was that the participants would gain new skills that they could use; if the discussion had shown that this was not actually the case, then the course content would consequently need to be adapted.

During the course, the participants have access to a team in Microsoft Teams, which serves as a forum where participants can ask questions and get support from the course leaders. We also publish literature, video and audio tips on service design there.

To facilitate our planning for the sessions, we also created folders in the course team for sessions two and three where participants could hand in their homework, i.e. results of studies and later prototypes and results from tests of these. The submission was voluntary for the first course intake, but we have since made it mandatory as it allowed us to keep track of the participants' progress and prepare our feedback for the following meeting.

Results and outcomes

So far, after two rounds, the course has been completed by 18 participants. Afterwards, they each received a short evaluation questionnaire where they could write in their own words what the best and worst things were about the course, and what we should take with us to the next round. At the last course meeting, as mentioned above, we also had a segment where the participants reflected on the possibilities of incorporating service design into their everyday work.

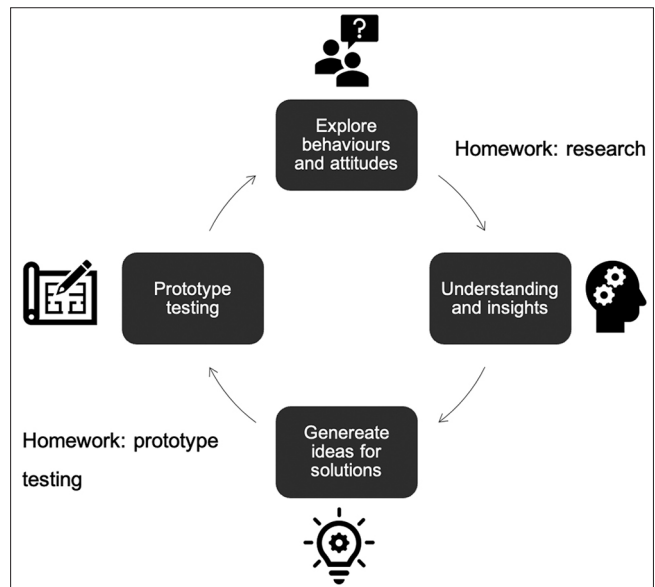


Figure 3 The service design process and our course outline.

The majority of the course participants have appreciated meeting colleagues from different parts of the university and being able to exchange experiences and learn from each other. Most also expressed that they both want to and can apply what they have learnt in their regular activities. We see this as an achievement of our objectives with the course, and that we have both promoted collaboration across organisational as well as geographical boundaries and spread the approach of putting the user's perspective in focus. Even if our goal was mainly to build bridges between the library and other parts of the university, an unintended positive outcome is of course the bridges built between other university functions and offices as well.

Lessons learned and what happens next

At the time of writing, we are looking forward to a new course intake in September 2023, with the first course meeting in October. Although the official invitation to apply will not be published until early September, we already have four colleagues signed up from the library, and another two are expected to join us from the university communications office. The intake is limited to 15 participants, though this also takes into account that we will very likely have some drop-outs. To combat the risk of participants dropping out, we have tried to clarify the workload between course meetings, as we think time management is the main reason for participants leaving the course early. We have also learned that we need to repeat often how the course works and when we do what; or, as we frequently tell our colleagues during UX and service design work – trust the process!

Further reading

- Dahrén, K., 2019. The UX Button: an exploratory approach to UX embedding. In: Priestner, A., ed. *User Experience in Libraries Yearbook 2019*. Goxhill: UX in Libraries, pp. 78–84. Available at: <<https://res.slu.se/id/publ/113501>>.
- Martin, B. and Hanington, B.M., 2012. *Universal methods of design 100 ways to research complex problems, develop innovative ideas, and design effective solutions*. 1st edition. Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers.
- Vermaercke, P. *Service Design Toolkit – Improve the quality of your service with this hands-on toolkit*. Available at: <<https://servicedesigntoolkit.org/index.html>> [Accessed: 12 September 2023].