When given the topic “the user experience,” I assumed there must be an entire discipline and literature devoted to it. Being a well-trained reference librarian with all the resources of a large research library at my disposal, I naturally turned to Wikipedia, where I discovered that there are some sources of a large research library at my disposal, I naturally to it. Being a well-trained reference librarian with all the resummed there must be an entire discipline and literature devoted when given the topic “the user experience,” I assumed all the resources of a large research library at my disposal, I naturally turned to Wikipedia, where I discovered that there are some excellent principles in the user experience (UX) literature. I’m glad I had studies to tell me this.

How hard can this be?
The UX literature consists of many complicated elements: information architecture, industrial design, interaction design, and human-computer interaction. If I could master all those, I might give up librarianship for something more lucrative.

There are also numerous research methods for UX design: eye-tracking, data mining, ethnographic studies, intercept surveys, A/B testing. Perhaps I could do some benchmarking and message board mining in my usability lab... if I had a usability lab.

In one study, a UX team “adopted the Rapid Iterative Testing and Evaluation (RITE) to achieve success by taking advantage of its three main facets: an easily modifiable prototype, faster, more frequent feedback, and a design that evolved over time.”

A UX case study in a library summed up several studies on what library users want. It seems they want “familiar and easily learned discovery interfaces” that provide a range of quality resources electronically.

Modifiable design, feedback, easy interfaces, good resources... I’m glad I had studies to tell me this.

Sympathy for the user
This isn’t difficult stuff. Users don’t have problems because we aren’t doing enough user experience studies—the problems result from a failure of moral reasoning on our part. We even get the easy stuff wrong.

We sometimes act as if library users are some exotic species difficult to understand, necessitating expensive research teams most of us will never get, doing time-consuming studies for which most of us don’t have staff.

We’re library users, too, but we’re so familiar with our libraries that we overlook the flaws, workarounds, and frustrations. We’re so snug in our systems and habits that we forget what it’s like to be so comfortable with our libraries, and we forget we’ve forgotten. Snug can make you smug.

In his Theory of Moral Sentiments, Adam Smith argues that our moral understanding and actions are based on sentiment, especially sympathy and imagination. We naturally feel sympathy at the pain and distress of others and are able to imagine ourselves in their place.

Creating positive user experiences isn’t that difficult if we just have some imagination and sympathy. How many studies do we need to tell us people like ease, familiarity, simplicity, and quality and in that order?

By all means talk to library users and study how they use the library, but we also need to break out of our complacency and imagine ourselves in the place of the library user.

If we did, what would we think about a guide to history resources at a college library website I visited recently? The “guide” was ten screens long, an alphabetical list divided into such useless categories as “subscription databases” and “indexes” (which turned out also to be subscription databases). It was a big block of text with no attempt to prioritize or guide, and the library had numerous “guides” just like this one.

Imagination? Sympathy? The guide might as well be in Chinese. Contrast that with a typical LibGuide, or with search boxes like Primo or Summon prominently displayed on library websites. It’s easy to understand why a well-designed LibGuide or a single search box is more user-friendly than ten screens of dense prose, and this understanding doesn’t require an expensive research team or extensive studies or immersion in the UX literature. To start, it just takes some imagination and sympathy. Users want simplicity, ease of use, and quality resources. Well, guess what? So do I.

A little imagination goes a long way
Personal interactions aren’t a big part of UX studies, but they’re a big part of reference, either in person or virtually. Go near a reference desk, and you’ll occasionally see the Serious Librarian. Very stern and professional, eyes fixed on the computer monitor, scowl firmly in place. As a library user, would any of you want to approach this librarian to ask a question? If you wandered into that library, would you see welcoming curiosity or indifferent hostility?

Imagination? Sympathy? Scowling librarians are nothing new, but they might as well be giving library users the finger. Making things better for library users isn’t that difficult if we just shake ourselves out of our complacency, forget what it’s like to be a librarian, and remember what it’s like to be a normal person again. It’s a matter of moral reasoning as much as anything else. Imagination and sympathy. What would we want if we were in the place of the user? What can we do to make that happen? The choices are often easy, even if acting on them is sometimes hard.