

InformalScience.org Front-End User Survey Summary

Participants & Method

We posted a 10 question survey on the InformalScience.org website in fall 2005 to better understand who uses the site, how it is used, and what users would like from the website. Responses were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. 87 users responded to the survey.

Summary

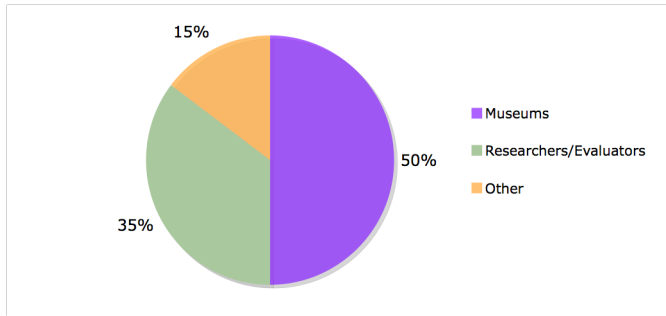
The results revealed a broad base of users. Of the 87 respondents, 50% were associated with museums, 35% with university/independent research groups and 15% with other types of organizations (e.g., multimedia, design firms). Respondents represented a variety of professions, including educators, evaluators, designers, administrators, students, producers and writers.

Of those who used the website prior to answering the survey, most (62%) visit a few times a year. Their reasons for visiting are varied, but the overwhelming majority (65%) seeks content: references, evaluation studies and articles. Other purposes include general exploring (16%), checking listings (12%), and posting information (4%). Thus, it is not surprising that users report searching for content and downloading reports as the most frequently used features. Community-related features (e.g., conference listings, viewing virtual business cards) were used occasionally, whereas contributory activities (e.g., posting and updating information) were used infrequently.

Overall, users are positive about InformalScience.org, describing it as a unique and highly cherished central resource—"a huge step forward to have so much consolidated in one place," "...the de-facto site for finding articles on museum learning." Still, there is room for improvement. For example, users value the reference database, but see the content in need of updating and want more sophisticated search functions, increased annotations and direct access to the articles themselves. Users also like downloading evaluation studies, but wish more studies were available from more evaluators, that the studies were more easily searchable and the submission process more streamlined. Significantly, many users also wish for dynamic ways to facilitate information sharing, virtual networking and communication across disciplinary boundaries. Their recommendations include facilitating information sharing among practitioners, inviting peer-review of research, cultivating active dialogue, inviting crosstalk between researchers and practitioners directly from the site, providing information about ongoing informal science projects and soliciting articles from leaders in the field. Essentially, users want InformalScience.org to support a learning culture.

I. Who Uses InformalScience.org?

Which of organization best represents your affiliation? Most responses (n=51) identified organizational affiliation as museums (e.g., science centers, museums with living collections, etc), some (n=36) as research organizations (e.g., university, independent research firms), and the remaining (n=15) from other organizational segments (e.g., media production). Some respondents identified themselves across organizations and gave multiple responses.



Types of Organizations & Associated Frequencies

Science museum/technology center	28
University Researcher	21
Independent research/evaluation group	17
Living collections	16
Children's Museum	5
Exhibit Design Firm	5
Community Organization	3
History Museum	2
Professional Organization	2
Publisher/Curriculum Developer	2
Independent Consultant	2
Media Production/Broadcaster	1
Funding Agency/Foundation	0

Total Number of Responses **104**
 n=84 (Note: some respondents gave multiple responses.)

How would you primarily describe yourself? Respondents represented a wide spectrum of professions within informal learning. Some identified themselves across professions and gave multiple responses.

Would you primarily describe yourself as a(n):

Educator	28
Evaluator	25
Academic Researcher	19
Developer/Designer	15
Manager/Administrator	15
Student	8
Grant writer/Development Officer	5
Other	3
Producer/Writer	2
Funder	0

Total Number of Responses **120**

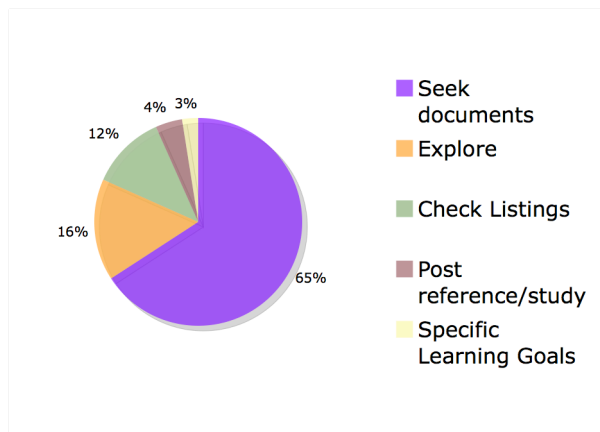
II. How is InformalScience.org Currently Used?

How often do you visit the InformalScience.org site?

Of those who responded to this question and who had visited the site prior to answering the survey (n=48), most (n=31) accessed the website a few times a year. A smaller number of users visited the site monthly (10), weekly (6), and annually (3).

Why do you come to InformalScience.org? What features do you use?

The reasons for visiting are varied, but the overwhelming majority of responses (n=76) involved **seeking content** (n=50) which included looking for references, evaluation studies, and articles. Other purposes included general exploring (n=12), checking listings (n=9), posting information (n=3) such as articles and virtual business cards, and specific learning goals (n=2).



The site is an important repository for information about informal learning:

From seeking documents to posting and checking listings...

- I primarily visit the site looking for documents, and have posted my virtual business card in the past.
- Looking for research papers and evaluation reports.
- I found the community section most useful.

From general exploration to specific learning goals...

- Looking for program and resource ideas.
- Looking for opportunities to support informal science education in rural bush Alaska. Currently using site to learn steps to proposal process.
- I look for evaluation and research on topics related to current projects I am working on.

Questions about Usage of InformalScience.org

We asked respondents to characterize their usage of the site, specifically to characterize how often they access different features, its usability, as well as the helpfulness and relevance of its content.

Overall, the responses suggested that users were positive about InformalScience.org. For example, many would return to the site and would recommend it to other professionals. Features related to research content (i.e., reference database and evaluation studies) were the most popular and content and were considered useful and helpful to accomplishing one's work. Community information (e.g., the calendar of events, virtual business cards) was used less frequently.

The usability of InformalScience.org could stand some improvement. Overall, respondents did not like the interface and found the information difficult to find. Moreover, the site in its current configuration was not viewed as supporting networking among users.

Frequency of Usage	Never	Occasionally	Often	Weighted Value*
Search for Documents	14	23	30	263
Download articles/reports	21	25	20	216
Visit conference listings page	41	25	1	122
Use calendar of events	42	22	2	120
Visit grant/funding information page	41	26	0	119
Use virtual business cards	45	19	2	114
Post articles/reports	55	7	3	94
Search for an evaluator	54	12	0	90
Update virtual business cards	59	7	0	80
n=67 (Note: Respondents did not value each statement.)				

*We weighted responses by multiplying *Never* by a factor of 1; *Occasionally* by a factor of 3; and *Often* by a factor of 6. *Occasionally* is defined as 1-3 times/year and *Often* as 5+ times/year.

Usability	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Weighted Value*
I would come back to this site again	49	3	1	48
It was easy to use this site	37	10	7	30
The organization of information was clear	32	14	8	24
I found the information I intended	30	14	9	21
I accomplished the task I intended	29	16	9	20
I like the interface, look & feel of the site	23	23	7	16
n=54 (Note: Respondents did not value each statement.)				

*We weighted responses by multiplying *Agree* by a factor of 1; *Neutral* by a factor of 0; and *Disagree* by a factor of -1 and then summed the values for each statement.

Usefulness & Relevance	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Weighted Value*
I find the available content useful	42	7	0	42
I would recommend the site to others	42	7	0	42
Using the site helps me with my work	38	9	2	36
The site has the information I want	29	17	3	26
The site has the functions & features I need	28	16	5	23
The site helps me prepare a better evaluation study	23	24	2	21
The site helps me prepare a better proposal	18	29	2	16
The site is useful for networking	14	27	8	6
n=49 (Note: Respondents did not value each statement.)				

*We weighted responses by multiplying *Agree* by a factor of 1; *Neutral* by a factor of 0; and *Disagree* by a factor of -1 and then summed the values for each statement.

III. How Might InformalScience.org Serve User Needs?

We asked users to list the most negative aspects and the most positive aspects of the site. Of the 114 responses from a total of 79 respondents, content-related concerns about the database, evaluation studies, articles, and community listings generated the most attention (n=60). Concern about usability—ease of finding information, site organization, design—garnered 35 comments, but community building only 4 comments. Whereas usability generated both positive and negative comments, community building only generated negative comments, suggesting that networking is poorly supported. Interestingly, 15 comments referred to the value or significance of InformalScience.org to the informal learning profession.

Issues	Positive	Negative
Content (53%)	Access to reference database and evaluation studies Listings of conferences, etc... Like openness of content availability	Database is going out-of-date Evaluation studies are too few Scope is too narrow Limited annotations & access to the articles No apparent peer review
Usability (30%)	Easy to use Functional	Organization is difficult to follow Primitive search functions Difficult submission process
Significance (13%)	Valuable as a clearinghouse for informal learning information Unique resource unavailable elsewhere Community Resources	No negative comments
Community Building (4%)	No positive comments	No opportunities for networking Inconsistent response to problems & emails

Users identified both positive and negative aspects of the site:

*What users liked about the **content** ...*

- The pre-2000 bibliography is pretty complete.
- The case studies section is a unique and useful resource.
- Having some of the articles reviewed is very helpful. Even abstracts would help a lot (actually even more than a review in many cases).
- Access to unpublished reports.
- The list of events, workshops, and other organizations.

*... and what users thought could be improved about the **content** ...*

- It is lacking many of the more recent articles.
- Wish there were more abstracts included with the titles.
- No access to full articles.
- Limited number of [evaluation] reports posted so far.
- Entries should be peer-reviewed.

*What users liked about **usability** ...*

- The name/URL is easy to remember.
- Clear, concise (usually) information. Easy for beginner to understand (though how the information is applied might be something to look into).

*... and didn't like about **usability** ...*

- The search tools are rather primitive.
- I sometimes have trouble finding things on the site - it is hard to guess how what I am looking for will fit within the four core areas.
- Not clear how to submit work, or what we should submit.

*What users thought could be improved about **community building** ...*

- There is no human presence for fostering dialogue.
- There is no sense of who the world of informal science is.
- No subgroup representations.

*What users thought about the **significance** of InformalScience.org to the field ...*

- Just the site's existence -- collection of materials on informal learning.
- Lots of information in one place.
- We really need a central reference place. It is SO hard to learn what colleagues are doing and what they learned. I'm sure we duplicating work all over the place.
- Really helps showcase the great professional work being done in informal science learning.

... And how much further we have to go ...

- The site has the potential to lead the field as an informal learning clearinghouse, but needs to invest in functionality, information and creating active dialogue.

Please let us know how we could make the site better for you. Of the 39 responses, improvements to content (n=18) assumed the greatest number of recommendations, followed by community building (n=12), and usability (n=9). Considering content's importance throughout prior user responses, it is not surprising that it ranked first among recommendations for improvements to the site. However the emergence of community building is surprising. With the exception of a few previous negative comments, users had not mentioned their desire for networking, information sharing, and supporting a learning culture.

Issues	Comments
Content (46%)	Update content Increase annotations Improve access to references Expand scope to represent broader informal learning community Improve searchability of evaluation studies
Community Building (31%)	Facilitate information sharing Facilitate communication and provide opportunities for networking Create a culture
Usability (23%)	Improve the search function for references and evaluation studies Streamline submission process Respond to requests

Users recommended the following improvements to ...

Community Building

- Perhaps a discussion board would allow more direct interaction amongst the community.
- Provide more networking directly from the site.
- Bring practitioners into site development and management to create an active learning culture.
- I wonder if there is a way to provide information about the various projects happening, even when there is no external report. It would be great just to know who is doing what (or has done it already).
- It would be nice if there was an online peer-reviewed journal that would publish work from professionals in the field. I'm not talking just academics either. I think practitioners could submit work on what they are doing as well. Basically, we need better communication in the field on what's going on around the country, and this would be a great way to keep up, but right now it's pretty scatter-shot.
- Foster user responsibility for contributing articles and information.

Content

- Keeping it up to date is my single biggest request.
- Peer-review and annotate references.

Usability

- Personally, I would like it to be more than just a collection of citations. It's hard to know the context of the work that's being done. It would be nice if there were some major categories so we had a way to get started. If you don't already know what you're looking for, it can be challenging or intimidating to dive in and look randomly for resources.
- Streamline the report entry process.