

DIY Induction: developing an active learning programme in the Harrison Learning Centre

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Background and rationale

The Harrison Learning Centre in the University of Wolverhampton is a purpose built, four floor building containing a blend of hi-tech resources with traditional library services. The Centre services six academic schools and attracts an average of 600,000 visits per year. The self-service style of operation in the Centre can undoubtedly appear daunting for new students. However, it is vitally important that students make use of the resources available from an early stage in their course and develop the confidence to use the range of diverse services on offer.

Traditionally the library induction programmes offered to all new first year undergraduates and postgraduates during their induction week involved a lecture style presentation. In many cases the length of time available for these presentations was dependent on the structure of the students' overall induction programme, and could vary between 15 and 60 minutes from course to course. In order to accommodate the large number of students from the six schools serviced by the Learning Centre, the presentations typically were delivered to groups of 100 – 250 students at a time, making accompanied tours within the building an impossibility, given the time scale and numbers involved.

Observation and feedback from staff working on front-line helpdesks, and from academic staff and student liaison meetings, tended to suggest that although the induction exercise may have succeeded as a public relations operation, and introduced the students to the Learning Centre services and staff, it did little to equip the students with the basic information and skills they required to become self sufficient and confident users of the services available.

The innovation

With our continual awareness of the need to support the large numbers of new students (approx 58% of the 13,000 entering the University in 2002 were supported by the Harrison Learning Centre), coming from a wide range of educational, social and cultural backgrounds, the Academic Resource Librarian responsible for user education continued to look at alternative approaches to improve the learning experience of the induction programme.

A pilot project which had previously been undertaken with a group of students in the school of Computing and Information Technology in 2001 working in close collaboration with academic staff, and forming a compulsory part of the students' induction programme, proved to be both popular and successful with the students. The pilot study involved an introductory talk about the services and resources available in the Centre. Students were then given the printed sheets of information and questions which required them to go into the Centre and use the on-line catalogue to locate books and journals. The outcome of this project and research coming from other Institutions e.g. University of Loughborough

(Gadd 2001) and Bristol (Nichols 1993) together with the publications of Caravello (2000) and Lorenzen (2001) encouraged staff to continue with a move towards more active and co-operative learning environments, in line with research. It was decided therefore to adapt this pilot scheme and to develop further the concept of active learning, to make it suitable for students from a broader range of disciplines.

A new DIY (Do It Yourself) guide was developed in the form of a professionally designed booklet which would be given to all new students entering in 2002. The aims of the new DIY guide were two fold. Firstly, to enable all new students physically to orientate themselves in the large centre at a time and pace which was conducive to their needs, and secondly, to enable them to test their newly gained knowledge in a supportive environment.

The time scale for the development and production of the new product was just four months during which time the Learning Centre was undergoing a major building extension in order to incorporate the stock from another campus library. This proved to be an unexpected and additional challenge for the project team.

It is also important to stress that this DIY Guide was not intended to replace contact with Learning Centre staff during the induction period. It was still envisaged that the Academic Resource Librarians would have a brief induction meeting with new students during which time they would hand out the DIY Guide and would encourage students to complete the task at a convenient time. The pilot scheme indicated that close working contact with academic staff and the compulsory nature of the task did add weight to the exercise, so wherever possible our intention was to encourage academics to support this new initiative. To enable the evaluation process to be continued, three additional schools agreed to support the project and to provide feedback.

The project timetable was as follows.

(2002)

May	Review feedback from students who took part in pilot scheme
June	Focus groups for Academic Resource Librarians to discuss resources and services for inclusion
June	Design Studio staff evaluate building layout
July	Text document to design studio
August	Draft copies for evaluation and trial within Learning Centre
Mid September	Final draft returned to Design Studio for printing
End September	Guides distributed to Academic Resource Librarians
December	Review feedback – students, academic staff and Learning Centre staff

The DIY Guide

Having agreed on the desired learning outcomes, the next task was to produce a generic guide for all new students which would lead them through a complex four-floor building, in an orderly fashion, and would enable them to successfully locate the essential services and resources, whilst retaining their attention and interest through out the exercise. The design and layout of the building, which had a central atrium, made it possible to create a “pathway” which went up one side of the building, across the top floor and back down the other side, enabling the students to explore all four floors on each side. However, in order to achieve this pathway, many doors and corridors had to be negotiated and there was potential opportunity for students to stray from the arranged path.

We were fortunate to have the services of a designer in the University’s Design Studio with whom we worked closely from the start of the project. Having explained the aims and learning outcomes of the project, he spent many hours becoming familiar with the building layout and ergonomics. At this stage we were advised that due to the complexity of the building it would be helpful to have the route marked in appropriate places with

arrows to help and reassure students along the way. This was something that had not been considered, and had not been necessary in the early pilot because the students were from one discipline and therefore were focused on one area of the building.

Academic Resource Librarians had the responsibility for selecting the specific resources and services to be included in the tour and also for the production of the basic text. After several drafts the text was given to the design studio who worked on a first mock-up of the guide. It was important that the final product would be in a style and format that was suitable for the task and yet within budget. For example, it was felt that students would be happier carrying an A5 sized booklet, rather than a more unmanageable A4 sized one.

The draft Guide produced by the Design Studio took the form of a 12 page, A5 booklet. The front page contained attractive graphics and the title “DIY TOUR - A self-guided tour of the Harrison Learning Centre”.

Section One described a walk through the building, noting key services on each floor. This was accompanied by a series of questions relating to the services and resources *en route*. Boxes were provided for students to write in their answers. The centre pages showed the layout of all four floors diagrammatically, again indicating where key services were to be found.

Section Two of the booklet was called the “Learning Centre Challenge” and consisted of six activities involving the use of the catalogue OPAC and questions relating to borrowing services. The final statement in the Guide encouraged students to talk to the staff at any of the information helpdesks if they were uncertain about any of their answers.

The back cover had details of contact numbers and opening hours in the Centre.

To accompany the Guide the Design Studio produced a series of colour coordinated, adhesive backed, plastic arrows which were designed for sticking on the carpet at strategic locations to guide the students through the building.

Initial reactions to the draft from the Academic Resource Librarians were good. The professionally designed guide produced in Quarkxpress was visually far more appealing than the in-house printed MS Word document used in the pilot in 2001. Minor adjustments were made and the final draft became available for evaluation by the staff in August 2002.

In addition, we trialled the Guide using three external volunteers: an 18-year-old pupil from a local school, a mature member of the public and a student on work placement in the University. They were asked to follow the DIY Guide and comment on the clarity of the text, the ease of directions, the suitability of the questions, and the overall experience.

Following feedback from all evaluators, additional minor amendments were made and a final draft was produced, which received a final proof reading before being printed.

The outcomes

All new students were given a copy of the DIY guide during their induction talk and were encouraged to complete the guide individually or in small groups if they preferred. Three schools were targeted to provide feedback from their students and selected tutors engaged in this activity by handing out the questionnaires at the beginning of term and collecting them back in at the end of October.

Results of the feedback questionnaires:

- There were 480 student replies of which 81% were from undergraduates and 19% from postgraduate
- Previous experience of using other libraries [63% school, 58% public, 10% academic]
- 74% completed the tour in pairs or small groups
- 56% found arrows helpful in navigating the building

- 80% located all resources requested
- 86% reported the tour was essential
- 84% reported the experience had given them confidence in finding books

These results deserve further comment. Students found the arrows on the floors extremely helpful. Unfortunately, no-one had informed the cleaners, who carefully removed them in several areas! In addition, others became dislodged through the large numbers of people passing through the building. Also, although only 80% located all the resources requested, this was in no small part because one whole floor was made temporarily inaccessible when it was taken over by the Registry for student enrolments.

Observations

Students were seen to be actively engaged in this exercise. Most worked in pairs or small groups and were therefore interacting with each other in the very early stages of their induction week. This in itself was commented on by students as a very positive experience.

Staff reported a perceived increase in the use of On-line Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) by students. This was supported by a reduction in the number of basic OPAC enquiries normally experienced at this time of year by the Helpdesks.

Learning centre statistics showed a large uptake in the use of self-service machines in the Centre over previous years, which must, in part, be credited to the success of the project.

Benefits

It is no longer possible or appropriate to provide all new students with a guided tour during their induction programme. The group sizes are too large and the environment is not conducive to effective learning. The use of the active learning tour package (the DIY Guide) will ensure that from an early stage in their education students will be able to locate the materials and resources that they will need throughout their studies at the University. This method of initial induction will further enable Learning Centre staff to focus their time and expertise on the provision of advanced information skills as required by more experienced students.

The DIY Guide will be used to support other induction activities and will be a useful support for students transferring in from other institutions mid-term.

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