Enhancing the first-year experience: ten ways to involve library services

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Introduction

The first year of university can be a challenging time for students, as is demonstrated by drop-out rates, low achievement and students suffering from anxiety or depression (Wong et al, 2006). Leeds Met Libraries and Learning Innovation have recently achieved the 'gold standard' Charter Mark for excellence in customer services, and are seeking ways to improve the students' learning experience.

There are two main challenges facing first-years in relation to libraries. The first is that many students feel that the library may be irrelevant to their studies as so much is available online (Barefoot, 2006). The second is that many new students are afraid of the library (Barefoot, 2006). It is a widely held view that students need to learn how to "find, manipulate and use information" (Barefoot, 2006). These competencies can be referred to as information skills, research skills or information literacy. This article draws upon recent literature on the subject of the first-year experience and academic libraries, seeking out examples of best practice. Ten of these are detailed below, to offer practical suggestions to tutors, librarians and course administrators, with the overall aim of enhancing the first-year experience. The ten tips chosen include library instruction, delivery, linking library activities to assignments, orientation (inductions), campus tours, fun, collaboration between tutors and librarians, library space (ambience), treasure hunts and ways of engaging students.

1. **Library instruction** should be an integral part of courses across the curriculum. There is an academic librarian for each subject offered at Leeds Met. Librarians can tailor training and information literacy to meet the subject needs of students. "The ability to find information, evaluate information resources...is critical in this information-rich society" (Samson and Granath, 2004). Cox and Housewright (2001) describe a program that uses "web-based resources and state of the art technology" to create an innovative course that enables a "library learning environment". A study by Hsieh and Knight (2008) found that problem-based learning "leads to better outcomes for the learning styles of engineering students" compared with lecture-based learning. There is a wealth of learning materials available at Leeds Met created by the academic librarians that will help to incorporate information literacy skills into the first-year curriculum.

2. **Delivery:** Librarians should be involved in the direct delivery of first-year programmes and should be included in the delivery of modules. According to Bisset (2004) it is a challenge for libraries to gain the attention of faculties in integrating information searching, evaluating and synthesising skills into the curriculum. Southwestern University's library successfully embedded library instruction into a compulsory first-year foundational course (Parks, 1996). The University of Tennessee has similarly created a course that combines the University libraries and the First Year Studies program to integrate research skills and information literacy into the first-year curriculum (Bullard et al, 2007). Collaborations between librarians and tutors will help to embed information skills into course structures.

3. **Linking library activities to assignments:** Students need to be helped to establish healthy learning habits by being given assessments that oblige them to use library resources. "Research instruction or information literacy is a critical element that needs to be embedded into the academic experiences of first-year students" (Samson and Granath, 2004). Offering academic credit, for example points, may encourage students to study information literacy (Barefoot, 2006). Brown et al (1997) suggest that turning the library induction into an assessment will motivate students to carry out the task. They also propose linking library activities to assignments that tutors and librarians assess jointly. Some lecturers at Leeds Met are including assessments that require the exploitation of library resources and could be used as examples for others to follow.

4. **Library orientation and inductions:** There is a commonly held view that students suffer anxiety about using libraries. Bostick's Library Anxiety Scale measures levels of anxiety. Brown et al (2004) used the scale to assess the anxiety levels of first-year students before and after undergoing orientation sessions. According to their study, the moderate anxiety demonstrated by students "was significantly decreased after the orientation sessions". Bowling Green State University has even appointed a 'first-year experience' librarian "to help students overcome their anxiety and develop their proficiency at using the library" (Davis, 1999). Brown et al (1997) recommend being "gentle" with students as they may "be daunted and terrified by the sheer size of the place and may feel very anxious and out of their depth".

5. **Campus tours:** According to Barefoot (2006) it may be prudent to address first-year students even before they join the first year. On the campus tour, the library should be an important stop. There should also be a librarian to welcome the prospective students and to stress the importance of the library to their academic experience.

6. **Making library inductions fun:** At induction the library should be included as an important and integral part of the students' orientation to the university. Ensuring there is a librarian there to repeat the critical importance of the library will help to anchor the point (Barefoot, 2006). All first-year students at Leeds Met are offered an induction to the library. Brown et al (1997) propose making inductions fun, and setting tasks involving finding things in the library that will make the students smile when they discover them. They also suggest using different ways of inducting students to the library, according to the variety of different learning styles preferred. For example, some students will prefer a self-study booklet, whereas for others a group tour will be ideal.

7. **Collaboration between tutors and librarians:** Further to point 1, tutors need to include library staff in discussions about the first-year experience (Barefoot, 2006). There needs to be collaboration between librarians and tutors to make "library instruction an integral part of courses across the curriculum" (Barefoot, 2006). Similarly, in Bundy's view, academics, students and librarians need to collaborate in designing uses of library space to facilitate its contribution to education, in addition to providing useful collections and access to information (Bundy, 2004). Librarians and tutors need to share a joint goal, that students will get the best possible start to their academic career by becoming expert consumers of information. A good example of collaboration between tutor and academic librarian at Leeds Met involved the librarian marking the bibliographic element of a computing module assignment.

8. **Library space and ambience:** Bundy (2004) emphasises the role of libraries as "place" and "social and educational capital". Bundy sees academic libraries as "educational change agents". He also encourages joint use of libraries, which is "the ultimate form of cooperation". He says that libraries can achieve this by "retailing approaches to ambience, interior design, furniture, lighting, signage, pervasive ICT and eating and drinking facilities" (Bundy, 2004). At Leeds Met, the main libraries have Wi-Fi, 24-hour access and comfortable seating. According to Barefoot (2006) offering 24-hour help and coffee-making facilities further enhances the ambience in libraries. According to Bundy, libraries should be welcoming, inexpensive, flexible and highly accessible. They should also cater for all learning styles and encompass areas for silent study, noisy study, group work, individual work, study spaces for people with disabilities and electronic study. "It is not the space allocated to books which is critical; it is the space allocated to people" (Bundy, 2004). Leeds Met took into account the many different learning styles of students when designing the layouts of the libraries, and has different study areas available. At Curtin University Library in Australia, the Library has even incorporated a Newsroom with a large screen plasma television for watching foreign language news (Budrovich, 2007).

9. **Treasure hunts:** Thompson and Kardos et al (2008) designed and implemented a treasure hunt involving library clue cards, which encouraged students to gather information and explore their local library. Their experience led them to concur that the treasure hunt helped their students to "learn, gain confidence, gather information and explore". This works particularly well when the activities are aligned with the learning expectations of the course. Dent (2003) describes the utilisation of a "web-based virtual library orientation package". The tutorial includes library and bibliographic instruction, a virtual tour and a quiz.

10. **Engaging students:** Traditionally, library inductions have taken place in lecture theatres and seminar rooms to large cohorts of first-year students. An examination of recent literature on this topic (Hsieh and Knight, 2008) suggests that this may no longer be the most effective route to engage students with their library. There are many alternatives to lecture-based delivery, such as treasure hunts, quizzes, virtual tours, booklets and problem-based learning. Librarians need to innovate to engage with all learning styles, as well as with the specific requirements of part-time students, international students and students with special needs (Brown et al, 1997).

Conclusion

The first-year experience is crucial in retaining students. Trotter and Roberts (2006) state that "literature has consistently declared the first year to be the most critical in shaping persistence decisions". Involving library services in instruction as well as induction serves to enhance the experience and to teach students skills that may enable them to become high achievers, lifelong learners with sought-after skills that may enhance employability. Tutors, course administrators and librarians need to work collaboratively in order to achieve the joint goal of improving the learning experience of first-year students.

Librarians are available at Leeds Met to tailor information literacy teaching to meet students' specific subject needs. Library inductions are offered to all new students and staff and the libraries are included on campus tours, with staff there to welcome students and their parents. The recent refurbishment of the Headingley library provided an opportunity for Libraries and Learning Innovation to respond directly to feedback and observations of students "to provide library spaces for the way they actually work, not the way we think they ought to work" (Everest and Morris, 2008). In line with the Civic Quarter library, the Headingley library now has 24/7 opening hours (365 days of the year), WiFi, a single help and information point, state-of-the-art self-service machines, different types of study areas (including silent, group and informal) and a disability resource room. The books are also in one single sequence with colour coded signage to aid accessibility for visually impaired and dyslexic students. The latest National Student Survey results showed that students at Leeds Met value learning resources highly (81%).

Some of the librarians are hoping to undertake a research project this year to evaluate the current provision of information literacy at Leeds Met and to offer recommendations for the future. Other areas for possible further development may include creating new ways to engage students during library inductions.

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