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Disability awareness for libraries – how have the Open Rose Group used their training package in four member institutions?



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LEEDS MET UNIVERSITY - ALY PEACOCK AND SUE SMITH,
LEARNING SUPPORT OFFICERS

At Leeds Met, we have delivered four workshops on dyslexia to over 70 staff. We watched the film, did a language de-coding exercise, a short quiz, we also asked staff to pick out who they thought was dyslexic from a picture list of 30 famous people, varying our materials and delivery styles. We then did something a little different to our usual training format and made the scenario session in the supporting materials very hands on, the idea being to take staff out of their comfort zones and make the library a frustrating place to be.



We decided to put a different slant on a very practical activity to make the familiar environment and a routine task as problematic as it could be for a dyslexic student. We asked staff to go to a specific class number and

find a book, but there was a twist. The book numbers could be interpreted 2 ways, e.g. 690 or 069 depending on which way up the card was held – dilemma 1: which section of book stock do you

go to? This was done to illustrate that different people can interpret information in different ways. We know what the book numbers mean, they have context to us so we'd know which area our books could be shelved at; students don't have this level of understanding for Dewey! If we only give this information out verbally, will the student remember it? If we write it down for them, is the way we present information clear? Are we able to leave our enquiry desks and show people how to get to the book they need?

Once staff had found the right stock section, the trainers transformed themselves in to 'the library catalogue' and phase 2 began. We asked team members to find a book that matched a dummy book spine, the information on the spine was made up of 15 symbols rather than letters and words. Another twist, when staff looked for the matching book, they were faced with 15 books with very similar spines, so they needed to return again, and again to the catalogue for help. We repeated information when the team questioned us, sometimes we weren't very helpful –just like the library catalogue! Some staff enjoyed their nasty catalogue role a bit too much!

To add to the frustration, we only allowed them quick glimpses of the dummy spine and didn't let them take it to the shelves with them to see how they coped remembering the information, again simulating what we expect students to do and remember.

It was interesting to see how the teams worked to achieve the retrieval of the correct item, and often they didn't bring it back, they just brought us any old book; again, is this what a lot of our students do when they can't find exactly what they are looking for?

This really brought it home how our students can struggle with a task we view as simple and routine. It led to a discussion on how we can help people with book retrieval and how staff on the service points can present information in a variety of more accessible, inclusive and user-friendly ways.

Staff were surprised at some of the terminology used by the students on the film, calling the library 'alien' and 'intimidating', referring to it as 'our territory'. After completing the workshop, many have commented that they now have a greater awareness of difficulties faced by our students and are more confident when offering support.

We have a series of follow up training hours to deliver for the rest of this year on dyslexia; all the sessions are being devised around direct staff comments and feedback on training needs from this initial awareness session.

Staff on the Disability Services Group have enjoyed presenting the training as we have an excellent starting point – the film of real student experiences, which has made delivery easier for us as it acts as a springboard for discussion. Staff really engaged with the training and have said they are looking forward to using the film in future sessions.

LEEDS UNIVERSITY – AUDREY COBB AND LINDSEY SCUTCHINGS, LIBRARY DISABILITY CONTACTS

We decided to have a rolling programme of training covering each of the four sections of the film. Spread over two years, delivering training to all sections of library staff – a mammoth project.

Members of the Customer Services Disabled Users Group deliver the training. This is a challenge as none of us have trained on this scale before. Dyslexia was chosen first as a large percentage of disabled students at Leeds have dyslexia. It is also an 'invisible' disability and we wanted to try to dispel the myth that all disabled students are wheelchair users or visually impaired.

Six sessions were offered at various times to catch as many staff as possible, advertised by email and on the intranet, with approximately 30 participants per session. We found that non-Customer Services staff have sometimes been reluctant to commit two and a half hours to a training session, and the take up from some sections of the library has not been as good.

We divided the training into four sections:

- quiz (including decoding exercises)
- watching the film with discussion
- what can you do to improve services in the immediate-, medium- and long-term
- evaluation of the session (feedback form).

General remarks:

- 'The decoding exercise made people feel uncomfortable. Doing an unfamiliar exercise in an unfamiliar group put them on the spot. It was noticeable how the atmosphere changed, starting with a sense of discomfort moving to relaxed discussion.'

- 'Keep sessions informal so people are encouraged to share their views.'
- 'Allow ample time for feedback: staff were really enthusiastic.'
- 'Stress suggestions will be fed back to the appropriate managers/groups. Publicise staff feedback so participants contributions are acknowledged.'
- 'Many staff were unaware of the services the library currently offers. Awareness training ideas were raised, as was the promotion and marketing of existing services.'
- 'Producing training materials on cream paper using a different font to library documentation reinforced the importance of format to someone with dyslexia. This made staff think we should look at our house style – is it user friendly?'
- 'Stress that improvements for dyslexic users often improve services for all.'
- 'Small steps can make a difference – e.g. badges saying 'how can I help?''
- 'Raising awareness of how library practices make it difficult for dyslexic students, e.g., we know that major stock moves are inevitable again this summer - suitability of signage?'

Feedback from the sessions is overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic – comments such as 'I didn't realise it was so hard for people', 'I didn't realise just coming in to the library was so difficult' were common responses. It raised questions regarding library policy, particularly with the increase in unstaffed self-service hours. It would be beneficial to implement some of the suggestions, no matter how small, and to make sure the issues raised are fed back to our senior managers. Above all, it is important to remember staff attitude is a major factor that can make a difference to dyslexic students.

It hit home with most customer services staff when we said think of students that keep coming back for help or keep asking the same question time and time again and can be regarded as 'pests'. We all felt a sense of embarrassment and guilt that we may have been irritated by such students without it ever having crossed our minds that they could be dyslexic, experiencing difficulties and had just plucked up courage to ask for help.

The film was the key factor which made the session a success as the comments from students of all ages are hard hitting and all staff could identify with the speakers and issues raised.

A training session using the dyslexia section of the film and supporting materials took place within the Learning and IT Services to trial the product and gain feedback from a cross section of different service areas. We trained IT specialists, students services staff, information assistants and advisers, and disability contacts.

The Learning and IT Services' disability co-ordinator gave a brief introduction to the morning's events and an overview of the support for students with disabilities offered by the department's disability contacts team, put in the wider context of the Disability Discrimination Act. We then viewed the dyslexia section which raised a variety of issues in the lively post-viewing discussion, such as:

- inductions for students with disabilities
- use of plain language (both verbal and written)
- the need for a spellchecker in both catalogue and databases
- use of colour-coded shelves and books
- roving profiles on networked PCs and loanable laptops.

Another issue arising from the film was the need to ensure that lecturers who may be used to recommending certain specific texts are aware that students who have difficulty getting into those resources may need to read around the subject: the implications for acquisitions policies and resource planning were recognised.

We decided to concentrate on two activities. The first was a quiz, using some of the suggestions in the supporting materials, including asking for a definition of dyslexia, a list of three or more positive characteristics which people with dyslexia may have and a list of three or more emotions which people with dyslexia might feel in the library environment. Everyone said they found it useful to see the film before the quiz to get some ideas from what the students had said.

After the quiz, we decided to hand out a list of resources and services offered by the disability contacts team, going through it together, taking questions. Also, a number of acronyms and specialist services had been mentioned in the post-viewing discussion, so it made sense for the benefit of those in the group with a non-library

background to go through these terms and services at this point.

The second and final activity we trialled was the 'scenario', which asks the trainees to consider the many issues faced by students with dyslexia as they come into a library, find a book and take it out. For this activity, the participants were split into their peer groups in order to get feedback from particular viewpoints. The staff with IT backgrounds came up with their own version of the activity: a student wanting to book an IT room to use a piece of software on a specific PC. This worked really well as many of the difficulties matched a library-specific scenario, such as understanding the booking system, finding the room with its signage issues, finding the software and knowing where to get help. We concentrated on what front-line staff can do at a service point and considered ways of making reasonable adjustments.

In summary, this training session was a very good introduction to using the materials and suggested lots of ideas on how to customise the supporting materials in future sessions. The trainees liked the fact that only one disability was covered and by splitting the group into people who work in the same service areas, the trainers were able to receive some valuable, representative feedback.

UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD - KAREN STATE, LIBRARY DISABILITY SUPPORT OFFICER

The Open Rose Group Disability Awareness training package has been an invaluable resource for staff training at our library. We recently used the film in dyslexia awareness and deaf awareness training sessions. It gave us an insight into how we can provide excellent customer service for students with disabilities.

Deaf awareness training: We felt that it is important for deaf students to feel safe in our library,





and talked about making sure desks face the inside of the room, placing mirrors strategically so that students can see what is happening around them. Good lighting is very important. Our photocopiers and printers are in corners of rooms and students may not be able to see what is going on. Staff are keen improve the environment in these areas. We talked a lot about effective communication and the ways that we can improve our help and communication methods. The training session also gave me an opportunity to talk about deaf culture and common myths about deafness such as that hearing aids completely restore hearing.

A comprehensive range of supporting training materials are included with the film and staff were impressed with the variety of exercises provided. Staff worked in small groups to reflect on the most important aspects of the film and how they could use this knowledge to make a difference in their day-to-day work, coming up with many practical, and viable solutions.

We received very good feedback for the training, commenting that it was enjoyable, fun, interactive, varied, and interesting with a good combination of teaching styles.

I enjoyed delivering the training sessions and I am looking forward to using the materials in the future.



If you would like to purchase a copy of this training package (DVD / VHS format. £40 inc p&p), or have any other enquiries about the Open Rose Group, please email openrose@email.com