Exterminating Boredom: synergy and creativity in an academic library

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Engagement
Library boring? Resources scarce? Staff stuck in a rut?
There’s nothing new under the sun and any number of articles can be found addressing these issues. Library induction in particular can be seen by students as a waste of time, boring or something they already know. Jordan and Badger (2004) talk about the “problems of growing student numbers, lack of teaching space and time, and pressure on staff” and go on to describe an electronic induction tutorial which attempts to overcome some of the difficulties. Staff too, may feel that they’ve been doing the same things for years and need a change or that they’re too junior to contribute anything worthwhile.

But does it have to be that way? By utilizing the skills and creativity of staff at all levels - professional and non-professional, we’ve found that a variety of tools and solutions have enabled us to engage with students in a variety of stimulating ways and also led to continuing staff development from NVQ qualifications to peer-reviewed journal articles. In a time when library resources are increasingly under pressure, efficient use and re-use of what’s on hand is going to become ever more important.

University of Portsmouth Library has developed a variety of projects to engage students from before they arrive, through induction, and onto further training and continuing support. For example the PrepUP project gives students an orientation before they even arrive (Collinson, 2010) and Referencing@Portsmouth (http://referencing.port.ac.uk/) supports students throughout their time at University (Gwyer et al, 2010).

Creative Ideas
Many of the projects we’ve been engaged with at the University of Portsmouth have connected with or grown out of each other in a complex net of inter-relationship, re-use and inspiration. For example, taking the decision to be involved in Freshers’ Fayre at the start of each academic year (and the ‘Refreshers’ Fayre’ in February) has allowed some of the creative idea generator types on the Library staff the opportunity to develop engaging stalls which would attract students rather than simply reinforce any ‘boring library’ stereotype. That we’ve been mistaken on occasions for the rugby club, amateur dramatic society, and Science Fiction club points to our success at ‘fitting in’ and gives us a chance to explain what we’re about. Antony Brewerton notes: “A stand with the word “Library” writ large would have only seen students taking the long route round merely to avoid the obvious boredom that is librarianship” (2003, p.271).
Some of this creativity was inspired by Brewerton running a workshop on marketing and publicity which many members of staff attended. So for example, we’ve had ‘buried treasure in the library’ with staff at the stall attired as pirates, a competition based on burying a flag in a tray of sand nearest the buried treasure, and a display of books to do with piracy and the like. The following year, with Dr Who back on television after a twenty year hiatus and becoming increasingly popular, we borrowed a life sized Dalek from our Creative and Cultural Industries faculty and themed the stall around the Tardis (like the library!) being bigger on the inside than the outside. Another year, inspired by PD James opening our new extension (Collinson, 2008), we developed a Cluedo themed stall with a floor plan of the Library done as a Cluedo board, Faculty Librarians turned into playing pieces, and a crime scene complete with chalk outline, traffic cones and ‘stop: police line’ tape.

‘Red Dalek’ as he became known led to students wanting their photos taken with him (where they weren’t too scared to approach altogether) which led to the idea of posting their photos (if they wished) on a Facebook page designed for the purpose. Meanwhile the Cluedo-like display for Freshers’ Fayre then morphed through a detective trail game for students during Induction Week into a learning object with a fully developed ‘Body in the Library’ unit in our Virtual Learning Environment which introduced distance learners to the various skills and resources they would need for a criminology course. (A taster can be seen at: http://www.elearning.port.ac.uk/body/index.html “The library must creatively develop more alternative induction packages for those not taught on the main campus.” (Toner, 2008, p.24) Subsequently a template has been developed so that this unit can be added to any course with ‘clues’ and resources slotted in which are relevant to the particular subject of study.

In turn, these kinds of projects have been written up as papers or presented at workshops, training days, and conferences, which enable others in the library community to explore similar ideas as well as contributing to professional development and promotion of the Library within the University and further afield.

Much has been written about novel ideas for induction: activity based (Edward, 2003), spiral (Laing, C., Robinson, A. & Johnston, V., 2005), Cephalonian Method (Morgan and Davies, 2004), using humour (Trefts and Blakeslee, 2000; Walker, 2006), and various electronic induction tools (Jordan & Badger, 2004 and many others.) We’ve picked up on some of these ideas but also tend to add tools to a portfolio of ways of introducing students to our facilities and resources as technologies, time and interest permits.

One such example is a PowerPoint that reinvigorated jaded induction sessions. The term “death by PowerPoint” could easy be associated with many library induction sessions. Indeed Toner (2008) suggests that tours were seen as being more useful to students than induction PowerPoints. After attending a session presented by David Starkey at a Learning and Teaching Conference in 2009 one of our Assistant Faculty Librarians was inspired to create an induction presentation that would challenge this stereotype and use PowerPoint in more creative and stimulating way. Taking inspiration from Starkey’s use of hotlinks she created a non-linear, interactive, and highly visual teaching tool that could be used by the Faculty Librarians to enhance their induction sessions. The initial version focused on induction for students from the Business School but she was quick to realise that the PowerPoint could be made more general allowing it to be used to by all the librarians. This
saved considerable staff time as each Faculty Librarian no longer needed to create their own induction presentation. The PowerPoint could be easily customised to suit a particular audience with the Librarian dipping in and out of sections that were relevant. The interactivity of the presentation means students can choose what’s next if desired. Whilst this requires the librarian to be flexible, it also allows students to discover information for themselves. Leading on from this, a link to the PowerPoint was added to the library website permitting students to access it in their own time to find information as they need it and “encourage students to explore and thus find library resources through serendipity as much as actively seeking them out” (Collinson and Williams, 2006, p.181). When used for self-directed study the user needs to be familiar with how to use PowerPoint or the non-linear functionality may be lost. It can be downloaded from http://www.port.ac.uk/library/helpyourself/induction/filetodownload,102859,en.ppt

Turning the PowerPoint into a set of web pages which are more intuitive to use yet retain the interactivity is one way we hope to further develop this project.

Web 2.0
We’ve also tried to make the most of social networking services as they’ve appeared. In creating a blog for the University of Portsmouth Library we wanted to move away from simply reporting library news. We aimed to stimulate our readers with “a round up of the bizarre and brilliant from the web”, whilst also sneaking in some more educational posts. Thing of the Day (http://reden.wordpress.com) was created where a different website, video or application would be featured each day. Some of the posts were educational and informative, some were simply creative or fun and some managed to combine the two. We wanted our students to see the library in something other than a staid and stuffy light.

Having ventured into web 2.0 with a blog, one of our library assistants was motivated to design a library Facebook page (http://www.facebook.com/uoplibrary). We had already dabbled with a Facebook presence during our Freshers’ Fayre events (see above) but it was soon realised that we had inadvertently breached Facebook’s terms and conditions. The library assistant researched the best way to represent us and with the support of senior staff built a page that encouraged students to engage with us through questions and feedback. The page was regularly updated (for example Thing of the Day is piped in automatically) and new content was created including an ‘induction tab’ designed to provide new students with the essential information they need. Gadd (2001, p.250) reminds us to serve our users rather than simply serve up what we think they want. “We have always tried to provide readers with information they want rather than what we would like to tell them.” The Facebook page, in fact, was the first to publish news that the University was closed due to snow at the start of 2010 and turned out to be a more trusted source of information for students than an official email.

As Twitter became more popular, we felt that this would be another way in which we could engage with students in a more informal and friendly style. Having established a feed we found that it wasn’t just our students who chose to follow us. We were followed by other libraries, librarians, alumni, suppliers and local businesses allowing the library a far wider audience.

We were also attracted to the idea of using wiki technology to replace our print and networked drive collections of policies, procedures, leaflets, and other useful information for
staff. All staff are encouraged to contribute and update and it has now become a much used first port of call for many library staff queries and even enquiry desk questions.

**Synergy**

Hopefully the above has shown how various ideas and projects have come from the synergy of interconnected ideas and allowing one thing to feed into another. Many of the original ideas have come out of allowing staff to ‘play’. Play in the workplace is seen by some as frivolous and a waste of time. We’d agree that it certainly shouldn’t be a ‘free-for-all’ but it does have both a useful and a serious point. Indeed, Palus & Horth (2005, p.5) refer to “serious play”. It’s “a skill in generating knowledge about the unknown aspects of a challenge through exploration, experimentation, rule bending, limit testing, levity, and sport. It is way of learning about the complexities and subtleties of an issue or problem by exploring the limits.” And it’s not just about drawing on workplace experience; home and hobby knowledge can contribute too. They add: “The competency of personalizing is about tapping into and using your unique life-experiences as resources for making sense of complex challenges” (ibid, p.3).

Our team performance was much enhanced by exploring the team role theory that R. Meredith Belbin has developed. ([http://www.belbin.com/](http://www.belbin.com/)). Understanding how different team members work together can dramatically impact the experiences and results of a group working together. Making sure there’s a ‘completer-finisher’ to see things through, utilizing the connections of a ‘resource investigator’, nurturing the ‘plants’ with their idea generation (but also knowing that not every idea needs to be given equal weight).

We believe that allowing the consilience of the vast pool of knowledge and experience that library staff have to contribute can reap great rewards. Not so much “thinking outside the box”, but revitalizing thinking inside the box of the constraints we all face in time, money and energy.

Of course, we’re not finished yet. There’s still much to do and much that can be done and improved. Some things we’ve been looking at for the future include SMS text messaging along the lines of Walsh (2010); QR codes to enable mobile users to pick up information more easily than, say, laboriously tapping in a URL; and foursquare type location aware ‘games’ to offer incentives alongside information ([http://foursquare.com/](http://foursquare.com/)). The challenge, with so much new to explore, is knowing when and how to get involved. Particularly given the issues regarding staff time and other constraints, it may pay to wait or test the waters in a low key manner. However, one advantage of some technologies, e.g. Twitter, is that it can be fitted into odd moments and a small amount of time spent on, say, a Facebook page, can reap large benefits. Even where Library Assistant time had had to be argued for, much of what we’ve described has been achieved in just one hour per week of staff time with two or three taking a ‘turn’ once a month.

**Consilience**

All of us are creative - but it may need to be encouraged. Harnad (1990) quotes Pasteur’s dictum “There is a (perhaps very large) element of chance in creativity, but it is most likely to occur if the mind is somehow prepared for it.”
Management, of course, needs to be supportive and in talking with librarians from around the country we’ve become aware that we’re privileged to work in an environment where it has been possible to explore and even, dare we admit it, to ‘play’. Palus & Horth (2005, p.3-4) note “Leaders can personalize in two ways. They can create a climate in which people can make creative connections between their personal passions and their work, and they can make these same connections for themselves.” Even in a difficult climate, guerrilla creativity is possible - using creative techniques to solve problems, inculcating an atmosphere of idea acceptance, and fostering positive attitudes. We appreciate, however, that this can be hard depending on the local climate and the attitudes of staff (at every level). On the other hand, it might be that the ideas presented here simply act as a prompt for fresh thinking and we hope it encourages seeing what consilence you can find in your own situation.

The library, or induction to the library, doesn’t have to be boring - for students or staff! The efficient use of time and resources is only going to grow more important as we are asked to do more with less. Lifelong learning and continuing professional development will mean we need to make the most of development opportunities for staff, senior or junior, who might not otherwise get a chance to exercise creative muscles and might find promotion opportunities scarce. It can also lead to academic scholarship with articles published and papers presented at conferences. These might start with internal publication and internal teaching and learning conferences and develop into peer-reviewed articles and presentations at national or even international conferences. In a climate where we increasingly need to justify our existence this can be crucial. Most importantly we have been able to inject our library services with some much needed creativity and inspiration allowing us to engage our students more effectively.

References:


**Post Publication finds**


http://www.libraryinnovation.org/article/view/31

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