Library induction: online vs face-to-face

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Background

During the past few years library induction has received a face-lift with the introduction of new and innovative methods of engaging students. The popular 'Cephalonian method' using colour, music and student participation to pose and respond to questions has introduced interactivity into the induction process.[1] Quizzes, treasure hunts and the integration of PowerPoint presentations with video have also been adopted by many institutions as means of engaging students.[2] At the University of Leeds a variety of interactive activities and media are employed to introduce new students to the university library. Although time-consuming, our librarians consider student induction to be a valuable activity, with face-to-face talks being well attended and receiving positive feedback from students.

Despite the work to improve the induction experience, one of the major concerns for academic libraries is that students are often overwhelmed by information in their first few weeks at university. Consequently they may find it difficult to retain the information provided during their library induction, not recognising its importance to their studies. As Whitton points out, it is hard to 'engage students in context-less induction activities'.[3] In 2010 Leeds university library decided that the creation of an online induction could provide some solutions to these concerns. The resource would enable students to access this information independently at their point of need, and, more pertinently, allow faculty team librarians (FTLs) to provide a blended (online and face-to-face) induction experience for students. It is generally acknowledged that blending e-learning with other approaches provides much greater opportunities to enhance students' learning experiences[4] and the University of Leeds adopted this as a university-wide strategy with the implementation of a new virtual learning environment in 2007.

At this stage it was also considered whether an online induction could be used as a replacement for face-to-face induction. Although it was appreciated that this would not be the ideal solution, it was acknowledged that it could alleviate some of the time pressures experienced by the FTLs.

The Project team

The development of the online induction was undertaken as a five-month project by the library Graduate Trainee, supervised by the Academic Skills Development Officer for information literacy and supported by an e-learning adviser and learning technologist. Additional support and advice were provided by the library Induction Development Group. This collaboration and the range of skills, knowledge and expertise were key to the success of this project.

The project was delivered in three stages: design, development and evaluation.

Design

The Graduate Trainee ran focus groups with FTLs as well as the library's Enquiry, Customer Service and Skills@Library teams to agree on the content and presentation of the information.

It was agreed that the content would be mostly generic but would highlight the subject-specific support available to students through 'talking head' videos which would provide individual introductions to each librarian as well as pointing students to their library subject support pages. In addition there was a consensus that the induction should use a range of technologies and approaches, particularly screen-capture software and videos to engage the students and ensure that dense text was kept to a minimum.

Once content was agreed, the project team decided that the induction would be created using the rapid e-learning tool Articulate Studio,

a tool used extensively by the e-learning team. Furthermore Articulate integrates well with other software such as Captivate and with the use of 'Articulate skins' we could achieve a visually engaging resource. In addition, designing a very simple navigation to avoid students becoming frustrated was essential; Articulate provides flexible navigation options. The project team drew up a spreadsheet outlining the required tasks, with a completion deadline, and assigned responsibility for completing the tasks. This helped to ensure that the project would be delivered on time.

DEVELOPMENT

The resource was split into four sections: getting started, finding and borrowing, IT and printing, and skills and support. By sectioning the resource users could to dip in and out rather than being forced to follow a linear process.

It was designed as a discrete, stand-alone package with as few external links as possible. The navigation was kept simple and multimedia were used throughout to engage and maintain interest. We used an external company to develop a number of videos to demonstrate activities such as borrowing a book and using the self-issue machine. All the other elements were created in-house, including step-through mini-tutorials to show library procedures such as searching the catalogue. The resource also introduces the FTLs through short video clips and uses photograph tours to help students find their way around the libraries.
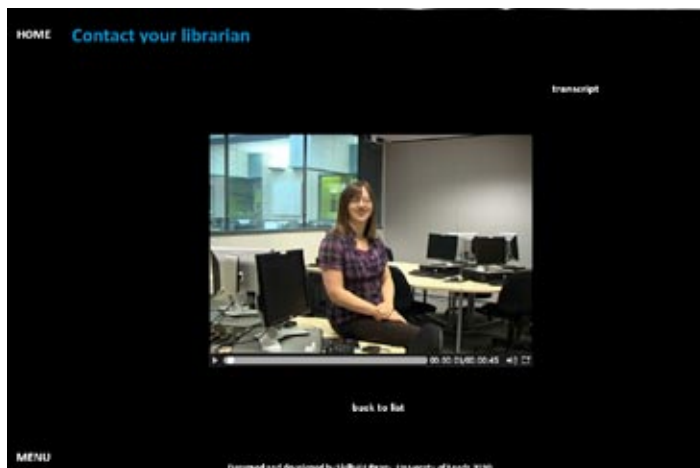
Example of a Faculty Team Librarian introductory video
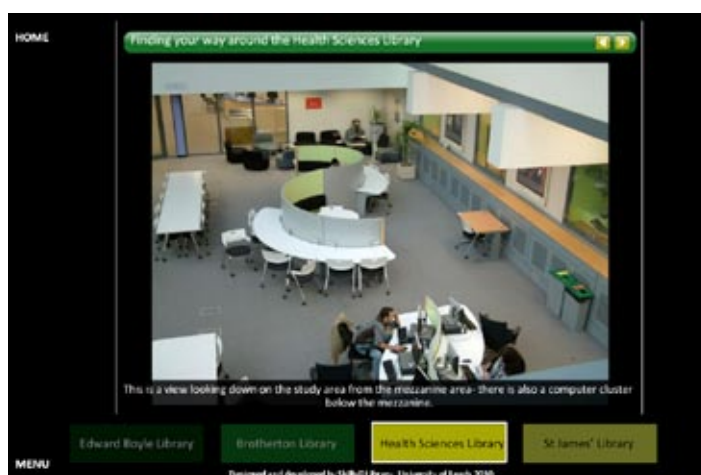
Example of the library photograph tours

The online induction was launched in September 2010, to schedule. The aim was always to launch the resource by induction week even though this was a tight deadline for completing such a complex resource. This did not allow much opportunity for the FTLs to become familiar with the resource and provide feedback, but despite this it was well received, with many of the FTLs using the online induction as part of their face-to-face presentations, signposting it for reinforcement and reference after the session. We also received initial feedback from the Customer Services Team and Enquiries Team who found it very useful to be able to point new students to this tool in the first few weeks of term. Despite our not having promoted the resource heavily outside face-to-face induction, it has consistently been one of our most used resources since its launch.

The home page from the Library Induction resource

EVALUATION

The resource was evaluated with students two months after going live. We ran three focus groups comprising new undergraduate and new postgraduate students. We involved a mixture of home, international, male and female students from a broad range of subject areas. The focus groups were an hour and a half long, with students working through the resource and completing a paper survey during the first hour. The survey was designed to ascertain their general views on the look and usability of the resource; there were more specific questions about the content, use of technology and the level of interactivity. We then led a half-hour discussion which focused on the students' views of an online induction as opposed to face-to-face, canvassing their opinions regarding these two methods of introducing the library facilities. This also gave the students the chance to discuss in more detail their general perceptions of the resource.

The response to the induction was very positive, with 100% of respondents saying they would recommend it to a friend. Students generally found the navigation simple to use as highlighted by comments including *'I love the layout; it is easy to find the resources I want'*, *'it is quite clear and well structured by dividing into different subjects'*. Students also found the screen captures and demonstration videos particularly helpful and requested more. The amount of interactivity as well as the level of information provided was felt to be about right for an induction resource. The focus groups agreed, however, that more subject-specific advice would improve the induction, such as a video tour showing where the books on their subject were housed in the library.

With regards to the online vs face-to-face question, the responses showed mixed views; some students said they like the structured approach of the scheduled face-to-face sessions, providing a set time and place to receive this information. Others saw the benefit of the anytime, anyplace opportunity of having the information available online. Several mentioned information overload during the university induction period when their priorities were centred on dealing with financial and accommodation matters and generally finding their way around the university campus. Lack of concentration at this busy time was considered to be an issue and the amount of information actually retained during face-to-face sessions was questioned.

Having the information available in an online format after the induction period was perceived to be an advantage; comments were made about the timeliness of the information provided at induction as well as the relevance. Several students felt that they would like to be able to access information about the library services at a time when they had a genuine requirement rather than being told about facilities before a need had arisen. This raised some debate, and in response some concerns were expressed about the limitations of an online induction and whether all the required information could be provided in this format: *'At the induction she showed us where our books are, quite hidden away – I'm not sure even with video this could be shown by a resource.'*

The consensus of the groups unsurprisingly was that it would be good to have both options available: *'I'd like the option of the face-to-face but be able to dip in and out of the online materials afterwards.'*

As outlined at the start of this article, this was also the consensus of staff within the library; however, with general cutbacks and staff restructuring, they appreciate that the current level of face-to-face student induction may not be a long-term option.

FUTURE

Currently the resource is an interactive information resource; it does not include any facilities for measuring understanding or retention. It has been suggested that for next year's cohort some librarians may ask their students to work through the resource prior to the face-to-face session, allowing librarians to use this precious teaching time to concentrate on more advanced activities, such as searching databases, or dedicating the time to developing their students' broader academic skills, in areas such as academic writing. If this is the case our dilemma is whether we need to provide an additional resource that guides the student through the information resource and measures understanding through interactive activities such as quizzes and drag-and-drop exercises. Those students questioned say not; they find the resource intuitive and the content straightforward and unambiguous. They feel that any component that tests understanding would be unnecessary. The FTLs are sympathetic to this viewpoint but can also see that, if the face-to-face induction is removed completely or the emphasis changed, a measuring element may be needed. The faculties may require reassurance that their

students are aware of the facilities available through the library and that they have sufficient knowledge of procedures and policy to use the library effectively. This may result in a separate e-learning resource being developed to provide a vehicle for those who require a means of testing knowledge and understanding.

We are now considering the way forward and whether next year's students will have the same level of face-to-face induction tuition or whether the online resource may play a more major role in their induction process.

As a result of both staff and student feedback the resource will be enhanced during the following months ready for the next cohort of students. There are no major content changes envisaged, just updates and a few additional videos. However, our next topic for discussion is whether we need to include an element of e-learning and assessment to support this resource.

CONCLUSION

At this stage, the exact mix of our blended solution is undecided but one thing is certain: the online element is here to stay. In fact it is most likely that the online offering will grow and mature, providing the foundation for library induction. It is hoped that this will be seen as a positive development allowing the FTLs the scope to factor their time for more appropriate and complex student facing activities.

NOTES

The Skills@Library induction package is available from http://skills.library.leeds.ac.uk/induction

1   N Morgan & L Davies, 'Innovative library induction – introducing the "Cephalonian method"', SCONUL *Focus*, 32, 2004, pp 4-8
2   M Wolf, 'Introduction to a snapshot overview of library induction methods', SCONUL *Focus*, 40, 2007, pp 57-62
3   N Whitton, 'Alternate reality games for orientation, socialisation and induction (ARGOSI)'. JISC Final report [online]. April 2007. Accessed 31 January 2011], available from: http://playthinklearn.net/argosi/final.pdf
4   A Littlejohn & C Pegler, *Preparing for blended e-learning*, London: Routledge, 2007