
Self-service reservations: a review of a pilot at Anglia Ruskin University



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BACKGROUND

At Anglia Ruskin University, reservations had been kept behind a service point counter, controlled, distributed by staff and locked away at the end of the day. Therefore, staff were the custodians of the reservations.

The University Library focuses on self-service provision; the vision of the wider university is to encourage students in self-directed learning. Following a pilot at the University Library in Cambridge in 2007/08, the one at Chelmsford moved to a pilot 24x4 opening during the 2008/09 academic year and, as a result of the increased opening hours, customers were able to come in and study out of 'staffed' hours. However, they could not collect reservations and would need to return during staffed hours for this. Feedback showed this was a hindrance for them.

Self-service reservations had been talked about before, and had been seen in action in another setting, which contributed to further discussions amongst staff. The aim of such a service is to make materials more accessible and to reduce inconvenience to library users, especially with the changing patterns of study methods and timing.

The main issue raised was that of trying to 'anonymise' the reservation for data-protection reasons, so that no connection could be seen immediately between the book title and the user. Essex county libraries' Chelmsford branch uses a paper wrapper with the user's name added, to hide the title of the book reserved, and it was felt that this would suffice to 'disconnect' the title from the user. The alternative suggestion was to create a unique reservation number which could be e-mailed to the user, but this was felt to be too cumbersome both for staff and students; staff would have to work with numbers when processing items (and when reconciling the reservation shelves against a weekly system-generated report) and students would need to remember a reservation number or, alternatively, to login to their accounts on arrival at the site to find the number if they had forgotten it.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The main impetus for this project was the trial 24-hour opening at the University Library Chelmsford in September 2008, and the consequent desire to make reservations available to students during non-staffed self-service hours. It was decided that the main barrier, besides educating library staff in the new way, was the need to retain anonymity for library users' reservations. The solution found was to wrap the materials in a sheet of A4 or A3 paper (held with an elastic band), with the names written on the spines. For aesthetic purposes, yellow paper was used to fit in with the theme of our recently refurbished library entrance.

Before proceeding we approached the systems librarian and asked whether it was possible that, instead of printing to a receipt printer in portrait, the system could allow us to print in landscape with the user's name in the middle of an A4 sheet of paper so that it was readable as a 'spine label'. After much work in XML this was achieved and it was decided to set up a printer specifically loaded with A4 yellow paper. A3 was used initially as a secondary wrapper for larger items, under the printed A4, but was soon eliminated as it was felt the A4 covered enough of the individual title.

Staff were trained in the process and began moving reservations from the locked cupboards

behind the reception desk to the new self-service cupboard beside the self-issue machines. In moving the materials, staff discovered discrepancies between what was expected to be on the shelf behind the reception desk and what was actually there. This was of interest because, as will be seen later, one major staff objection to the change had been that users might take their reservations and leave them, unissued, around the library. This finding proved that discrepancies can also occur when staff alone are handling reservations.

The system went live in September 2008, to coincide with inductions and the trial 24-hour opening. When filling holds, an e-mail notification went out to students, with an amendment to say they were now able to collect via self-service. We placed brief instructions for students on collecting and issuing reservations, receptacles for users to deposit the elastic bands in and paper-recycling bins for the paper wrappers. Initially, as expected, previous users approached the counter to collect their reservations and had to be directed to the new area, but these enquiries soon stopped. One benefit of using a coloured wrapper has been the ease in informing users and directing them to where the self-service reservations shelves are.



Figure 1. The new-look reservations collection

STATISTICS

The usage of reservations at University Library Chelmsford in 2007/08 and 2008/09 was assessed at the end of the one-year trial period. It focused on how many reservations were placed, were collected, were not collected and within what period of time they were issued. The results showed that

there was a shorter collection time compared with the previous year.

	Days taken to collect a reservation		
	0–2	3–5	6+
2008/09	3,810	3,086	2,567
2007/08	3,419	2,746	2,611
Difference	10.26%	11.02%	-1.71%

ISSUES

Technical

The library users' names were to be printed on specific sheets of paper which were used as wrappers. To facilitate this, staff realised immediately that to load an ordinary printer would delay the process. It was decided to use an older printer, set up specific machines at which library assistants could print the wrappers and avoid the need to change paper.

One concern was the potential waste of paper in creating wrappers – especially as with printed names they cannot be re-used for other purposes due to data-protection regulations. Many other ideas were put forward and alternatives considered, for example a transparent plastic document-holder placed on its side and inserted between users' items with a name written on the folded end of the plastic holder. The varying sizes of materials and the fact that one user might have many books meant this was rejected. No practical alternatives were found, and staff began to accept the original method over time.

Staff issues

Staff perceived that the new reservations process took far longer than the previous method – for example retrieving individual wrappers from the printer, covering the books, ensuring relevant details were hidden and so on. It was suggested that this task be moved from the afternoon to the quieter evening shift. This allowed staff more uninterrupted time to complete the process.

After a few weeks it became apparent that it was necessary to time how long the new process was taking. A timesheet was created, with start and end times plus the number of items processed being written down, together with any comments. The recording process led to fewer staff comments and the time levelled out to approximately one hour for 21 items (3.5 minutes of processing for each). Comments by staff included 'Had to stop to provide back up to the reception desk', 'Printer broke down, wrote slips by hand', 'Had to tidy

reservation cupboard before adding next batch' and so on.

After approximately 12 weeks, library staff began to settle into the routine and the anecdotal feedback from students was so overwhelmingly positive that staff could see the immediate benefits.

Student perceptions

The customer services management team asked staff to deliberately engage with students who were using the system, by searching for their reservations by name. Feedback was immediately positive, even from those who were inconvenienced by having used the old system and being directed to the new. Feedback forms were placed on the reservations shelves when the system was set up, but unfortunately no written verification of positive anecdotal evidence was received. It is, however, noteworthy that the converse was also true – there have been no negative comments or complaints. Interesting points noticed by staff were that the students liked having control and being able to look for their reservations by browsing the section by name (the sequence being in alphabetical order). They soon realised what the section was for and queries at the counter diminished.

Observations

- *Reservations were found on the normal returns trolleys (and on main shelves).*

This is a continual problem in libraries. A notice was placed on the self-service reservations shelf telling students where to take books to self-issue them and to return them if no longer required. The issue of reservations being returned to the trolleys, rather than put in the allocated bins, could be solved by having all books on trolleys being checked by staff (a very lengthy process), or by the longer-term possibility of purchasing a book-sorter through which all materials would have to return. It has been found that users who no longer require an item tend to leave it on the reservation shelves rather than alert staff.

- *Students' requests are not available on the shelf.*
If a student is correct that their requested item is not on the reservation shelf (and some apparent errors were rectified by finding their name for them!), a reason for this is that somewhere in the process the user has been alerted to the book's arrival but it is not available – but this is rare. Or that the material has been placed in an incorrect wrapper, which is possible but not known to have occurred. The most likely explanation is that another user has managed to identify that book and use it – see below. However, it should be restated that this scenario of a student's request not being where expected also happened before the move to self-service reservations.
- *Weekly reconciliation report shows material is missing.*
The reasons for this are the same as above.
- *The 'wrong' person takes the book from the shelf.*
It was hoped that the wrapper would discourage users from being able to identify a book they wanted on the self-service reservations shelf. If they did use an item not reserved for themselves and did not return it to the proper place, this would mean it would be missing from the appropriate shelf.

Because users have to self-issue before leaving the library, materials not issued will set off the alarm. The assumption is that the item will remain in the library somewhere. It might be found on the shelves at a later time and the error rectified, depending on how well the 'wrong' user has hidden the book! The possibility of users not issuing books to themselves and leaving the library is slight. During non-staffed hours a security guard sits at the entrance/exit and stops any 'offenders' from taking materials that have not been put through the self-issue machines. All reservations are only able to be added to the requester's record.

- *Extended loans cannot be borrowed for their full length of time.*
Currently any user who has a note on their record stating that they have been assessed by student support is entitled to extended loan periods. However, due to the lack of automation in the process these have to be manually changed by staff. This is not just a difficulty for the self-service reservations but is the same for any normal loan. This is

due to be automated in 2009/10, which will eliminate this barrier.

- *Legitimate reservations unable to be issued.*
Users having fines on their record, no matter how small, are stopped from borrowing. They may place a reservation but may not self-issue. To alleviate this problem we have recently installed self-payment machines for students to use at the self-service points.
- *Untidiness.*
Despite notices and receptacles being provided, some rubber bands and wrappers find their way to the self-service machines or the floor, but this causes minimal problems.

CONCLUSION

Students and teaching staff love the new system, from the verbal feedback received. This pilot was created at University Library Chelmsford, with a view to recommending whether we should adopt the service at all Anglia Ruskin University library sites, or at least at those sites that offer self-service hours. Twenty-four-hour opening meant that we needed to provide true self-service and this is a facility that, up to now, has not been available to users. Staff were initially reluctant to adopt the new working practice but have settled into the routine, soon realising that the time spent on this self-service process has freed the library assistants for duties elsewhere.

(Summary table cont overleaf)

SUMMARY

<i>Positives</i>	<i>Negatives</i>	<i>Solutions to negative issues.</i>
Customers are able to issue their reservations themselves, out of staffed hours.	Administration of the scheme – wrapping books – is time-consuming.	Staff found that printing several at a time, and then wrapping, meant a quicker process.
Inconvenience is reduced for students.	Items in the incorrect place.	Clearer instructions, regular shelf checks, tidy shelves.
Reservations are more readily available.	Browsing.	This is not required at these shelves: customers are asked if they 'need any help' if it appears they are browsing. It may be they are unsure of the process, in which case staff can point out the instructions at hand.
Customer perception?	No written comments but anecdotal evidence gained.	The idea of a bookmark in each item requesting student opinion might encourage more feedback for evaluation.
Reduces staffing and queues at the reception desk.	Time taken to process.	Process the requests at a time when there is less interruption: library assistants soon got used to the workflow and adapted accordingly.
Staff perception about the use of paper wrappers has changed due to understanding this is the best solution to date.	Perceived untidiness.	Staff tidy the shelves when shelving the reservations.
Students predominately do place the wrappers in the recycle bin provided.	Untidiness.	Recycle bins were placed directly adjacent to the collection shelves.