Implementing an online training course in disability awareness for frontline staff

Experiences at National University of Ireland Maynooth

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INTRODUCTION

This article describes the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUI Maynooth) library experience of implementing an eLearning disability equality training course for part-time frontline library desk staff. While disability awareness is an integral part of library service in all its aspects, the eLearning method of delivery of disability awareness training is new in Irish university libraries. In a time of increasing constraints (both budgetary and time), eLearning offers a potentially cost-effective and innovative way to develop a range of professional skills including disability awareness.

Brief context and background information about the library is provided, followed by a description of the online course and its application in the training of frontline library staff. Results of a survey of participants' experiences of undertaking the course are presented. While the group of participants was small at eight, the process and experience has broader applicability in the context of both online training and disability awareness training.

NUI Maynooth (http://www.nuim.ie/) has approximately 8500 students and 26 academic departments.

The library (http://library.nuim.ie/) has a strong commitment to staff development and is supported by the university Staff Development Unit. This unit offers courses that are not library specific but are frequently of relevance to library staff. At a national level, an annual training programme is offered by the Academic and National Training Library Co-operative (ANLTC) (www.anltc.ie) groups of the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) (http://www.libraryassociation.ie/) and other training bodies.

Disability awareness training in the library

While library staff have had some training in disability awareness in customer care and other courses, in 2011 the deputy librarian Helen Fallon – one of the authors of this paper – who has overall responsibility for staff development, was approached by the university Staff Development Officer to discuss piloting a new online course on disability awareness – produced by the Irish National Disability Authority (NDA) (http://www.nda.ie/) for staff involved in public service. Having evaluated the package to ascertain its relevance to the library, it was decided to undertake the pilot. The task of managing the pilot project was assigned to a member of the frontline team – one of the authors of this paper – who had first-hand knowledge of the challenges faced in undertaking an online course while being rostered for desk service and who also had the energy and enthusiasm for the project to make it work.

Online course structure

The course is divided into modules, each of which has a number of sections. Using the menu, learners can navigate between modules by selecting the module/sub-section they wish to access. This is useful if a learner wishes to repeat a particular module or view content out of sequence. Within modules, next and back buttons are provided to navigate from page to page and to move through the course from module to module. Each page has a tab for preferences, glossary and help which can be accessed at any point during the course. Learners may stop at any point and recommence from that point when they next log in.

Audio, video, text and images are used throughout to illustrate concepts. The learner has the option to view videos online or to download them. Transcripts and subtitles are available for every video. All these options for navigation are well explained in the introduction and via help screens. Overall, the course is clear and easy to navigate, with the progress bar at the bottom of each page proving very useful in keeping track of the course.

Course content

The course is in two main parts. The first provides background information about disability, including legal issues, and introduces the concept of 'reasonable accommodation'. The following is an example from the course of 'reasonable accommodation': Bronagh is studying architectural technology at her local college and classes normally start at 9 a.m. She suffers from depression and manages it by visiting her therapist once a week. She spoke to her disability support officer and arranged to spend some extra time with her tutor each Wednesday afternoon. This allows her to keep up with her class colleagues so both Bronagh and the college are happy with this arrangement.

The second part of the course, a case study, follows the story of a young man, Niall, who wants to renew his passport. It shows how the passport office and its staff ensure that he can do this. Perspectives and opinions from people with disabilities on their experiences of using service providers are included. In this case the perspective of the staff (Claire who works on the passport office desk and Kerry, her line manager) providing services to people with a disability is also illustrated. Discussion regarding internal policies and supports available to staff dealing with customers with disabilities are tabled as part of their regular review meetings.

Upon completion of each section, the learner is assessed by using a question based on the material covered in the previous module. To get full marks the learner selects as many of the options as are correct. A score of eight out of ten is needed to pass the course.

Undertaking the online course

The frontline team comprises nine part-time staff members who work an average of 22.5 hours each per week. Three staff are rostered on each shift with three shifts of 4.5 hours per person per day. One member of staff covers the admissions desk and two maintain information desk service, one

of whom has a roving role. Each team works an additional Saturday shift every third week.

Undertaking the course proved to be less of a challenge than initially anticipated by participants. Volunteers were not hard to find: eight members of the nine-person team applied to take part in the pilot. A link to the course was emailed to each volunteer and a spreadsheet was set up with headings containing staff names, the date on which the link to the course was sent to each individual and the date each participant completed the course. Information in relation to whether the course was completed during or outside working hours, length of time taken to complete it and whether it took one, two or more sessions was also recorded on the spreadsheet. Help and advice from the co-ordinator was also arranged for staff completing the course. Initially it was anticipated that participants would complete the course during working hours. It was agreed that at quieter times – e.g. evening shift – desk cover would be maintained by two staff while their colleague completed the course. This proved difficult on occasion. If the desk was busy the person undertaking the course was often needed to provide service, so concentration was broken. Four members of the team finished the course during working hours and four outside working hours.

Our subsequent survey showed that those who completed the course solely within working hours took longer to complete than those who were in a position to devote time outside work. However, this should not be seen as a deterrent for staff completing the course in the workplace, as those who completed it within working hours did so, albeit at a slower pace. It is important to note that there is no limit on the length of time taken to complete the course. Participants can log on as little and often as they wish until they complete the course.

Participants can print off a National Disability Authority certificate of completion, which they can add to their curriculum vitae / skills portfolio.

The course can be accessed by individuals or groups in the United Kingdom and elsewhere at http://training.nda.ie/signups/new/dcc1

The information on disability legislation relates to the Irish jurisdiction. However, education and training in disability awareness transcends jurisdictions.

After the eight frontline staff completed the course they participated in a survey aimed to provide useful information to the library and to the university Staff Development Office. The online survey instrument used was Bristol Online Surveys. It comprised both qualitative and quantitative questions and was drawn up by two of the authors of this paper.

Questions were divided into four sections: section 1 related to the online course itself; section 2 related to staff interaction with users with disabilities and the impact of the course on their interactions; section 3 covered future training needs; section 4 explored preferences for format of delivery.

Section 1: Online course
Overall the feedback on the course was very positive, with a majority of staff (87.5%) finding it clearly laid out and easy to follow. The only area which caused a problem were the instructions for the assessments, which did not clearly state that more than one answer could be correct. Staff found this a good basic introduction to the issues and improved awareness of disability. They suggested that this course be the basis of future training, not the end, and that intermediate and advanced courses be considered. It was also suggested that input to training from people with special needs and disabilities would be helpful.

Staff were satisfied with the support and guidance they received from the library, which was via the co-ordinator, one of the team.

The certificate available upon completion of the course was seen as valuable by 75% of participants. It was perceived as evidence of learning and successful completion of the course.

Section 2: Staff interaction with users, impact on future interaction and improvements to library services
All staff who participated in the survey had encountered users with disabilities. Having completed the course 75% (6) of respondents felt that their ability to support library users with disabilities was now very good, with 12.5% reporting it as good. One respondent commented that the course had created a great awareness of *'issues and sensitivities'* and a realisation of how *'little I know and my lack of awareness of hidden disability'*.

In the comments from staff regarding specific techniques and practices, words such as awareness, listening, taking time and patience were all mentioned as key to future interaction with users with disabilities. Specific techniques such as asking users to write down their query if the staff member is having difficulty understanding what the person is saying and the concept of bringing the user to a quiet area were seen as valuable, and staff reported that they would use these techniques in the future. It was also reported that the course had an impact on reducing anxiety around assisting users with disabilities. Awareness of hidden disabilities was heightened through undertaking the course.

'I feel that I am a lot more confident in dealing with library users with disabilities. It means I can be more patient and understanding and hopefully make their library experience all they would hope it would be. This in and of itself will enhance library customer service.'

A number of suggestions were put forward as to improvements to service. Most of these related to the library as physical space and have been rectified with the building of a major extension, which opened in December 2012. Suggestions included having documentation available in multiple formats and making tables, printers, photocopiers, etc., easier to access and having a more disability-friendly building overall.

Section 3: Future training needs – How the course will enhance library service in the future
Half (4) of respondents felt that they needed no further training on disability awareness, with the other half responding that they would like further training. Those who indicated that they required further training suggested that the opportunity to meet and discuss issues and concerns with users with disabilities would be very important. More contact with the university Access Office regarding technology was suggested.

All the responses to the question in this section emphasised awareness, listening, understanding, knowledge and patience as key to enhancing library customer service to users with disabilities.

Section 4: Preferences regarding training methods
Over 60% of respondents had previously completed an online training course. All respondents indicated that they would undertake an online course in the future. With both staff and budgetary constraints, the resultant time pressure, significant developments in the provision of online courses through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other initiatives, this type of training is likely to become more important in the future.

The main advantage of online training noted by respondents was the flexibility of being able to dip into the course at different times. The flexibility regarding pace was also noted:

'It is more relaxing and you have more time as you can go back over questions.'

'Online training can be studied at your convenience. You can go over the information time and again.'

Disadvantages included not always having support at the time of need; no discussions as would be feasible in a face-to-face course; no interaction with a tutor to ask a specific question that may come up during the training and the difficulty of finding time when scheduled for desk shifts for all working hours.

In order to inform future training, participants were asked for their preference for delivery of staff training (not limited to disability awareness) with the options

- online (self-directed)
- online (with support)
- face-to-face (workshops and seminars)
- other

The most popular option was online with support (6 respondents), followed by face-to-face via workshops and seminars (5). Those who responded 'other' opted for a mix of training delivery mechanisms.

'Depending on the course any or all of these options could be relevant. I have studied online self directed for ECDL [European Computer Driving Licence] and found it quite difficult.'

'I do like role play and discussing different situations. This online course was good in that it did have role play and it did explain different ways of approaching a situation and it also gave it from the point of view of the person with the disability, which you would not get from a workshop.'

75% (6) of respondents felt that the certificate was of value and importance. Most were happy to have their certificate as it demonstrated their achievement and their successful completion of the course.

Further comments

In a section 'further comments', the respondents reaffirmed their earlier responses expanding on a couple of points. For example, the suggestion was made that the library, in conjunction with the Staff Development Office, develop a course to ensure that all staff are completely confident in dealing with all library users. It was also suggested that the library might have an advocate in the library for users with disabilities. This suggestion has been acted upon and a member of staff has now been assigned to this role.

Conclusion

In terms of course content, this was found to be a very useful introductory course, heightening awareness of disability among frontline library staff. A presentation was made to all library staff and the university Staff Development Officer by the course co-ordinator. A poster on the course was awarded third prize in a national poster competition. The results of the survey were provided to the Irish National Disability Authority to assist them in their design and delivery of training. Following the pilot with frontline staff, other staff in the library were offered the opportunity to undertake the course. It was hoped to promote the course throughout the university, but the university Staff Development Officer took advantage of an early retirement scheme and has not been replaced to date; progress has therefore not been made in this regard.

The issue of online training needs more investigation locally and nationally. Having piloted a small number of online training courses (ECDL: http://www.ecdl.com/; 23things: http://23things.wetpaint.com; and the National Disability Authority eLearning Equality Training Course), the library plans to offer further online training courses as a method of delivery. The Academic and National Library Training Co-operative is currently exploring a centralised approach to identifying online content and making links available via its website. Overall this was a very successful pilot and forms the basis for progressing two very important areas – disability awareness and online training.

Library building photos by kind permission of Mr Alan Monahan: alan.monahan@nuim.ie