

Library Orientation Tours : Changing our focus

by Rachel Bahl

The ubiquitous library tour: a group of users come in; we try to be friendly and personable and show (and tell!) them as much about the library as we can possibly fit into twenty to thirty minutes. At the Canberra Campus of Australian Catholic University (Signadou), the demand for library tours is in Orientation Week (O-Week), with around 180 new undergraduate students turning up to be shown around the library.

In 2005, with a changing student population, changing courses and an extended library space, it was timely that we revisit the content and methodology of our library tours. When the opportunity came up to attend training at the National Library of Australia on running library tours, we were keen to be involved.

The training began with a tour of the National Library, conducted by Fiona Hooten. The National Library is a fascinating place, all the more so when you have an experienced guide showing you the services and facilities, with generous amounts of "behind the scenes" views thrown in for good measure. After the tour, Fiona led a group discussion on whether or not it was a good tour experience and discussed what worked best with the tour. This was followed by the cryptically titled presentation, *How to bend spoons and other mind games*.

How to bend spoons and other mind games

Fiona's presentation really captured our imaginations. While some of the issues raised in the presentation might be considered mere 'common sense' (smile, introduce yourself, don't speak over other people, wear a name badge), other issues made us reconsider our

approach to our own library tours.

We started by looking at the aim of guiding. What are we hoping to achieve with our library tours? Fiona's presentation suggested that we want to "create a positive environment which supports involvement, enjoyment and learning", and that we want to "interpret – reveal meanings and relationships through experience using illustrative communication". This was quite different from how we'd approached our library tours in the past. Previous library tours tended to be quite content heavy. It was exciting to think that we could involve our users in a real learning experience simply through the library tour process.

Fiona introduced us to the EROTicism of guiding. Guiding should be:

Enjoyable – use active language, personalise the activity;

Relevant – relate to what we already know, create bridges;

Organised – use cognitive chunking, 5 or less ideas;

Thematic – the big deal, the key purpose.

There were many practical suggestions in the presentation as well. Some of them related to

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logistical issues such as asking clients about mobility issues (can they all use the stairs?), waiting at natural pauses such as doorways and don't walk any faster than the slowest member of your group (but don't let them know you're doing it!). In addition there were suggestions regarding the content and delivery of the tours. Some of these suggestions included using an observable object or feature to inform the commentary at stops, and making a thematic connection to the next stop. Other suggestions included eliciting personal stories and responses, organising information into five-minute blocks, and being quiet occasionally. The training emphasised making the cerebral connection between users and their existing experience and the new information you're trying to give them.

With all this in mind, we reflected on the library tours we'd conducted in previous years.

Reflecting on previous tours

When we returned to our workplace we had a brainstorming session on the issues raised at the library guiding training. We reflected on the orientation tours that we had offered in previous years. We observed that there had

Context – O Week

A note of context might be useful here. At our campus, the library orientation tour is offered as part of a campus-wide program of tours for new students. This year, with an enlarged campus and a larger student cohort, the 'matrix' of tours expanded from four groups (in previous years) to five groups of students attending five separate sessions. Thirty minutes is allocated for each tour, however in real terms this equates to a twenty-minute session and ten minutes to travel between activities.

Once the group of students had been brought to the library and introduced to staff, they would be divided into smaller groups of 6-8 to be taken around the library. Depending on the numbers in the original group we might have up to four smaller sub-groups working their way around the library.

Previous years' tours were very wordy and were structured very much as a walk around the library identifying key collections and resources. We would tell the students (in great detail!) important information about how to register their cards so they could borrow; how to borrow and all about the borrowing

Time	GOLD	RED	BLUE	PINK	GREEN
11.15 am	Your SSA	All around Signadou	All around Blackfriars	You, me & Technology	You, me & the Library
11.45 am	You, me and the Library	Your SSA	All around Signadou	All around Blackfriars	You, me & tehcnology
12.15 pm	You, me & Technology	You, me & the Library	Your SSA	All around Signadou	All around Blackfriars

Figure 1: Orientation tours matrix (partial). Library tours commenced with 'green' group, then 'gold', 'red', with 'blue' and 'pink' after a lunch break.

been too many things to say, and a sense that students were leaving either over-whelmed (too much information) or under-whelmed (they had switched off). We felt that the timing of the tours were important in this respect. Most of the tours take place in O-Week and this makes the entire exercise a blur for students.

conditions, including the fines system; how to use the photocopying system; as well as introducing them to the catalogue terminals and the loans and information desks and encouraging them to attend scheduled library tutorials in lecture week two. Questions were answered in great detail.

Our 2005 tours – “It’s your library and we’re here to help”

It was clear from our brainstorming session that our tours had opportunities for improvement. We decided to incorporate a number of the suggestions we received at the training at the National Library into our tours for 2005. We decided to introduce a key theme or message for our orientation tour and that it would be “it’s your library and we’re here to help”. We wanted to give the students tools to find information later when they really needed it.

We decided to focus on six key tools: library signage, handouts, our website, communication (particularly via email), further training and ‘ask us’. We were conscious of ‘mentally’ spacing the information we wanted to give to the students into manageable ‘chunks’, as well as ‘physically’ spacing the tours so that our small sub-groups were not on top of one another as they made their way around the library. In previous years we had found that we inevitably ended up with two or more sub-groups in the main library area. With this in mind we nominated four ‘stations’ around the library where we would stop and speak to the students. With around twenty minutes for our tours, this also allowed us to keep to five minutes worth of information at each station. Four staff were rostered to conduct the tours as we were committed to keeping numbers in the sub-groups low.

Station one was an area near the Information and Loans desks. Topics to be covered were based around the key functions of the Loans and Information desks and they were simply:

How do I borrow a book? How do I get help?

These two topics encapsulated the range of issues addressed at the two desks namely all circulation matters, and the kinds of questions we encounter at the information desk such as help with finding information using catalogues or using e-resources.

Station two was situated at our ‘autoloader’, which is the machine that is used to add credit to the student’s copying card. Here we covered:

How do I print? How do I photocopy?

We were able to give a very brief demonstration, in particular highlighting the signage that could be referred to later.

Station three was just outside our new library extension. This area is known as our Teachers’ Resource Centre. Outside this room are two OPACs and a large open space with study tables. At this point we focussed on the catalogue and we covered:

How do I find stuff?

The information we mentioned here focussed on encouraging students to attend further training sessions so they would learn how to use the catalogue in more detail. We encouraged students to read the screen and nearby signage to see which collection an item would be found in. We also encouraged students to read their email and, look for posters advertising training sessions. We felt that all of this gave them ideas on problem solving that they could use later when they needed them.

Station four was on our mezzanine level outside the online centre. Our topic for this stop was:

Where can I use computers?

This allowed us to tell the students where to find the computer labs and what computing facilities were available in the library. We also used the theme of computers to talk about the library website and the services offered there. After all, the physical library is increasingly only the tip of the iceberg in terms of what libraries have to offer.

Each tour guide carried a single sheet with prompts for the information to be covered at each station, and a summary of the ‘tips’ for students and the tour guides.

Outcomes

We were surprised by the effect of our simplified library tour on the students. We found that students were more engaged with the tour process. There were lots of questions.

We felt that 'less was more' – if there was something that students were particularly interested in and we hadn't already mentioned it, they would ask about it. There was a better physical flow around the library. While there were still close encounters as the small sub-groups passed in corridors, tour leaders could usually see whether the next station was available and move their group at an appropriate time.

With four stations, we knew that we had roughly five minutes at each one – this helped with planning what we said at each point. The key message resonated with students – it was the message we left them with at the end of the tour and if they remembered nothing else we wanted them to remember that. We also found that there was much less 'loss' during the tours. There were no glazed eyes or personal conversations amongst students. None of this is particularly 'earth shattering' stuff, but there was a discernible improvement for both users and library staff.

Reflecting on our O-Week tours in 2005, we can report that those students who participated

in the tours have been noticeable in their use of the library. While we have not conducted a serious evaluation of the tours, the feeling amongst my colleagues is that those who attended the tours are not just using the library, but give an impression of feeling comfortable in the library and are certainly asking us when they're not sure about something.

Conclusions

We found it was a valuable process to revisit both the content and the purpose of our library orientation tour. We found the idea of focussing on a key theme particularly useful. It was important for us to make the connection with our students. This was the students' first contact with the library – we wanted it to be engaging and pleasant, not eye-glazingly boring! It was useful that students left the library with the key theme firmly established. We will continue to look at tours using this framework. Library tours are clearly not just a walk around the library, but an opportunity to make a lasting impression on our clients.

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