

## The Library Assistant: using technology to support library inductions



### Oxford's library system: a labyrinth?

Oxford's complex library system can be confusing for new students. Undergraduates and postgraduates often need to get to grips with up to five libraries covering their subject area, including their college library and several of the Bodleian Libraries. Many need to use Oxford's research libraries, which can be intimidating to use for the first time. For example, before coming to Oxford most undergraduates have not come across libraries with remote book stacks. Furthermore, reading lists may appear confusing at first to new students, with terms such as 'ibid.' and seemingly baffling journal citations.

Both colleges and the Bodleian Libraries run induction sessions in week 0 to help students to become more familiar with libraries. Student focus groups show that these are popular and students particularly value the opportunity to have a tour of the library and demonstrations of key tools.

However, focus groups have also revealed that both undergraduates and postgraduates experience information overload during the first week of Michaelmas Term and that the timing of induction can be problematic. This means that much of the information does not sink in, and students miss the opportunity to pick up crucial knowledge. Furthermore, some inductions were felt to come too early when students do not have sufficient context to understand what they are being shown, while others came too late as students already needed to prepare a paper. There are also a great many IT-related questions which arise when students struggle to work out the various systems and their different user names and passwords.

Oliver Bridle and Angela Carritt, along with other members of Oxford libraries staff, launched a project, the Library Assistant, which aimed to develop an online library induction for use on mobile devices which works alongside traditional inductions for Freshers.

Focus groups help staff tailor the technology to tackle specific student problems



*Figure 1 The Bodleian is a beautiful building but its sheer size and enormous quantity of books can be overwhelming at first*

In 2013 a group of Bodleian staff members ran student focus groups to find out more about the difficulties students face when using Oxford libraries and to ask them what three things they would tell a new student about Oxford libraries. These focus groups determined the content of the Library Assistant and ensured that it focused on students' needs. Card-sorting exercises were used to work out an intuitive structure.

The project then considered whether to create an app or a responsive web site. It was decided that a responsive web site would be created, in order to ensure that students without a mobile device could use the Library Assistant on a laptop or desktop computer. This would also ensure future sustainability, as by hosting a web site using the Bodleian Libraries CMS, staff could ensure that librarians would be able to make changes to the content easily. Following on from this, the team then worked with the Bodleian Libraries web team on the design of the Library Assistant and created wireframes which were tested on students to ensure that the navigation and functionality was intuitive.

The next stage was to work on the content. There are three main types of pages in Library Assistant:

- **Static html pages** use text/graphics to provide guidance.
- **Interactive database driven pages** interrogate existing library databases which were upgraded as part of the project. There are three sets of database-driven pages – which libraries cover different subjects; the induction timetable; and the accessibility database which allows students to see the facilities available for readers with disabilities in each library.
- **SOLO chat page** is where students can use our Live Help facility to talk to a librarian

A small team of librarians from across Oxford worked on the content, using a style guide to ensure that content was as concise and consistent as possible.

The final stage of the project was to market the Library Assistant to freshers. This involved working with the Oxford Design Studio to design wallet cards and posters. Many colleges

agreed to include information about the Library Assistant in information packs and on their web sites.

Another crucial strand of this project was working with librarians from across Oxford's diverse libraries to ensure that they modified their inductions in light of the feedback from student focus groups and to ensure that the Library Assistant was incorporated as an integral part of induction, allowing face to face inductions to concentrate on high value subject information.

### Immediate success: freshers are firm fans

The benefits of the online induction offered by the Library Assistant are:

- available anytime, anywhere, at the point of need;
- tailored to the needs of undergraduates in their first term at Oxford;
- covers all the libraries used by undergraduates including the Bodleian Libraries and faculty and college libraries;
- covers shared services (for example SOLO, IT and printing, copying and scanning) and helps students to identify which libraries cover their subject area; and
- helps students to decipher reading lists;

The impact of the Library Assistant was measured using web analytics and by running student focus groups. Google Analytics showed 1,692 visits to the site between 23rd September and 6th December 2013, leading to 4,408 page views. Views of the website were not evenly distributed over the term but peaked around 23rd September and 9th October. These dates coincided with inductions for new students in the Department of Education on the 23rd September and Freshers' week inductions which took place between Monday 7th and Friday 11th October. Visits to the Library Assistant appeared to trail off after the first couple of weeks of term. This pattern was not unexpected, as the Library Assistant is designed primarily as a tool for new students. It was expected that the need for the website would diminish as students learned how to use library services and no longer required so much supporting information.

The analytics data also showed that the most popular pages were 'Which libraries cover my subject?', 'What does "closed stack" mean?' and 'What do phrases like "ibid." mean?'. Focus groups were run with first year students. The feedback from these focus groups demonstrated that students had found the Library Assistant useful in getting to grips with Oxford's libraries. The sections that they found particularly useful covered using the photocopying system, logging into library computers and help with reading lists. Creating this online induction has enabled Oxford libraries to transform face-to-face inductions. Staff can now concentrate on subject resources which students will find useful in preparing their first essays.



Figure 2 From L to R: Main Menu; Sub-Menu; Content. Having a clear map is extremely handy when there are a lot of libraries at the heart of a small city

### Not just for first years! Library assistant proves applicable to postgraduates too

In September 2013, Sophia Staves and Catherine Scutt at the Bodleian Education Library made innovative use of the new library website, combined with other mobile devices, to enhance the presentation element (and so the impact) of the Education Library inductions. The pair began by exploring the new website designed for freshers and saw that, although designed for undergraduate students, much of the content and layout would actually work well used as the backbone for welcoming new postgraduate students, particularly those on the intensive PGCE course.

The induction session was structured around the content of the website, and students were invited to use their own mobile devices to access it. This practical angle made it more likely that the students would remember the information having experienced it for themselves. Using the mobile Library Assistant as a prompt ensured all the crucial information was covered, with an Education Library slant provided by having live, local, librarians presenting. A dual screen approach was used: one presentation screen was linked to the library's iPad ensuring that it displayed mobile 'Library Assistant' as it would be seen by the students on their mobile devices; a second presentation screen linked to a laptop. This meant Sophia and Catherine could complement the content of the website with live examples of the students' own reading lists, relevant searches for books in the library catalogue, and to show the library website and social media while encouraging the students to join in on their own devices too.

This approach transformed what could have been a basic introductory lecture into an in-depth practical workshop, and provided students with a website to consult over the next few days and weeks.

The analytics of the mobile Library Assistant website show a significant spike in usage starting on, and in the days following, the PGCE inductions. As these inductions happen earlier than any other student events, it is very likely that the data are a direct result of the sessions. The feedback on the day was positive with students keen to join in and enjoying the event. This style of induction created the right first impression of the library as an up to date source of relevant information, provided by helpful, tech-savvy librarians. PGCE

students were noticeably more adept at using the library and the online systems in 2013; asking fewer basic questions. Providing the right style of induction also promoted an excellent rapport between the 200 PGCE students and the Education Library staff.

## Top Tips



Figure 3 There's a reason it's called 'reading a degree' – all Oxford courses require students to use a variety of literature with a critical eye

For anyone else considering a project in developing something similar, Oliver and Angela recommend:

1. Engage with students to ensure that you are meeting their needs
2. Work closely with the staff across the institution to ensure that you benefit from their experience. This is also important because staff are crucial in advertising new services to students. For this project to be successful it was also necessary for librarians across Oxford to make changes to their face to face inductions so that we could improve the student experience. In addition, staff in college offices were important in promoting library induction.
3. Use systems that you have easy access to so that you can make changes. Here, the Content Management System that was used was already widely operated in the Bodleian Libraries.
4. Devote time to the marketing effort. Often this is neglected but it is vital if students are to benefit by using the service!

With particular reference to the use of mobile devices during induction sessions, Catherine adds that it is important to check the strength of the wireless signal first, and to seek advice from the local IT support staff on how much simultaneous access is likely to be possible. She also recommends allowing time to explain the process of how to connect to the University's wifi (as this is an induction it will be the first time most students have tried to do so).

## Further Information

- You can find the Library Assistant at <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/assistant>



*Oliver Bridle, Sophia Staves and Catherine Scutt were winners of the OxTalent 2014 award in the category Using Technology to Support Transition. This award recognises initiatives seeking to facilitate students' move to Oxford University from other institutions.*

*The text and images in this case study have been adapted from Oliver's entry for the OxTalent competition (supported by Angela Carritt) and supplemented by Sophia and Catherine's entry.*