Training students to work in the Learning Resource Centre

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There was a large cultural shift in ideas and practice at the University of Teesside when Library & Information Services (L&IS) moved into a £11 million Learning Resource Centre (LRC) in 1997. In the old library building, the department had offered just 8 Apple Macintosh computers for customer use and now almost 400 PCs were available in the LRC. Things were changing rapidly in the information sector and not just in relation to modern information technology. L&IS strove to meet the change head on and introduced student workers into its workforce to meet new and increasing demands from its widening customer base.

Student workers were first employed by L&IS in 1997/1998 academic year. They were employed to assist with the re-shelving of library stock on an evening and were also employed to assist with ICT enquiries taken at the Enquiry Desk within the LRC on an evening. Employment of student workers in these roles proved a success as it released L&IS staff to perform other more pertinent roles within the department. However, the administration of student workers and their supervision requirements did require serious consideration.

In 2000, L&IS took the radical step, in consultation with the Student Union, to employ student workers in a more defined role, as 'Behaviour Assistants'. The aim was for the student worker / Behaviour Assistant to patrol the LRC floors during the days, evenings and at weekends and to ensure adherence to L&IS policies and practices. Although the employment of Behaviour Assistants was a success in that problems in the LRC were more contained, the role was a very negative one and students working in this role felt under extreme pressure from their peers. This was manifested by sickness and absenteeism.

In consultation with the Student Union, L&IS agreed to expand the role of the Behaviour Assistant and to develop it into a role of an Information Adviser. The aim was to include a more positive role for the student worker and would develop their role to embrace ICT enquires out on the subject floors, deal with basic L&IS enquiries and to re-direct other customers to the appropriate Information Desk within the LRC. The employment of student workers in this role led to much debate within the department as to how best to train this new workforce and how to ensure that we got the best out of them.

The re-structure of LIS during the summer of 2002 included the creation of a new team, User Support Services (USS), with responsibility for the employment of student workers, including the newly expanded role of the Information Adviser. Prior to the summer of 2002, responsibility for the management of student workers had been within the remit of more than one LIS team. This now falls entirely within the remit of USS, who must ensure that the role of the student worker fits into the overall structure of L&IS and contributes to meeting its mission and aims.

Following the start of the 2002/2003 academic year, USS worked closely with another L&IS team, the Academic Information Team (AIT), in order to put together a training programme for the student workers that would help to clarify their roles within the department.

INDUCTION

On appointment, all student workers have an induction with USS that deals primarily with the mechanics of their expected role. This induction includes training on how to use pagers (so that they can be easily contacted by L&IS staff at the Enquiry Desk), radios (so that they can contact, and be contacted by, the University Campus Security Staff based in the Learning Resource Centre [LRC]), manual handling training (to assist with shelving), University Health & Safety video, training in the support offered by L&IS to students with disabilities and general housekeeping e.g. lockers and toilets.

Further training

It was envisaged that a training programme that dealt with the handling of information queries (analyzing the levels of enquiry) and ICT troubleshooting would be of further benefit to them, both as student workers and as students themselves. January 2003 saw the training programme delivered to 23 student workers employed at the University of Teesside – Information Advisers, ICT Advisers and Student Shelvers. The training had two components:

-   an overview of LIS team structures and in particular the work of the AIT.
-   an ICT skills staff development session with University of Teesside Staff Development Lecturer in ICT

Role of the Academic Information Team

Because of the expansion in the role of the Student Workers from "Behaviour Assistant" to "Adviser dealing with Level 1 queries", the AIT felt that student workers would benefit from some explanation of 'Level 1' queries. Some of them had been observed making well meaning attempts to deal with queries beyond their remit. It was clear that definition of where their role ends and an assurance that their efficient performance of that role contributes to the well functioning of the LRC was needed.

The training session took the form of a short talk by one of the Senior Information Team Leaders (SITLs) outlining L&IS practice of working in teams, with each team respecting the acknowledged expertise of other teams and of 'referring on' where this will provide the customer with the best service. Another factor, to which permanent members of L&IS staff are sensitised, is that vague general queries often mask an inability to articulate a specific query, which may need 'unpacking' in a reference interview. The inexperienced worker may answer such a query *literally* without realising that the customer's needs have not been fulfilled. It was explained to participants that librarianship is a graduate profession and that they were not expected to know as much as the professionals and that, indeed, no-one in L&IS has *all* the answers.

In order to make the session more lively, the session took the form of a series of scenarios of the type of queries which student workers are likely to be asked. These were ably acted out by members of the AIT, taking on the roles of student worker, customer and Information Desk staff. After each scenario the participants were

asked to comment on how effective they though the Student Worker response had been and to suggest improvements, where appropriate. The types of queries ran from level 1 (e.g. where can I get a photocopy card?) to level 3 (e.g. I need to get some journal articles on human resource management).

The session was videoed and has subsequently been used to induct individual student workers as they join the team throughout the year. Evaluation sheets were completed by all participants.

Participants' evaluations of AIT session

The evaluation form for the AIT session was qualitative, asking participants to complete the two statements: 'The session was useful because…' and 'Next time it would be useful to…' The evaluations indicated an overall approval and appreciation of the event, with comments such as 'Everyone was made aware of the procedures that need to be followed',
'We are now able to see/recognise senior staff',
'Most importantly we now all understand where we stand. And I strongly agree the procedure and feel comfortable working as a part of the team',
'It made me understand why people sit at the desk and your job roles',
'It helped us to gain an understanding on what queries should be dealt with by us and which ones should be passed on'.
As a comment for what would be useful next time, it was quite rightly suggested "Have this session at the beginning of the academic year, as students are employed in that period as well" and an appreciation was expressed that their role had been recognised as valuable, with a desire to "keep in touch and communicate to each other to ensure a proper working , friendly and professional environment."

ICT Skills Session

The second part of the session centred around the key ICT skills required by the student workers in order to fulfil their roles within L&IS. The session included a closer look at the student e-mail system, MyMail, and considered set-up and troubleshooting. Other fundamental basics of ICT were delivered in the session, including how to format floppy disks effectively, how to create and use zip files, how to check a document's size before it is sent to a printer, viewing and saving of web pages and so on. The session was well delivered and involved the student workers in a practical workshop environment.

Participants' evaluations of ICT session

Feedback from the student workers indicated that for some, it had been the more interesting part of the training event. This feedback came from those student workers not currently engaged in ICT work within L&IS i.e. the Student Shelvers. Feedback from the ICT Advisers and Information Advisers suggested that although the session was well organised and delivered, it was pitched below their level of ability. However, the demonstration of the student e-mail system, MyMail, was of particular interest and all student workers commented on this.

Observed effects of the training

Almost immediately, the effects of the training were noticeable: from the very next day, student workers began to refer, even bring, customers with complex queries to the Information Desks. It is very probable that, prior to the training session, they had been unsure of how much they themselves were supposed to know and the session had reassured them that they were serving customers better in some cases by "referring on".

Monitoring and future development

It is clear that the training session was a worthwhile activity. The video of the session proved useful almost immediately, being used in the induction of a single student worker the following week. Since then a more sophisticated version of the scenarios of likely enquiries has been produced for future use. If a sizeable group is to be inducted, there is the option of a live delivery of the Powerpoint slides used in the 'talk' part of the session, or, for small numbers the presentation could be done entirely by video. Clearly the finer definitions of levels of enquiry are still evolving and it will be useful to keep open the channels of communication between teams. Including student workers will be beneficial both to the maintenance of their morale and informing LIS of the detailed problems customers encounter. To improve interteam communication a member of the AIT will in future attend the regular meetings which USST holds with the student workers. It is possible that the ICT part of the training may need adjustment as the new role of the Enquiry Desk develops.

We would welcome comments and requests for further information.