

OUT OF FOCUS AND INTO THE FRAME: INFORMATION SKILLS BENCHMARKING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the University of Queensland Library's 1999 Information Skills benchmarking project. Particular reference is made to focus group methodology and findings. Customer based criteria for the design, and redesign, of Information Skills Programs in academic libraries are discussed.

BACKGROUND

The University of Queensland Library

The University of Queensland Library is one of the largest academic libraries in Australia and the largest in Queensland. It houses over 2 million volumes, in addition to a large collection of microforms, multimedia and digital files. Over 20 service points deliver services up to 84 hours per week across fourteen branch libraries on three major campuses.

The Library's customers include approximately 29,000 students, with a large percentage of these postgraduates, and over 4,500 academic and general staff. Customers also come from groups with which the University has formal links, such as Cooperative Research Centres, staff of the major teaching hospitals as well as the wider community. The customer is the focus of all library activities.

Benchmarking

The University of Queensland Library undertakes regular benchmarking activities as part of its quality improvement program. In 1998, in response to a call for partners from the University of Otago Library, a partnership was established to benchmark information skills programs. Information was exchanged on the range and variety of programs provided, the process of developing programs, the way in which programs are delivered, the skills and training of staff delivering the programs, and the evaluation of the programs. Then, in order to obtain customer perspective, focus groups at each institution were undertaken.

The discipline of benchmarking with our partner, of having information prepared for exchange, and the value of having our partner's input and opinions on the provision of information skills instruction contributed to a successful and useful benchmarking

exercise. Communication and cooperation levels were excellent. For us, the exercise focused attention on one of our key performance areas with the main advantages being the self analysis involved in the process, and the fact that attention was focused on the information skills program at a time when its future development was being considered.

The University of Queensland Library's Information Skills Program is extensive. Over the last few years courses have increased in number and cohesiveness with regard to being part of a program of instruction. All professional staff, both "front line" liaison staff and "back room" administrative and technical staff recognise the importance of providing instruction and must be available to do so. Courses are very well attended by our customers -- in 1997 over 12,600 staff and students participated in the program, in 1998 over 24,500, and in 1999 over 34,000. However, despite the success of the program, we were unaware of customer perspective and particularly interested in this with regard to future development of the program and the integration of the program, or at least elements of it, into the curriculum. This insight was gained through the benchmarking exercise.

The results of the benchmarking activity indicate the provision of information skills courses by the Library is an essential part of students' learning. The University of Queensland Library discovered it is on the right track with its Information Skills Program but there is still room for improvement.

Teaching and Learning Overview

The courses within the Information Skills Program range from searching the Library's catalogue and web site to detailed subject based research workshops. There are also extended programs for researchers and postgraduates. Some courses are offered flexibly via the web (<http://www.library.uq.edu.au/training/>). The Library considers the incorporation of information skills instruction into the curriculum a priority. A Working Party of the Library Committee of the Academic Board is addressing policy issues with regard to this and a taskforce of staff is addressing practical issues.

While a range of courses is developed in conjunction with academic staff, others are developed solely by library staff. The Library's Information Skills Coordinator is responsible for the development of centrally run courses which are offered to all staff and students irrespective of discipline. The Coordinator also provides assistance, advice and training to liaison staff as required, and ensures a uniformity of presentation and documentation across all programs. The Information Skills Program is promoted to university staff and students on the Library's web site, in the UQ Staff Development Handbook, on notice boards, electronic discussion lists, by letters/flyers/emails to academic staff, and in official Library publications.

All information skills classes are evaluated with participants completing questionnaires at the end of classes. In comparison to extended, controlled research (eg. focus groups), we consider immediate feedback forms to be of limited value. Nonetheless we employ this method, monitor responses and channel any consistent feedback themes into both

staff development and course development.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND LIBRARY FOCUS GROUPS

As the University of Queensland Library had previously conducted successful focus group research in the areas of web site design and customer service, the process of qualitative focus group research was a familiar one to us. We had found, as Glitz (1997) also notes, that focus groups can provide important information for library planning and decision making. At the University of Otago a questionnaire was constructed to supplement their focus group information. At the University of Queensland, however, the focus groups were so well attended it was felt that the research findings from them could stand alone.

Methodology

Five focus groups were run in one week in August 1999. Each focus group met for approximately one and a half-hours. Attendance was excellent, due in no small measure to the offer to all attendees of either a AUD\$10.00 photocopy card or Café voucher for coffee and cake. Free refreshments were also provided at the sessions, which led to a friendly informal atmosphere. We found, as Valentine (1993, p.304) notes, “focus groups proved a quick and effective tool for eliciting relatively spontaneous responses from participants”.

The focus groups were publicised by Information Desk staff and liaison librarians for approximately two weeks prior to the scheduled sessions and expressions of interest were collected. Potential participants were contacted to confirm attendance close to the time of the sessions.

A total of 57 undergraduates, postgraduates and academic staff attended the focus groups. The number of participants that attended each group is displayed in Table 1.

Group	Participants	Total Attending	Mature Age Students	International Students	Comments
Group 1	First year undergraduates	14	3	3	
Group 2	Second year undergraduates	13	0	4	
Group 3	Students of any year	16	0	3	Majority third year undergraduates
Group 4	Postgraduates	8	3	4	
Group 5	Academic staff	6			**
	TOTAL	57	6	14	

** Interests in: Law, History, Chemistry, Sociology, Minerals & Met., Occupational Health & Safety, Family History, Higher Education.

Table 1: Focus group participants by group

A moderator, unknown to the participants, facilitated the focus groups. Each session was tape-recorded (with the permission of the participants) and a librarian

was present as recorder and note-taker. The recorder only contributed to the discussion when invited to do so by the moderator.

Questions

The moderator posed a series of pre-determined questions to the focus group participants and facilitated conversation on selected topics. The questions were designed to elicit information on customer perception of the quality of teaching within the Library, its effectiveness, the reasons for attendance at, or absence from, classes, the effectiveness of publicity and signage, and the desire and usefulness for the integration of Information Skills in the curriculum. Participants were asked the following questions:

- Did they know the Library has an extensive training program?
- How did they find out about the training sessions?
- Which sessions had they attended?
- Why did they go?
- What factors would prevent them from attending?
- What was/was not useful about the training sessions?
- What suggestions did they have for improvement?
- Would they like information skills training to be an integral part of their subjects or do they prefer it to be kept separate?
- If they could make one final suggestion for improving the Information Skills Program or Library services in general, what would it be?

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

It was decided to group the findings into four broad categories – **Cognitive Structures**, **Attitudinal/Emotional**, **Technology**, and **Communication**. We noted that there was some overlap between the categories in that every factor had some attitudinal/emotional component. The use of categories was treated simply as a mechanism to generate ideas which could be used to improve the existing Information Skills Program and courses.

From these categories, we derived a set of criteria for instructional redesign. Because these criteria were based on empirical evidence, they provided powerful persuasive arguments to convince our own staff and senior management of the need for change - not only in the Information Skills Program itself, but also in the attitudes of librarians to teaching information skills.

Initially, it was anticipated that the focus groups would simply confirm existing assumptions about information skills training. This did, in fact, occur. However, the research was invaluable for generating fresh approaches to instructional design and reviving our own enthusiasm for information skills teaching. In addition, as frequently happens in focus group research, issues that were not part of the original script, but that were clearly regarded as important by the group members, emerged (Widdows, Hensler & Wyncott, 1991, p.356).

Cognitive Structures:

Customers approach the Library and courses within its Information Skills Program with their own preset conceptual frameworks and learning styles. Customers want information skills training to suit their individual learning style and *immediate* information needs. They want flexible delivery of training in a range of formats - print, electronic, online and self-paced, face to face – but only at a time convenient to them, with contents and skills directly relevant to their next assessable task.

The information seeking behaviour of many students is “unconsciously incompetent” (Howell, 1982) – that is, they *don't* know what they don't know. Therefore, one of the most difficult tasks for them is to start with a journal citation from a database and actually finish with a hard copy of the article. There is a gap between *finding* the reference and *getting* hold of the material (Massey-Burzio, 1998, p.215).

Students' learning styles become more self-directed and exploratory as their confidence increases. Third year students and postgraduates are significantly more proactive and independent than first year students. Many move from “unconscious incompetence” to “conscious incompetence” – that is, they *know* what they don't know! Postgraduate students in particular are highly motivated and prepared to devote time to training if they anticipate a discernible benefit.

Attitudinal/Emotional:

Many library staff still seriously underestimate the impact of “library anxiety” and may even be unaware of its fellow travellers – library rage, library embarrassment and library phobia. For example, as Valentine (1993, p.304) points out “...students often misunderstood the librarians' role, and, even if they did not, they often felt that consulting a librarian was not worth the risk of embarrassment or communication failure.” These feelings constitute real barriers to information seeking success.

Despite the numbers of students attending information skills classes, we have met the merest fraction of the need. We found most students exist in a kind of information vacuum, and informal peer mentoring is highly regarded by students as a means of learning, and they acquire their information skills by trial and error. Saving time is also considered a *major* factor (eg. one hour was the maximum time for a workshop acceptable to students). Printed help is preferred, but only in the form of short basic recipes. There is genuine concern from all customers about updating their information seeking skills and knowledge. They want regular “refreshers” that update them without going back to the basics – again, saving time is the key factor.

Conversely, many students who had positive attitudes recalled individual experiences in the Library as success stories. Friendly *personal* contact is important for customers' confidence and comfort. They like to know Library staff personally.

Also, personal endorsement by, and a positive attitude from, lecturers to the Library Information Skills Program were absolutely crucial, to acceptance and attendance by students. Information skills training incorporated into the curriculum of a subject was

considered the most relevant, the most useful and most timely, regardless of whether it was for credit or not.

Finally, we found Library customers are truly delighted to be given the opportunity to express their opinions and suggest improvements to the Library services. They wanted to have this opportunity on a regular basis.

Technology:

Library customers occupy places on a continuum from the technophobic to the technophilic. Many are frustrated by their lack of computer skills and feel that this hinders their learning. They acknowledge that technical skills are crucial to their future University and professional careers, which only increases their frustration and anxiety. For example, electronic mail is considered a vital tool for learning, but many students have great difficulty with advanced features like email attachments.

With over seven hundred public workstations available at the University of Queensland Library, together with a prominent Electronic Information Centre and technically competent staff on hand, they view the Library as an appropriate place to learn computer skills. They also consider that Library staff have the technical and pedagogical expertise to assist them and, in fact, suggest that the Library teach basic computer skills.

Communication:

Because customers are so focused on their end-point information requirements, they literally fail to see publicity and all forms of communication about information skills training, because they consider them to be peripheral to their central concern. Present publicity/communication with students about Library training, services and products is therefore not effective across the board and students are only vaguely aware of the Library's extensive Information Skills Program.

Focus group participants wanted multi-modal communication of information about training - email, web site, signage, flyers, digital readouts and personal contact - in other words, everything short of a direct download to the brain! It was interesting to note that all academic staff knew about the training Program, due almost entirely to personal communication from liaison librarians.

OUT OF THE FOCUS GROUPS AND INTO THE FRAMEWORK OF THE INFORMATION SKILLS PROGRAM

The focus groups input was used to formulate and refine the following criteria. These criteria in turn were used directly to modify the instructional design of the Information Skills Program. Each of the numbered criteria below is linked to the implementation strategy with the same number.

The criteria:

An effective Information Skills Program should –

1. be based on learning outcomes which stress content and processes relevant to customers' lifelong learning information needs. The learning outcomes should be clearly articulated in publicity and catered for in the design of learning experiences.
2. be both structured and progressive so that customers use it as a conceptual framework or "roadmap" for the development of their skills.
3. be modular in concept, so that customers can slot units of learning into their timetables when convenient and relevant to their current tasks.
4. be based on an instructional design that facilitates the creation of independent learners. For example, encourage the learning of *essential principles*, but use relevant subject content as examples, emphasise the importance of online "Help" functions and facilitate the critical evaluation of resources, especially Internet resources.
5. be based on the teaching of information skills *processes* rather than content. This is particularly important in the creation of information skills publications (eg. step by step guides).
6. be well publicised to all potential customers.
7. be part of an excellent working relationship with other customer service groups at the University, such as the Teaching and Learning Committees, the Student Union and student and staff support services.
8. be designed for flexible delivery in order to cater for individual learning styles.
9. be accepted by academic staff as an essential element with regard to the integration of information skills into the curriculum.
10. be mindful of the level of customers' IT skills.
11. be reviewed on an ongoing basis. (The focus group method is a useful tool for gathering information on customer perspectives but should not be the only method used. However, it is to be noted that a highly satisfactory by-product of focus groups is the improvement in public relations resulting from actually asking the customers what they want!)
12. be designed and delivered by staff who have a realistic appreciation of customer needs. (As Valentine (1993, p.304) states, "the fact that students want to avoid interactions that they believe may be painful should not be surprising. Educators, however, should be aware of these perceptions and how they influence undergraduate students' experience". Given the importance of attitudinal/emotional factors to the success of information seeking, it is salutary to note that many librarians still subscribe to the "take it because I know it's good for you!" principle. Yet, research shows that many customers are "unconsciously incompetent", which means that librarians must make choices for them, particularly undergraduates. This produces the "codliver oil conundrum" of information skills instructional design. (Note: The authors wish to make it clear that they, too, have succumbed on occasion!). A possible solution is to consistently base course design on a realistic appreciation of customers' cognitive, emotional, technological, or communication related needs.)

Implementation at University of Queensland Library:

1. All major information skills classes are in the process of having learning outcomes written and publicised.

2. The Information Skills Program is currently being redesigned with a clear framework so that customers know what their level is in the sequence of courses. Exact competencies are also being specified so that they can see a pay-off for their investment of time.
3. Classes are being shortened to one hour wherever possible, offered at lunch times and regularly throughout the semester.
4. “Generic” classes have been designed which communicate *principles*. This allows liaison librarians to substitute subject specific examples, thereby delivering relevant information skills training with less preparation.
5. A “recipe” format is used in as many publications as possible. For instance, the Library is producing ranges of both “FindIts” and “UseIts”. These are simple guides to information location and retrieval, which are available in print and on the Cybrary website. Popular examples are “FindIts”, in over 150 subject areas, and the “UseIt”, “Infotrac – Six Steps to Success”.
6. The Library is currently increasing the range of mechanisms used to communicate with its customers. Some discussion lists have already proven themselves to be effective, as have distribution lists operated by liaison librarians.
7. At the time of writing, the Library is working closely with student support services on Orientation Week activities. Student training, handouts and publicity are being produced cooperatively. Student Support Services and Student Administration staff have provided training for Library staff.
8. Online versions of some courses are already available via the web using WebCT. Development of other courses continues via the Cybrary web site in PDF and/or HTML.
9. This year a joint working party with members from the University’s Teaching and Learning Committee and the Library will consider ways in which attributes such as critical analysis and problem solving can be fostered through the integration of information skills into the curriculum. The use of training packages to reinforce the effective use of skills will also be considered.
10. Commencing in first semester 2000, the University of Queensland has funded a computer Help Desk and training service for students, called *AskIT*. (<http://askit.uq.edu.au/>). The Library has been nominated to manage and house it. As well as a face-to-face, telephone and email Help Desk, *AskIT* provides computer training on basic operations and commonly used software (eg. web browsers, email, Microsoft Office).
11. The Information Skills Program will be regularly reviewed. Experience with focus groups has demonstrated their usefulness as a public relations tool as well as a means of gaining customer perspectives on the Program, and it is intended such groups will be run again.
12. An internal report on the information skills focus group research has been circulated to all teaching librarians and managers. Elements of the report have been incorporated into a “Train the Trainer” program which will be delivered to teaching librarians this year. A system of peer mentoring is also under review. One of the Information Skills Coordinator’s duties is to maintain library wide standards of instructional design.

CONCLUSION

To continue as an indispensable, integrated tool for lifelong learning and problem based teaching, academic libraries must meet the information needs of their customers. In order to do this effectively, changes in customer requirements should be monitored, and timely, relevant programs and courses should be designed and provided.

As a result of its information skills benchmarking, the University of Queensland Library is reviewing and revising its Information Skills Program and courses. Every element of the Program is being considered in respect of customer opinions, and changes made as appropriate. A framework within which to offer courses is being developed, courses are being shortened, and the range of communication mechanisms used is being increased. Also, further efforts are being made to increase the degree to which information skills instruction is integrated into the curriculum.

The benchmarking and focus group research has provided valuable information for the revision and updating of the Program and the Library will conduct similar research on an ongoing basis. We recommend this method of research to other academic libraries.

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