Case Study

Library e-induction: alleviating anxiety with digital doughnuts: a case study

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Abstract:

This case study will explore some innovative methods of library induction at a higher education library in the UK, Southampton Solent University, looking particularly at e-induction and alternative approaches to the management of library anxiety.

The induction programme includes features that are modular, interactive and - most particularly - student centred. They cater for a variety of preferences, including video, audio, text based and multi-media options. The variety of approaches taken by the Library's blended induction package will be demonstrated. From the standard type of induction such as physical, virtual, self-guided and audio tours, to the perhaps 'less usual' including an alternative library with roof garden and doughnut machine.

We will reflect on how all these approaches have worked together to assist new library users make the step up to this part of their information literate lives. In particular we would wish to differentiate between options appropriate to the induction stage, at which students are overcoming initial emotional barriers created by anxiety, and later stages when they are more receptive to, and better able to benefit from, in-depth e-literacy training. How this fits into the wider University "spiral induction programme" - a recently introduced system of spreading university induction over a number of weeks rather than cramming everything into a few hectic days - will also be considered.

In addition we will explore possible further research avenues such as 'the doughnut line' (a statistical measure) and a game based interactive learning experience designed to help overcome library anxiety.

Keywords: universities, libraries, induction, anxiety, creativity

Introduction

This case study looks at the library induction programme of one of the UK's newest universities. The programme is modular and the focus of this paper is particularly on the more innovative and unusual elements and those which are aimed at alleviating anxiety in those students who find the transition to higher education daunting or stressful.

Jorge Luis Borges statement *"I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library"* might meet with agreement from many librarians, however research has shown that students first experience of a university library can be somewhat different. *"When I first entered the library, I was terrified. I didn't know where anything was located or even who to ask to get some help. It was*

like being in a foreign country and unable to speak the language." (Mellon, 1986)

The Southampton Solent University Library covers some 4,500 square metres on three floors and is thus not large compared to many other institutions, nevertheless, it may well be the largest library that new students have ever encountered.

Meeting the needs of those who find using a university library to be daunting, as well as for those who find it an exciting experience, is a challenge. We try to do this by making our physical building and our website as appealing as possible, as well as making it informative. For example, we have introduced a facility to display pictures of book covers alongside the bibliographic details on the library catalogue. This is a feature that, from informal feedback from students during enquiry desk contact and in training sessions, appears to be very popular.

Induction to a university library

Induction in particular has to support those whose first reaction to the new environment is a purely emotional one: anxiety. "*Anxiety blocks the normal thought processes. Anxiety and panic seriously interfere with memory, attention, and concentration and are emotionally draining.*" (Chan, 2001)

We do not believe that you can effectively train people and give them new skills until you have overcome the barrier of fear that many face, and so we aim our induction at overcoming anxiety rather than providing in-depth training in information skills, although options for such training are available to those who want it.

Resource optimization in restricted financial circumstances

UK university libraries are often under considerable financial pressure to maximize facilities and resources (or usage of them) with minimal budgetary implications. Many other organisations face similar pressures on resources.

"*When Steven Spielberg was shooting Jaws, he didn't have a dream budget. Ideally, [he] would have liked to film an incredibly lifelike mechanical great white shark attacking and consuming weak humans en masse. The problem was that an incredibly lifelike mechanical great white shark was incredibly expensive.*

So he had to think of something else. Something creative. Something cheap. He
decided to shoot the unsuspecting swimmers from the shark's point of view (with
scary music), and it resulted in a classic memorable sequence…

When your back is to the wall, you get creative. It's as simple as that. Some of the
most ingenious solutions have come into existence under circumstances with limited resources at hand." (Stone, 2002)

We found ourselves in the position of having to be creative with limited resources for either research or development. The approach we took was to bring together a number of modules, developed separately over a period of time by a number of different people, and to build on these as and when we were able. This meant that skills could be developed when needed and time could be devoted to a variety of projects asynchronously as work load permitted. Bringing these strands together under one banner has provided a suite of options for students to select from.

Overview of library induction and further guidance

There are physical and virtual strands to our induction programme and a range of options have been developed within each. (See Figure 1).
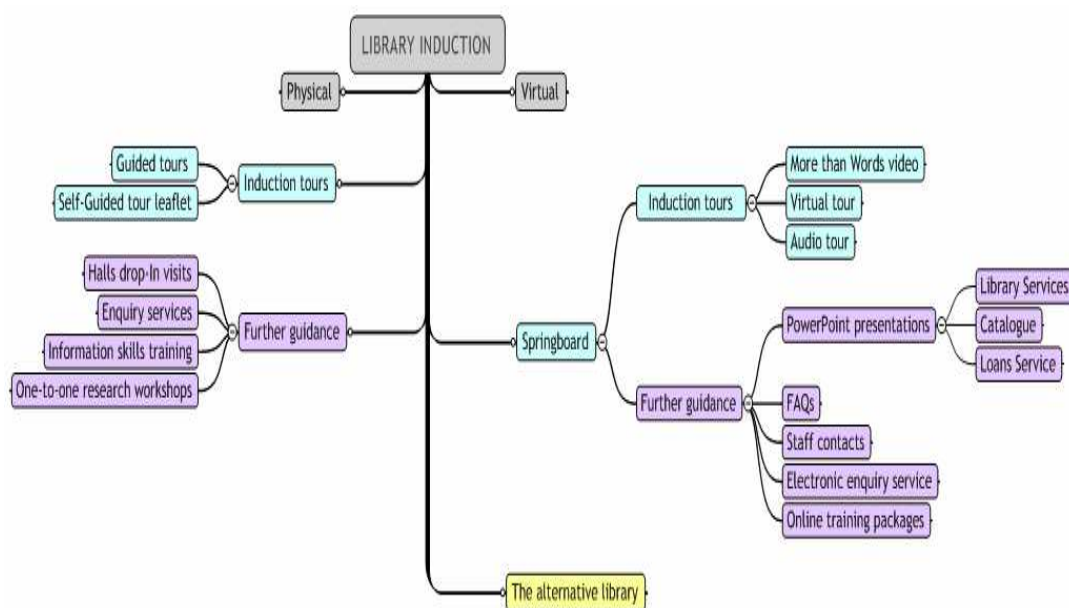

Figure 1: Mindmap showing conceptual arrangement of induction and training.

We continue to offer the traditional guided tours in induction week and we get positive feedback from students who come on these tours. We conduct a monthly student survey and the theme of the survey in the early part of our academic year, each October, is induction. In October 2005 77% of respondents reported that they had attended a library induction and 79% found it informative. However, we know we will never get 100% attendance on physical induction tours in induction week so we also offer a range of alternative options. Should students miss their formal tour of the library, a self-guided tour leaflet is available. The virtual aspects of induction are considered below.

In addition to induction we provide a variety of options for further guidance. In terms of face-to-face guidance there are one off events such as drop-in visits to halls of residence and information skills training sessions within course programmes. Ongoing services such as enquiry desks and one-to-one workshops continue throughout the year. There is also a variety of further guidance available online which students can look at as and when they want to, in induction week or at times during their 'spiral induction.' (Laing, 2005) This is

an ongoing programme of support that the university faculties provide that directs students towards the most appropriate support services for them.

There is also an alternative library, that takes a rather different, more experimental approach. This is discussed in more detail below.

Overall, our aim has been to make our induction package modular, with various pick and mix options. We have made as much use as possible of multi-media – with help from our colleagues in the E-Developments Centre (a section within the Learning and Information Service of the university which focuses on web development and learning systems support.). We have included a blend of both face-to-face and online options, so that students can choose what meets their needs best. We have also tried to make it as interactive as we can, however we think there is potential for it to be more so.

The e-induction programme - Springboard

The e-induction programme figures prominently on the library's homepage, where a section called Springboard gathers all the relevant material together. See Figure 2.
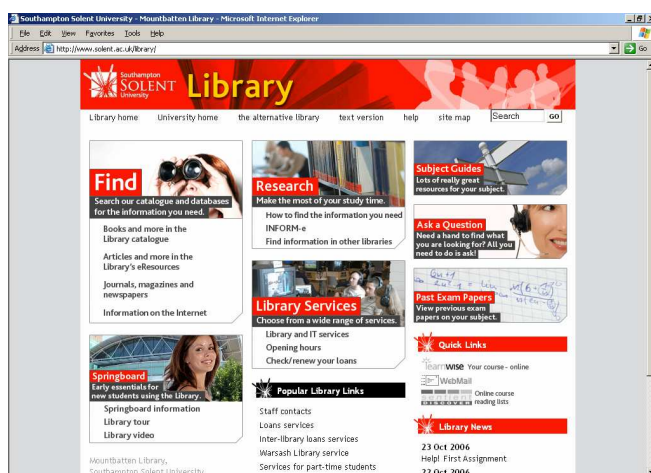

Figure 2: Southampton Solent University Library homepage

On the library homepage is a direct link to the library video, More Than Words, which is also accessible from the main university homepage as part of a collection of eight campus video tours. (See Figure 3.) These videos were actually produced after the 2005/06 induction period, so it remains to be seen whether they will be used in face-to-face induction, but we hope that they may act as a form of pre-induction, promoting the university to students before they arrive, and possibly even contributing to their choice of university.
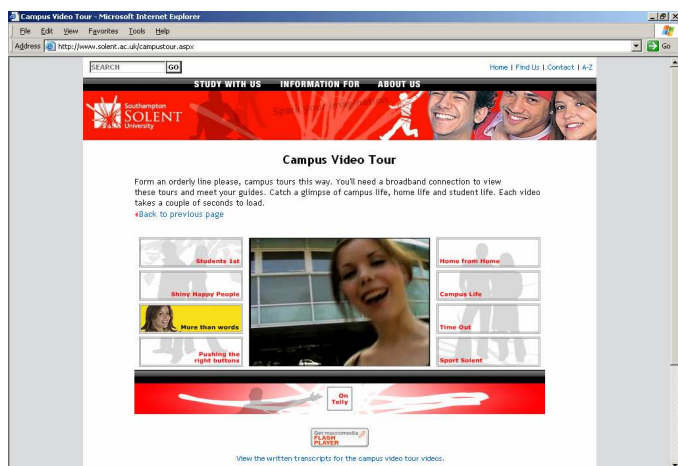
Figure 3: 'More than words' video tour of library

Also in the Springboard section of the Library homepage is a link to the Library Tour. This is a virtual tour based directly on the physical tours which we conduct throughout induction week. It was designed for students who missed induction week, or for those who did attend but want a chance to remind themselves of the information they were given. Photographs link to the different stops and the text replicates what students are told at that location on the physical tour. An extra feature of the virtual tour is the ability to link to additional resources that might be of interest. There is also a printed leaflet version that students can use to guide themselves around if they wish. The Law Library has its own virtual tour.

Newly created for last September's intake, and linked to from the Virtual Tour's Entrance is an audio tour. This consists of a page linking to eight mp3 files, totalling just over 12 minutes. These are based on the self-guided Library tour mentioned above. Once a script had been finalized this was produced by two members of staff, with just a few minutes training in using a media resource recording studio. With the addition of one sound effect, the files were converted from .wav to .mp3.

Students may either listen to the tour on their PC, or download the files to an mp3 player or PDA to listen to as they walk around the building. We considered the idea of a handheld solution to loan to students, but this was ruled out on the grounds of cost. In the two weeks after induction week the audio tour was offered, in the main foyer of the library, to anyone with an mp3 player who wanted to take it immediately, with a view to both addressing any technical issues the students may have and as a promotional exercise. Technically, the audio tour has been unproblematic, but take up from students of help with downloading it was minimal. As a result it was decided that students could be left to download the tour themselves from the web page if they wished to. There is no direct means of counting the number of people who download or listen to the tour, but Figure 4 shows hits on the audio tour page and the accompanying transcript page.
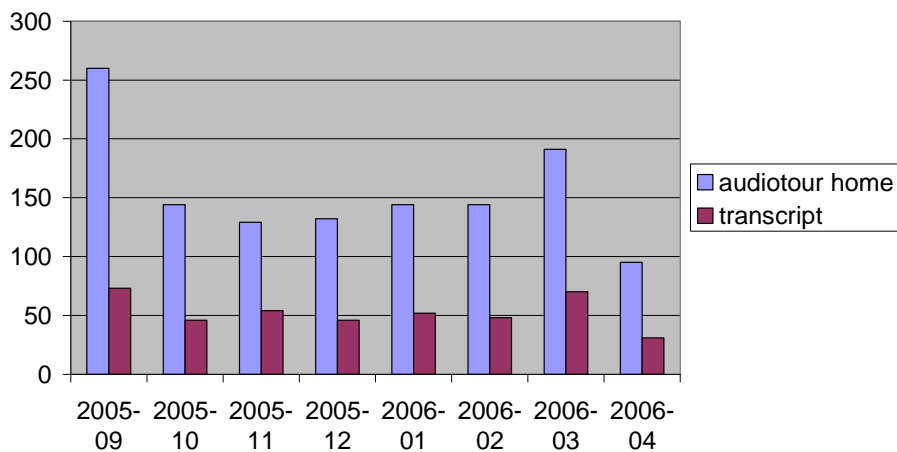
Audio Tour page hits

Figure 4: Audio tour page hits

With over 250 hits in September, around 150 in the 6 subsequent months, and a steady hit rate of around 100 per month since then, it would seem that there is some interest in this form of induction. It represents just over 12% of the FTE number of 9488 Southampton Solent University students of 2004/2005 visiting the page within half a year.

The final link in the Springboard section of the Library homepage is to further material collected under the Springboard banner. By its nature, being one level below the main homepage, this section is likely to be accessed only by students who are positively seeking more in-depth information. On this page, there are links to PowerPoint presentations about the Library, the catalogue and Loans Service; pages of further information concerning the Library as a whole; and online tutorials that Library staff have developed such as INFORM-e. These move beyond induction into further guidance and training.

The Alternative Library - an exploratory approach

There is a section of the Library's website that takes a different approach to induction by actively encouraging exploration. The authors have written elsewhere in more detail about the Alternative Library, its features and its pedagogical rationale, but very briefly the aim of it is to be helpful to students who may not be best served by the traditional approach to interface design. It takes its design inspiration from nineteen-eighties text based adventure games (NETBAGs) which relied mainly on textual descriptions to create the atmosphere of a real place. Computer graphics at that time being basic and very demanding in terms of computer processing power. It has been kept deliberately simple and straightforward to foster a sense of place that students might want to return to.

"*We are serving an audience that is likely to be at varying stages on a continuum, from new students still retaining some playful exploratory mental models through to mature adults with less inclination to explore. As our main Web site is geared towards the mature adult… the Alternative Library is geared more towards the other end of the continuum in terms of its overall structure and navigation, and by the addition of certain non-essential and not entirely*

serious elements, although the core material included is identical." (Collinson and Williams, 2004)

The Alternative Library grew out of a creative thinking course the authors took part in, and encourages exploration both by being somewhat unusual and by including 'easter egg' like features. 'Easter eggs' are a concept borrowed from the world of computer games to describe non-essential hidden features or messages embedded within the game programme. Early examples of NETBAGs such as the simply titled 'Adventure' or the later, more graphically enhanced, 'Zork' included mazes, monsters and puzzles that usually had to be negotiated to successfully complete the game. They would often have red herrings and dead ends that were part of those puzzles, as well as features that might simply be 'fun' within the game without directly contributing to final solution. In the Alternative Library, for example, there are Easter eggs such as time zones clocks at the enquiry desk and, in the Roof Garden, a doughnut machine.

Some of the features we placed in the Alternative Library may seem entirely fanciful, but the digital doughnut, for example, has been particularly popular and has become a kind of statistical benchmark. In one part of the Alternative Library there is a roof garden in which a vending machine serves up a doughnut (i.e. the user is presented with a graphic of a "fresh warm doughnut"). The purpose, explained more thoroughly in Collinson & Williams (1994), is to encourage students to explore and thus find library resources through serendipity as much as actively seeking them out. The doughnut, an entirely non-serious feature of the Alternative Library, attracts a regular hit rate in excess of many of our serious and informative pages. Figure 5 shows the 'doughnut line': i.e. the number of hits on the doughnut image since the Alternative Library opened charted against, as an example, the profile pages of the authors between May 2003 and May 2006. (Short biographies of members of library staff with responsibility for particular subject areas.)
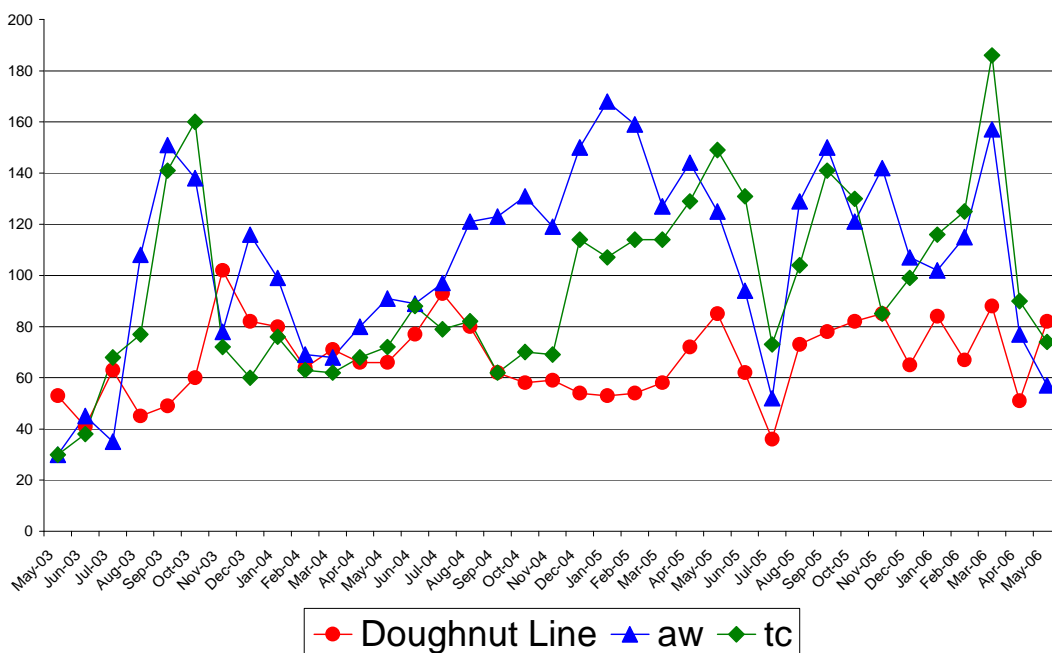

Figure 5: The 'doughnut line' the authors' profile pages

Future developments

Looking to the future, there are various avenues we would like to explore if time, skills and resources allow:

- a graphical, 3D version of the Alternative Library. Ideally this would be fully interactive with 'information players' (Nicholas, 2000) guiding avatars through the virtual library, browsing the ebook and ejournal shelves;

- a more integrated multi-media tour combining video, audio and web pages;

- the application of game based learning to develop a maze metaphor for the HE experience. This is partially designed but has not been fully developed. It includes a series of learning experiences and a final assessment involving an axeman: an archetypal rite-of-passage figure. It could be built as a NETBAG or be more graphically developed depending on available resources;

- an investigation into the role and significance of digital doughnuts, and student perceptions of this type of 'Easter Egg' feature. Is the discovery of a virtual doughnut a motivating factor in exploring a virtual environment?

- statistical analysis of the implications of falling below 'the doughnut line'.

As the digital becomes increasingly ubiquitous in students' lives, our induction programme will need to be under continuous development, incorporating new electronic elements as well as retaining the best of those already established. We feel that the modular structure facilitates this type of continuous development.

The library may never be everyone's idea of paradise. Hopefully, however, we can ameliorate some of the anxiety that new students feel. We do this by offering them an attractive and informative environment that rewards active exploration, along with help, encouragement and even digital doughnuts.

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