Internships and ethnography: students researching students

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In the summer of summer 2018, Library Services hosted our first internship as part of the wider careers programme at the University of Birmingham. This is the story of that summer….

Why an internship?

The Birmingham Undergraduate Internship Programme (BUIP) offers paid internships within the University during the summer vacation. They want to provide meaningful and high quality work experience placements that would offer students the chance to develop their employability skills. The areas they list are in communication, problem solving, project management, data analysis and research – sounds perfect for UX, right?!

Figure 1   The Main Library at the University of Birmingham.

Why did we want our intern to do UX?

This was the first time our team had participated in the undergraduate internship programme and we applied because:

- We wanted to expand our UX practice and gain more experience in using a range of UX techniques.
- We had already used some UX methodologies and knew they are powerful and emotive methods of exploring users' needs and relationship to our services. BUT we are a small team and although we strongly believe that you are never too busy to improve, the reality is that time is a limiting factor. The opportunity to have someone who could carry out a focussed piece of work over 11 weeks was very attractive.
- We saw this as a good opportunity to develop our partnerships with other parts of the University and wanted to play our part in supporting the University's employability agenda.

So, we bid for an internship via the BUIP programme and we hired Luke, a politics student going into his final year of undergraduate study.

What was the plan?

We wanted to give our intern a challenging piece of work so that he would get a meaningful experience from the internship. We decided:

- Our focus was to find out more about taught postgraduates (PGT) – not just their relationship to the library but more broadly about their experience of being a PGT at the University of Birmingham.
- We focussed on PGT because as a group we know much less about them compared to undergraduates and researchers.
- We wanted to explore the PGT experience via new (for us) UX methodologies.

We therefore elected to run a cultural probe, which encompassed a number of different UX techniques. Our intern was to take an active role in the planning and the execution of the probe, with primary responsibility for participant liaison and data analysis.

We were very clear from the beginning on what we expected his outputs to be, which were:

- A written report of findings based on an analysis of the cultural probe data
- A presentation of findings to Library staff (30 minutes)
- A written evaluation of the ethnographic techniques used, including an assessment of what had been successful and what had not worked so well.

How did we recruit participants for the cultural probe?

We recruited for participants via social media and the University student portal. We knew we wanted ten participants and placed no restrictions on applications other than they had to be taught postgraduates.

Once we reached 30 volunteers we closed applications thinking that would be enough, however a number dropped out when they realised the level of commitment. Whilst we still had enough volunteers for the cultural probe, we would have liked a more diverse range of applicants; for example, we had twice as many females as males, and we struggled to recruit any participants over 30 years of age. Thus if we did this again, we would consider more targeted recruitment activity and would advertise over a longer period of time.

Participants were remunerated with gift vouchers of their choice.

What did the cultural probe involve?

The probe took the form of a diary, where for two weeks the participants had to complete a daily task. This two-week period was bookmarked at the beginning and end by a meeting with our intern: a briefing before starting the diary, and then at the end of the two weeks a debriefing meeting. This debriefing was more like a semi-structured interview, where we could expand on some of the images and notes within the diaries.
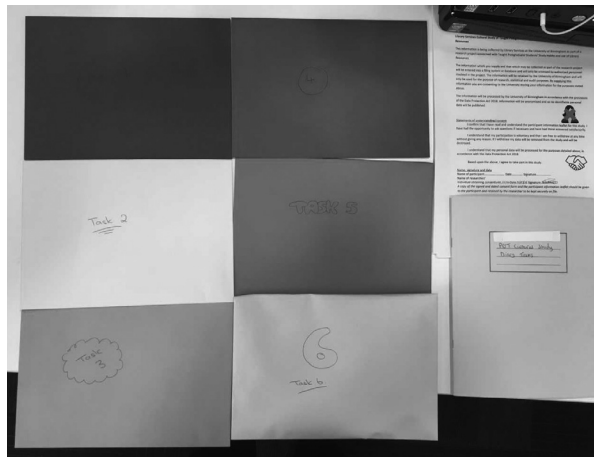

Figure 2   A cultural probe pack ready to be sent out.

What were the daily tasks?

The daily tasks alternated between a question written in the diary (and they would write their response in the diary also), or they would have a numbered envelope to open with a task inside. For example, one of the daily questions was: 'Has your opinion of the library or its services changed since you started your course?' and one envelope task was to write a Love or Break-up letter to the library. See the end of the chapter for a full list of questions and tasks.

How were the tasks received by participants?

As we were testing a variety of UX techniques, part of Luke's role was to analyse how well those tasks worked (in terms of the data they provided) and also what students thought about them. Some of those findings were:

- Engagement and completion rate was high for the diaries, and participants commented that this gave them a chance to talk about issues properly, rather than just ticking boxes in surveys. And it got them thinking in different ways – *"you could be more creative which I liked."*
- Having a variety of tasks was good. As some people are visual, some people verbal, we knew their enjoyment of each task would vary, but the variety kept them engaged.
- We found tasks where participants were asked to self-reflect were the most revealing, e.g. the advice letters and love/break-up letters were particularly effective.
- Participants enjoyed doing something 'physical', i.e. writing in the diary, drawing, posting items to us, as opposed to typing or working solely online.

Findings and outputs

The cultural probe was very successful at showing us the lived experience of taught PGTs at Birmingham (one of the original aims). The students' voices came through very strongly and we felt we really got an insight into their daily lives that of course traditional survey methods don't give.

Our intern was also the one who presented the findings to senior library staff, and it was hugely impactful hearing from him, another student, directly.

Being a holistic study, there were some general findings about the PGT expe-

rience (not directly related to libraries) that we could report back to colleagues, as well as practical recommendations for improvements the library could implement. In brief, these were:

1. *It is very important to socialise and take part in activities outside of your PGT course* – all participants within this study mentioned the importance of making friends as a central support mechanism.
2. *It is important to have a variety of bright study spaces* – participants said the brightness of a study space is essential for their productivity.
3. *Post-graduate taught courses seem to lack organisation and the workload was not spread evenly across terms* – all participants emphasised issues with communication between lecturers/departments and students.
4. *A Masters degree involves a high level of stress and pressure compared to under-graduate study* – participants emphasised the level of pressure and being 'expected' to know information about the education system.
5. Post-graduate taught students appreciate all of the library and university services that are available to them.
6. *Students who are new to the institution (i.e. who have not been here at under-graduate level) require extra support, and especially if they are international students* – non-UK students said they had problems adapting to the British educational style. This relates to the expectation that post-graduate taught students should know certain information.
7. *Students find most information on university and library services online* – all of the students who were new to the university found most of their infor-mation (regarding the library and university services) by searching online at the point of need.
8. *University services need to be better publicised and signposted earlier on* – participants said that they found information about university services too late into the year. Responses tended to focus around library services like the Academic Skills Centre, book ordering and software, as well as university services like the Careers Network and disability services.
9. *It is important to get to know lecturers and feel comfortable talking to them* – participants spoke of the importance of regular contact with lecturers, and many wished they spoke to lecturers more.

You can see the full report with all the findings on our e-repository: <http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3167/>.

What are the benefits of having a student intern for UX work?

Students bring creativity, talent, enthusiasm and innovative thinking, as well as boundless energy. Our intern was full of ideas and suggestions, and contributed fully to the project.

An intern also brings a number of attributes to the table that we as library staff don't have. As a student themselves they have an innate understanding about students' academic and social behaviours, about campus life and how they use the library. This gives them an advantage in building a rapport with participants.

Another benefit is perspective. Being a student intern means they are not influenced by how we do things now, what our processes are or by what we may perceive as barriers to change. They are free to see things entirely from a user perspective and make recommendations accordingly.

What are the benefits to the intern?

Luke, when writing about his experience, said:

> *"Completing this project I have had so many challenging and new experiences. I have developed research skills, the ability to analyse data and make suggestions. The most fundamental skill I feel I have gained is project management. Most internships do not challenge interns."*

Picking up on the last comment, we found that as long as you put the right support in place, you can be quite ambitious in what you ask your intern to do, making it a rewarding experience for you and them.

Are there any negatives of having a summer intern?

From a team perspective, the expertise they have built up over three months is lost to you when they leave, so it was important for us that Luke documented in his report the techniques and methodologies used, as well as reporting on the findings of the research.

On a more personal level, you get used to having a new team member, and then you lose them. Our intern was fully embedded in our team and was an equal co-worker on this project, so it was sad when he left us. ☹

Final thoughts

We found having an intern such a positive experience that, over the coming years, we will continue to be part of the BUIP scheme here at Birmingham. We would recommend that if your institution offers a similar scheme, do consider getting involved.

If you are lucky enough to gain a student intern, be supportive, be ambitious, be brave, and we're sure they will go beyond your expectations.

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Appendix: Full list of diary questions/tasks:

Day 1: Task 1

"Some advice would be nice…." Write a letter to someone (in your diary) who is about to embark on a PGT course. What would you tell them? What would you encourage them to do, what would you warn them about? What's the best advice you can give them to help them succeed?

Day 2: Question time

If the library were a celebrity (dead or alive) who would they be and why?

Day 3: Task 2

Look at the 6 images in your diary for today. Choose the words and emojis that best explain your feelings and describe each image. Note the words down under the image and stick the emojis you have chosen in.

Day 4: Question time

What has been your biggest challenge at University? How did you respond to it? What might you have done differently in hindsight?

Day 5: Task 3

Photo study task: Over the course of the day, take 6 photos to 'diarise' your day – 2 in the morning, 2 in the afternoon and 2 in the evening/night. Don't worry about a theme: it can be your breakfast, taking kids to school, working on your dissertation, meeting friends for coffee, etc. At the end email 6 images with the time taken and a title.

Day 6: Question time

Do you know your PGT course mates? Who do you talk to most since starting your PGT? When you need help who do you go to for advice or guidance?

Day 7: Task 4

Write either a love letter or a break-up letter to the library IN your diary. Dear library….
If you choose to write a break-up letter please be as honest as possible – negative feedback
is often the most valuable to us in terms of designing and improving our services for you.

Day 8: Task 5

Have a look at the picture on the front of the postcard. IN your diary write how it makes
you feel/what emotions it evokes, thoughts you have. Write a quick message on the back of
the postcard and pop it in the post to us today, using the stamp provided.

Day 9: Question time

In what ways has your opinion of the library changed throughout your Post-graduate
studies?

Day 10: Task 6

On a piece of A4, we would like you to draw a cognitive map of 'Your personal experience
of completing a University assignment,' e.g. the services and spaces you use, the people
involved in your working life, your daily learning routine.

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