LIBRARY ON LOCATION: TAKING LIBRARY SERVICES OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY WALLS

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ABSTRACT

The community served by a library is often unaware of the range of resources and services its library provides. To address these issues, University of Canterbury librarians investigated a "Library on Location" service. After reviewing similar services elsewhere, the librarians conducted two term-long trials taking a wireless-enabled laptop and a selection of borrowable items out of the library to high-traffic student areas. Different configurations of equipment, location and time of day were tested to evaluate usage of the service in this environment. Library on Location proved to be an easy and effective way to provide outreach services and publicity about the Library beyond the library walls.

KEYWORDS

outreach, mobile services, academic libraries

BACKGROUND

Librarians have long recognised the need to go beyond the library walls. As early as 1858 the Warrington Mechanics' Institute used a "perambulating library" to take books directly to their members, and doubled their circulation statistics within a year [Bungay, 1999]. In 1905 Mary Titford founded the first "book wagon" in the USA, a horse-drawn lending service driven by the janitor on a four-day circuit of the rural population of Washington County, Maryland [Western Maryland Regional Library, n.d.]. Bookmobiles are now an institution among public libraries, albeit one often threatened by budget cuts.

Academic libraries, by contrast, have usually relied on having a relatively captive audience. However, with the rapid increase in the number of library resources and services available, many of them now electronic, university students and academics are often unaware of all the library has to offer. In addition, many people find academic library buildings and staff intimidating, particularly new students who are often only familiar with relatively small school or public libraries. "Library anxiety" can present a formidable barrier to use of the library [Mellon, 1986].

Recognising this, academic libraries have sometimes introduced outreach services. For example, "Roving" librarians, rather than waiting for library users to approach reference desks, go out to the computers and the stacks to actively offer help at the point of need [Ott & Chhiu, 2007]. "Embedded" librarians might either integrate library instruction with academic courses, or set up regular or permanent "office hours" within the department being targeted [Shumaker & Tyler, 2007].

The increasing availability of wireless internet access for laptops has brought outreach capabilities full circle back to the bookmobile. Libraries can now bring not only a selection of books, but the entire range of a library's internet-based services, to students anywhere on a wireless-enabled campus. A small but growing number of libraries have trialled such a service under a variety of names including "Roving Librarians", "Mobile Librarians", "Laptop Librarians", "Librarians on the Loose", and "The Ask Cart".

Inspired by Harvard College Library's service to its undergraduate commons area [*Reference on the road*, 2003], Simon Fraser University Library trialled "Ask us here!" in two high-traffic concourse areas [Wong & O'Shea, 2004]. An early evaluation showed that the service averaged 2.5 questions per hour and students were more likely to approach the desk having seen it before [Wong & O'Shea, 2004]. The service proved popular enough to add a third location, and is still running after five years [De Forest, 2008].

The University of Texas at San Antonio piloted "Direct-2-U Reference" in five locations. Librarians answered 46 questions totalling over 7 hours of transaction time out of 58.5 hours of providing the service. They found that student dormitories and computer labs were the most active locations, while librarians at the writing and tutoring centres fielded the least queries [Bosque & Chapman, 2007].

Tunxis Community College instituted their service in order to promote a new library building. Carrying a sporty red laptop, some garish signs, a dash of whimsy, and an enthusiasm for conversation, the librarians visited cafeterias, student gathering spaces, and other high-traffic areas. They answered 40-50 questions a day [Lavoie, 2008] at three hours a day, five days a week [Lavoie, personal communication, August 4, 2008].

LIBRARY ON LOCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Our Library on Location service was based on the recent provision of wireless internet connection across much of the university campus. With this level of connectivity, we realised that we needn't be confined by the library walls when offering reference services or demonstrating the use of library web pages. With the aid of a hand-held scanner, we could even issue and return items from the library collection.

The University of Canterbury Library consists of six branches on two campuses. Many students and staff are not aware that each branch holds items of interest to people outside the subject area of that collection. In order to promote these varied holdings, we decided to display a selection of resources and make them available for on-the-spot issue. At the same time, if anyone wanted to drop off an item with us, we could scan it in and return it for them.

We named our service "Library on Location" to reflect our decision to bring both the library service and library resources outside of the library. To identify the service, we displayed a large UC Library banner and a smaller Library on Location poster, and we offered sweets to passersby to further attract their attention.

Trial 1

The first Library on Location trial at the University of Canterbury took place during the second semester of 2007, with the aim of determining the type of equipment needed, time involved and the general response from different locations on campus. In this trial, we operated the service at different times of day and at different places. Each time we went out we refined our methodology in terms of the materials we took and our approach to attracting students.

Our intention was to target high traffic areas for undergraduate students, so we chose two sites in close proximity to cafeterias. Both sites were near our own Engineering Library (EL) and Physical

Sciences Library (PSL) branches, an important consideration since our book trolley was not built for long distance travel across campus. We ran Library on Location at each site for one hour in a morning and one hour in an afternoon.

In addition to the cafeteria sites, we also tested providing a course-specific service by embedding Library on Location in a physics laboratory session, and by setting up outside a lecture theatre with materials targeted to an upcoming course assignment. In the lab session, our presence provided "guide on the side" support: we helped groups of students with basic search concepts, gave advice to individuals and issued books relevant to the topic at hand. To support the other course, our presence was announced during the lecture, encouraging students to stop by with questions or to borrow books relevant to their assignment on their way out.

Equipment we took to each Library on Location session included:
- book trolley
- free standing library banner and a Library on Location sign
- laptop with wireless connection and barcode scanner
- borrowable items (textbooks, general interest books, science-fiction, popular magazines, movie DVDs and music CDs)
- bowl of sweets
- library pamphlets and business cards
- feedback forms, statistics sheet and pens

While circulation statistics from Library on Location seemed considerably lower than we were used to at the EL and PSL branches during comparable periods, we felt that reference interactions were at least as frequent as and generally more in-depth than would be usual for the branches. Our statistics also did not reveal the large numbers of students who, while passing the Library on Location stand, were made aware of library resources they hadn't previously known about.

Since we had set up Library on Location at different locations and at different times of day, we were exposed to a fresh group of passersby every time, most of whom hurried by without stopping. We felt that familiarity with our service might make people less wary of us and encourage them to stop more often, so we decided to conduct a second trial, basing it at just one location. To get a clearer picture of how Library on Location was performing, we decided to collect reference and circulation statistics from Library on Location as well as the EL and PSL branch libraries.

Trial 2

The second Library on Location trial was conducted in term 2 of 2008, with a focus on exploring the effects of providing this service at a regular time and day and at a fixed location throughout an entire term, and comparing the usage of Library on Location with services provided in branches during the same period.

During this trial we maintained a trolley of items ready to go to save the time involved in assembling it on-site each time. We also displayed books "shelved" spine-out on the trolley, rather than facing them out in a broader display around the floor as we had done during the first trial. This was done to reduce our setup time but, as a positive side effect, it also encouraged people to come in close to browse the trolley contents and so made it easier to engage them in conversation. As we had done in the first trial, we took sweets out to attract interest, with the intention of distributing these less frequently as students became more familiar with the service.

RESULTS

We evaluated the service by collecting statistics on user interaction and by asking users to fill out a short feedback card.

Statistics

Unlike at a branch service desk, reference predominated over circulation (fig. 1).
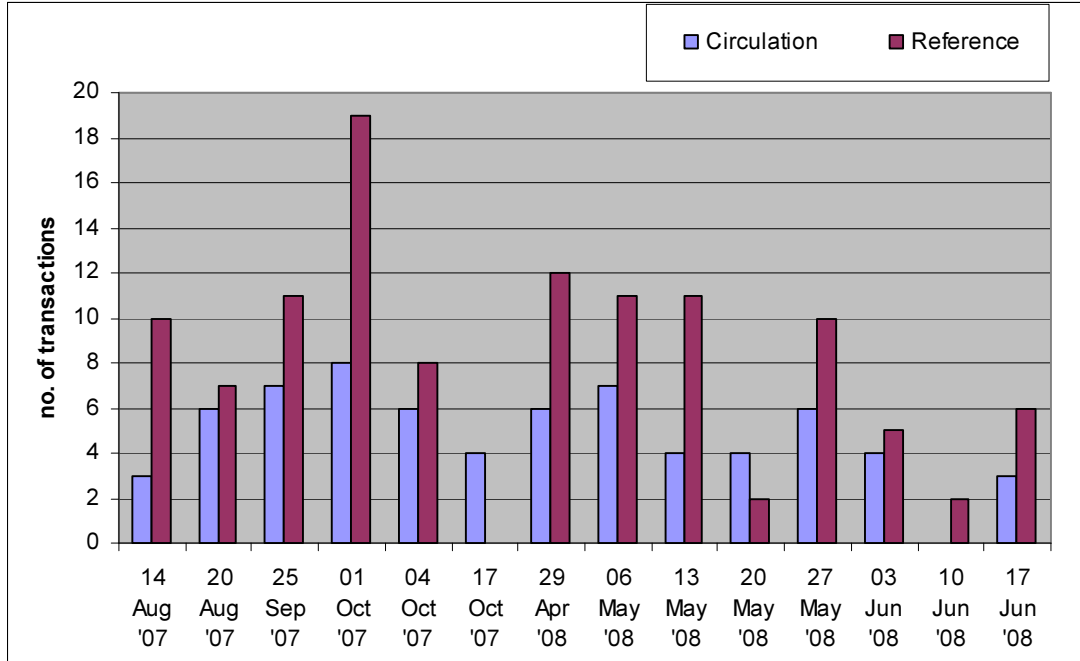

Fig. 1
Library on Location 2007-2008, Trials 1 and 2 – Circulation and Reference

When, for trial 2, we collected statistics at branches as well as on location, our intuition about circulation statistics proved correct: although Library on Location typically loaned or renewed a handful of items each session, and once received an item for check-in, the branch libraries overwhelmingly outperformed Library on Location by circulating from 10 to 40 items or more.

However, in terms of the number of reference queries, we found that Library on Location performed favourably compared to the branches (fig. 2). The nature of queries answered at Library on Location also tended to be more involved than the quick answer type of query that dominated at the branch desks.
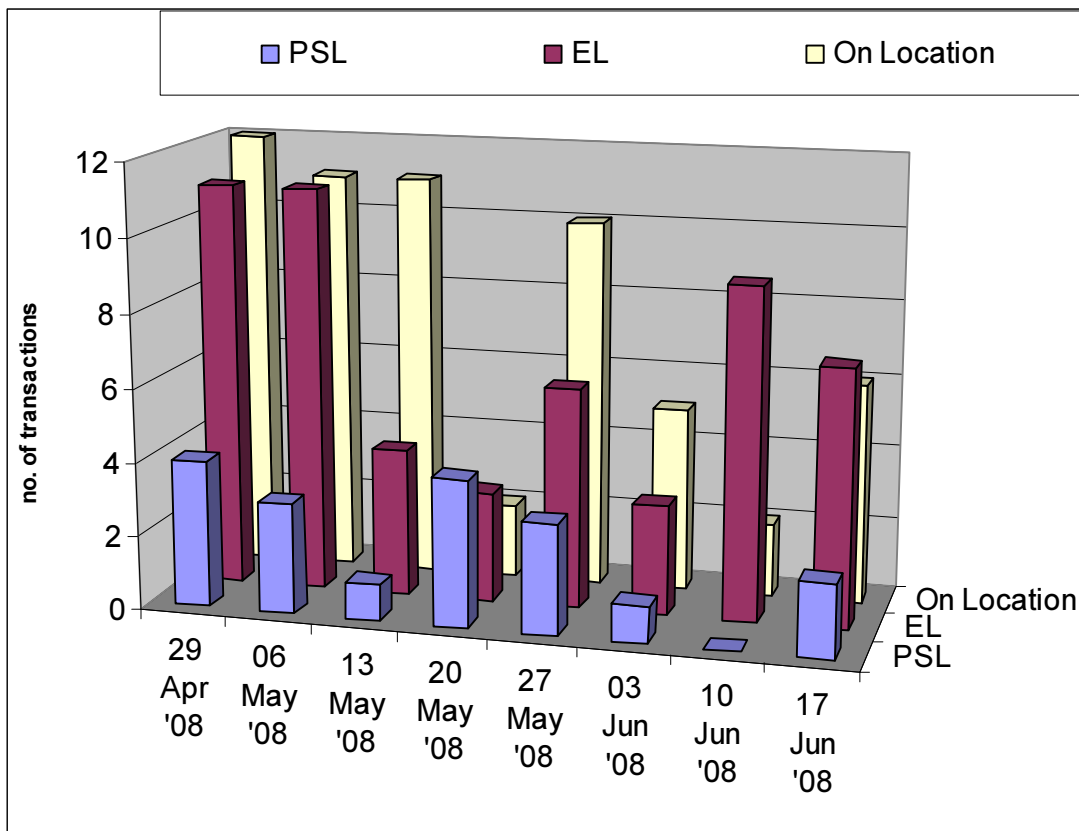
Fig. 2
Library on Location 2008, Trial 2 – Reference transactions

The low performance of session 4 was a result of not using sweets to attract attention. Session 6 was in the last week of term and students were hurrying to get assignments completed. Sessions 7 and 8 occurred when classes had ceased and students were busy studying for exams.

Our statistics did not reveal the full impact of the Library on Location presence on passersby since we interacted with many more people than actually used the service. In order to measure how many contacts we were making at each session, for the last four weeks of the second trial we counted the number of sweets we distributed. These were the least busy sessions, but we still distributed between 30 and 60 sweets each time and we estimated that we would have distributed 60 to 80 during our busier sessions. That provided an indication of how many people were exposed to the message that the library was "out there" and had something to offer.

Feedback

We asked students who used our services or spoke with us to fill out a short feedback card consisting of two multi-choice questions and a space for optional comments. However, not everyone could spare the time to do this.

Responses indicated that most users had visited the library at least once a week, but we did help some students who had only visited a few times, or even not at all (fig. 3).
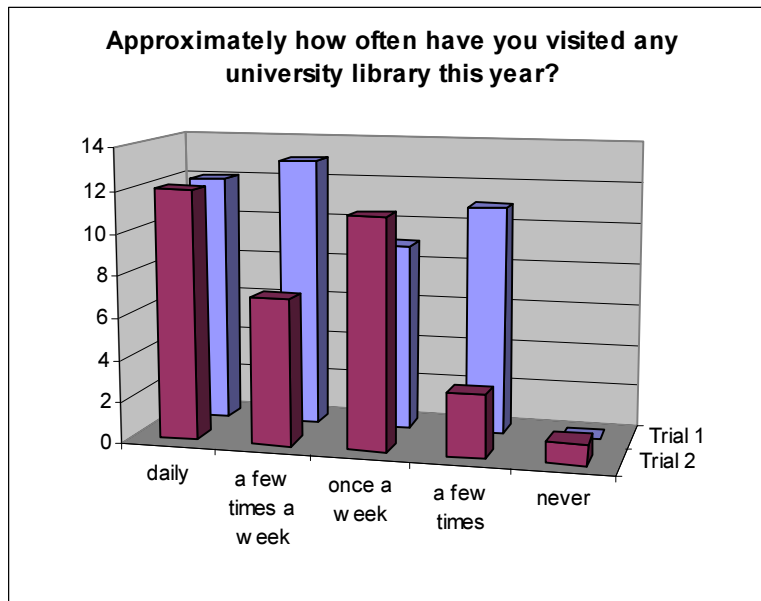
Fig. 3
Library on Location 2007-2008, Trials 1 and 2 – Frequency of Library Visits

Most respondents found the service very useful although responses from the physics lab session skewed the total results of trial 1. In the physics lab, 4 respondents found it "very useful" and 10 "a little useful" but in the remainder of Trial 1, 22 found it "very useful" and 9 "a little useful. In Trial 2, 31 found it "very useful" and only 3 rated it "a little useful".
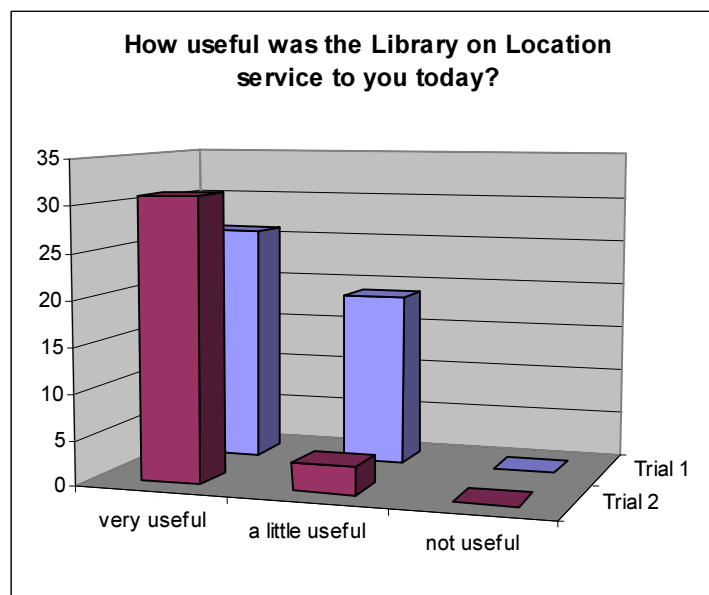

Fig. 4
Library on Location 2007-2008, Trials 1 and 2 – Usefulness of the Service

Comments were also positive. Some respondents simply said "Great idea!", "very handy", or "yay for sci fi!" Others suggested specific titles either to bring on location or to add to the library collection. Other feedback clearly illustrated the value of the service:

- "The library can be very intimidating and you can often feel quite silly asking questions but this service makes it easier Thankyou"
- "I didn't know library had dvds. Ladies were lovely and really helpful Thank you."
- "able to take through system without feeling bad about holding people up (smiley)"
- " Should be in the COSC building more often as there is no library"
- "some lib on location services like this are good to educate students about library & its resources."

We also received useful verbal feedback. On one quiet afternoon session in trial 1, an academic suggested trying the morning instead – this proved indeed to be a busier period. During trial 2, a number of students, hurrying past on the way to lectures, told us that they would come back after the lecture. However, as we were only there for the one hour, they weren't able to do this.

The physics lecturer for the imbedded lab session was impressed with the service and student response to it, and he asked for Library on Location to be provided for the course again in 2008. Having become aware of the class's need for information literacy support, he also requested us to provide an additional instructional session.

DISCUSSION

Enticing people to stop at the Library on Location stand was not easy since most people were pressed for time, wary of our motivations, or simply not interested in anything labelled "library". The bowl of sweets served to break the ice with those who would otherwise have hurried past. During the second trial we attempted to forgo the distribution of sweets but with unsatisfactory results.

With experience, we became more adept at promoting the service, and developed the technique of:

- offering a sweet;
- if they came to accept one, pointing out the borrowable DVDs;
- if they looked interested in those, briefly describing the Library on Location service.

Avoiding library jargon or dry language such as "resources" was important – but having the resources there drew attention to us, stimulated conversation, and served to promote the range of materials available at the library.

We encountered a wide range of users:

- academic and general staff,
- undergraduates,
- pre-entry students,
- international students,
- students with disabilities,
- people with young children.

We spoke with people who had seldom used the library and found that it also improved our rapport with students who were already regular library users. One general staff member was surprised to learn that he was eligible to use the library, having thought it was just for academics and students; and one ESOL student had assumed there was a cost involved in borrowing from the library. Many people, even regular library users, expressed pleasant surprise that the library stocked movies, music and recreational reading material. Topics of conversation included:

- finding videos and DVDs in the library
- the new interbranch delivery service
- basic library questions

- help searching in the catalogue
- ESOL questions
- reference questions

Basing the service at a fixed location increased the success of the service. As the trial progressed, passersby seemed more at ease with our presence and became increasingly friendly. We also became acquainted with the types of people who frequented the area and developed a rapport with repeat customers, enabling us to supply materials specifically for their needs. On several occasions we provided an individual follow-up service.

Although it would be possible to run Library on Location with only one librarian, we felt that it was much more successful with two. Whether from curiosity or a feeling that safety lies in numbers, people were more inclined to approach us when someone else was already interacting with us. When this happened, it was useful to have a second librarian available to answer questions from other people, or to continue offering sweets to passersby.

WHAT NEXT?

Due to the success of our trials, we plan to continue running Library on Location next year. At this stage, staffing resources may only allow for us to provide the service approximately once a month. However, we will encourage the involvement of subject librarians from all Library branches so that the workload for each librarian will be minimal.

As our trials were focused on only two areas of campus, our next task is to identify additional locations that attract high student traffic and have good wireless coverage. We will also investigate what events might be enhanced by the presence of Library on Location, such as the enrolment week "Get Connected" programme. Less frequent provision of the service will make branding and marketing more important, but aligning ourselves with other events could also boost traffic.

In the longer term, we would like a purpose-built trolley. Book trolleys do not travel well over uneven ground, so a more rugged trolley that could hold materials securely in place would make it easier to move around campus. Ideally, it would also have in-built weather protection and a fold-down panel to support a laptop.

CONCLUSION

Library on Location was simple to operate and the service was well appreciated. The trials increased the library's visibility and exposed students and staff to services and collections they had been unaware of. Overall, Library on Location answered more numerous, in-depth, and varied queries than nearby branches during the same time period.

While reference provision has been the focus of many similar services, and was still the primary value of Library on Location, displaying issuable materials during our trials encouraged passersby to stop and interact with us. Likewise, although it can be set up at a different site every time, a fixed location and a regular time seemed to increase public acceptance of the service and allowed staff to become familiar with local needs.

The flexibility of Library on Location adapts it to any high-traffic, wireless-enabled student area. It is equally suited to a regular term-time service or a one-off promotion for special events. By going out to non-traditional spaces, Library on Location enables librarians to reach out to both current and potential users to promote library services, collections, and staff.

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