

9: SwITch at Northumbria University

The iBorrow project benefited from the experience of other institutions undertaking a similar journey, albeit with alternative technology and in different contexts. This case study from Northumbria University is an opportunity to compare and contrast the respective problems and solutions encountered in each project.

Northumbria University Library has a reputation for delivering innovative, student-focused services positioned at the heart of the student experience. It is renowned for its excellent customer service and is a holder of the Cabinet Office's Customer Service Excellence award. It has been developing flexible, technology-enhanced learning spaces for a decade enabling students to study in state-of-the-art spaces within a hybrid resources environment.

Development of the laptop service

Northumbria was an early adopter of wireless laptop loans. In 2001 to support students' diverse study styles and avoid flooding the library with hardwired IT study spaces, which would have constrained the degree of flexibility we wanted to offer, we offered our first Laptop Loan Service. The loan service was mediated by library staff and worked well at both the City and Coach Lane Campus libraries, with students able to borrow them within the library for a maximum of two hours (restricted by the battery life). No problems were encountered with these 'inadvertently' leaving the building as they were security tagged, wireless only and, most importantly, issued to the student smartcard, making the student accountable if the laptops are mislaid, as with other library loans on their cards (JISC, 2005).



Scaling the service

As the Library service moved to 24/7 opening at City Campus it became evident that the Laptop Loan Service, in its current guise, whilst heavily utilised, was constrained by being a mediated service. The laptops had to be returned prior to the closure of the Enquiry Desks when the 'lapsafes' were locked overnight and therefore unavailable for student use for a large proportion of our extended opening hours. Whilst there were sufficient hard-wired computers in the building to meet the overnight demand, the popularity of laptops and the flexibility they offered led us to reconsider the service. Moving from a mediated to a self-service model would enhance IT options for students offering greater flexibility, particularly important for those students unable to use the service during the day.

To ensure a truly 24/7 service a 'lapsafe' containing 30 self-service laptops was purchased. This would be piloted to see how students used them alongside the other IT facilities on offer. We chose Wyse X90L thin clients with five hours of battery life and were impressed by their robustness and security which enabled our colleagues in IT Services to run them as Wyse series Citrix clients. Their solid design means no moving parts and a far longer lifespan than other comparative laptops. And of course no hard drive means no data whatsoever is lost or compromised if a Wyse X90L is stolen or mislaid. Each laptop is also secured with a tag, standard across our stock security systems. The 'lapsafe' was located in a convenient and accessible area for all students, with a separate power supply and fitted with RCD plugs for safety. Procedures and 'health and safety' notices are clearly displayed next to the laptop trolley.

It was important to distinguish between this additional service and the Laptop Loan Service which was still being offered from the Enquiry Desk until the pilot had been sufficiently trialed and evaluated.

The new service was branded as **swITch Self Service Laptops** and launched in October 2010. It aimed to:

- Improve student access to IT 24/7, offering flexibility for use anytime, any place (in the library), on comfy seats in the basement, at the group study tables or at study desks without hard-wired IT terminals
- Enhance group study and collaborative learning
- Provide a cost effective option

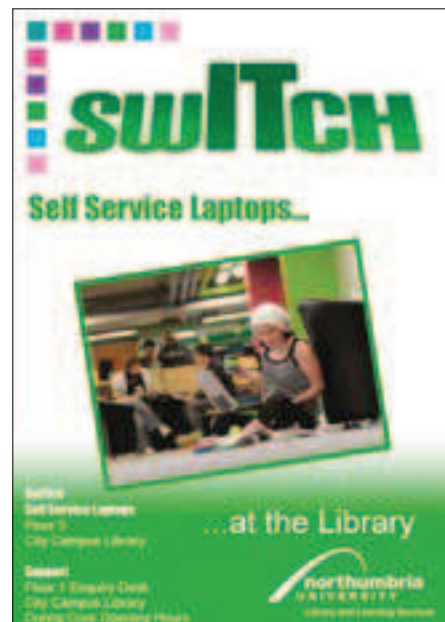
The brand provides a simple concept for the service:

Switch on – and go

Switch seats – use the laptops anywhere in the library

Switch off – return laptops to the appropriate floor

A soft launch using library plasma screens, posters, leaflets and word of mouth was successful in letting students know about the service. Students were very quick to tell each other about it. The idea is simple: students help themselves and replace the laptops for recharging after use.



Administration and maintenance

Before implementation, checks were undertaken to ensure the power supply could accommodate the 'lapsafes'. Health and safety checks were carried out and robust long-life battery powered laptops were scoped. Also important was ensuring the laptops could easily be removed, returned and reconnected to the lapsafe power chargers. Since the implementation of the SwiTch Self Service Laptops there have been few problems. Laptops not being returned, or being hidden, were initial issues but are not such a problem now we have discovered their hiding places! Students sometimes even recharge the laptops with their own chargers!

An advantage of using WYSE series laptops is that any laptop can be plugged into any of the available 'lapsafes' in any location, due to their compatible power supply. This is a real advantage as it allows students to return the laptop to the nearest 'lapsafe'. Whilst the intention is to encourage students to return them after use rather than leaving them lying around (so that they can be recharged properly), we are finding that students usually leave them where they have used them. Interestingly other students tend to use them where they find them, so unless the battery is flat this is a good flexible way of maximising their use.

By their nature the laptops have to be regularly checked and a small team in the Library maintain and administer them with support from IT Services as required. Every 30 days the laptops are fully checked and any missing from the 'lapsafe' are tracked down to check functionality. Additional checks were made during the busy exam period running through Easter to mid-June to ensure they were fully operational at all times. Any laptops found lying around unused were retrieved and put back in the 'lapsafes' for recharging. We have incorporated this recovery task into our roving service and are finding that students who may be reticent in asking questions at the enquiry points feel more comfortable asking for help in this way when they see staff retrieving the laptops.



In February 2011 the Library increased the SwiTch service from 30 to 50 laptops with 20 new WYSE X90CW which are smaller netbook-style thin clients, but still compatible with X90L thin clients.

The Basement learning café is proving to be the most popular area for laptops use. This is a designated social area with comfortable seating, furniture that can be moved to accommodate different size groups, whiteboards and vending machines and a café serving snacks and hot drinks 24/7, making it an ideal environment for students to relax and study as they wish.

Early statistics and informal feedback have shown that the service has far exceeded our initial expectations.

As a member of library staff observed:

“The flexibility of the swiTch service meshes nicely with the libraries flexible learning space concept. The service also dovetails with the 24/7 service of the library, and is available at all times students are in the building”

Student comments include:

“Great idea fits in with the 24 hours service provided at the library”

“Love it”

“Great but need more”

“Like the freedom not the worry I may forget to return and be lumped with a fine”



Plans for further enhancements to the SwiTch Service

In 2010-11 the Library offered students both the SwiTch Self Service Laptops and the laptop loan service. The popularity of self-service and the review of the pilot project has decided us to expand the service within the City Library and to introduce this to the Coach Lane Campus Library which has only been running the Laptop Loan Service this year. As this library is about to undergo a major refurbishment we are eager to provide swiTch here to truly update and enhance our services to students. Coach Lane Library will have 30 WYSE

X90L and 20 WYSE X90CW thin client laptops housed in two 'lapsafes' located across the floors. This will lead to the withdrawal of the Laptop Loan Services at both libraries in 2011-12. From September 2011 the library will have increased the self-service laptops from an initial 30 in October 2010 to at least 140 compatible and robust laptops. We are optimistic this service will continue to be popular with students offering, as it does, flexible learning options which enhance the student experience.