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Helping students to 'study happy'

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Antony Brewerton and **Becky Woolley** talk about a range of wellbeing activities on offer at the University of Warwick library, helping stressed-out students to relax and become better able to cope with the pressures of study and being away from home.

EARLIER this year, *CILIP Update* ran a news story about a series of Carnegie UK Trust databases outlining how libraries support their local communities as a social hub, learning hub, economic enabler and cultural centre.[1] The databases and their attendant publications highlight how 'public libraries are safe spaces at the heart of our communities, providing completely free access to huge resources of information, knowledge and technology. They have dedicated staff and are well linked with other local services'.[2] They detail how libraries tackle isolation and foster inclusion, provide an arena for creativity and cultural events, and can support both traditional and digital skills development. All of this is dynamic, and as the trust points out 'to respond to the changing needs of the 21st century, libraries are changing and must continue to change. Libraries must be brave, innovative and show how they are doing things which really make a difference to their community'.[2]

But it is not just public libraries that are taking on this challenge. Academic libraries have, of course, acted as learning hubs for years – some of us even include the word 'Hub' in the name of some of the spaces – but they are increasingly developing services in some of the other areas identified by the Carnegie UK Trust.

At the University of Warwick, the library has grown its community engagement offer over the last few years. When we say 'community', although we do outreach work throughout the Coventry and Warwickshire area (with widening participation support and promotion of our Modern Record Centre's trade union archives), we primarily mean our different student and staff communities. In 2014, as part of a wider restructure, the library was able to develop community engagement teams for undergraduates, postgraduate students and teaching staff.

So why this new interest in community?
In many ways this isn't new. For the last decade our library's mission statement has been: 'connecting you with information,

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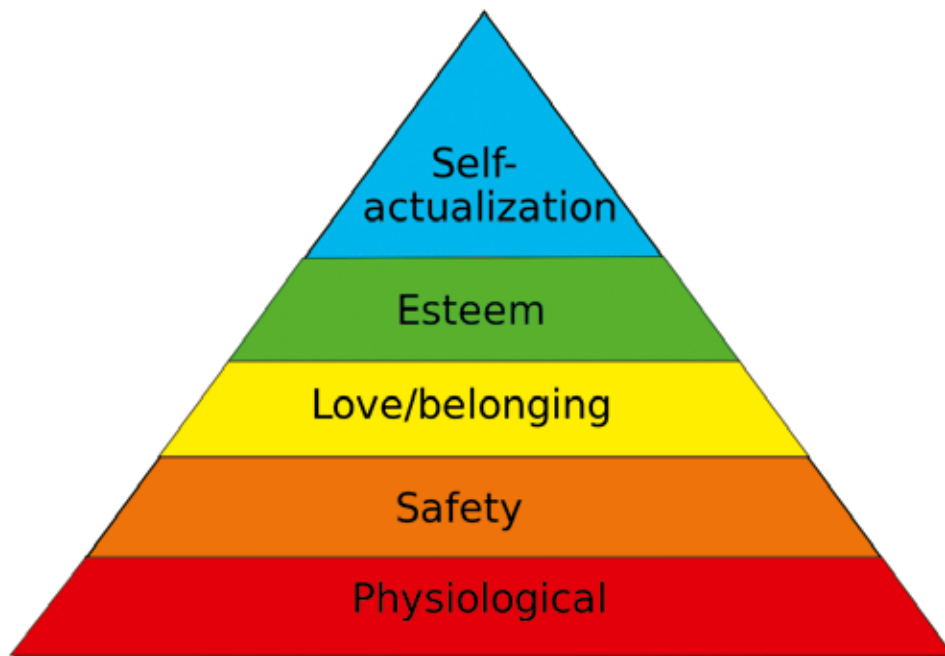
Figure 1: Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs.

support and your community'. The information element is the core of all libraries. Support is something we have developed and extended, going beyond traditional information skills to embrace digital skills and wider academic skills. But 'community' has been our key area of growth, fuelled by the expansion of our community spaces (four Learning Grids, the Teaching Grid, the Postgraduate (PG) Hub and Wolfson Research Exchange) which have provided the arena for wider conversations with our community groups.

Skills support
This was recently reinforced by a new university strategy which highlighted 'community' within the university's key values and 'engaging our communities' as one of the university's goals. For us a key line in the strategy is around 'creating the conditions for our students and staff to succeed'. We have achieved this through skills development, tackling isolation and creating a stronger sense of belonging, and wellbeing support.

Skills support has moved from the usual professional approach of one-off interventions to scaffolded programmes of academic and information skills developed in partnership with academic colleagues – such as our 'Student as Researcher' activities for undergraduates – and new areas of support – such as our growing 'Digital Tools for Researchers' modules. Our 'On Track' programme prepares our postgraduate students to cope with the stresses of their dissertation well in advance of them beginning writing up. Indeed, as well as supporting skills for academic work and employability, developing skills sets early on strengthens resilience which supports wellbeing.

A sense of belonging
Although evolving, skills support is a time-honoured library offer. A newer area of development for us is around tackling isolation and helping to create a stronger sense of

belonging amongst our student communities. If we are going to create the conditions for student and staff success, we need to consider all the elements that need to be in place for that to happen. Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs'[3] (see figure 1) highlights the factors we need to address. Our campuses provide accommodation, access to food and drink, and security. But what about creating a sense of belonging? Celebrating achievement? Providing the opportunities for self-actualisation? Libraries can do more to support these elements.

We work hard to help students feel at home. Library-managed student blogs[4] explain what it is like coming to Warwick from, for example, Nigeria – making it less scary for students coming across the globe to begin a new life in a new country. We also host much of their induction in community spaces, so for taught postgraduates this means the PG Hub. Throughout their time at Warwick, students can benefit from weekly networking events that take place in the relevant library spaces. The library also hosts cultural events (such as student celebrations of Chinese New Year), helping students to feel at home and enabling them to proudly talk about their culture to other students. All of this helps foster integration and a sense of wellbeing.

'Study Happy'
Our main approach to enhancing student wellbeing, though, is our 'Study Happy' programme.[5]

Study Happy initially ran over four weeks of the peak exam period in the summer term of 2014 helping students cope with exam stress through a range of activities which encouraged them to take a break and connect with others. Subsequently, we have extended the programme to run throughout the year to encourage students to think about their wellbeing from the outset and develop good practices in readiness for any stress point in the student journey. We hope, with the diverse range of activities we offer, that there will be

something to appeal to everyone. Much of what we do is developed with different partners around the university. We work closely with Student Support services, of course, and encourage students to follow the five steps to wellbeing:

- connect
- be active
- take notice
- keep learning
- give[6]

Wellbeing activities for all
Our 'Crafternoon' offering crochet, origami and adult colouring and our Chinese New Year celebrations offering mask painting and Chinese character calligraphy appeal to a variety of students, encouraging them to take a short break from study to do something creative and in many cases learn a new skill (or pick up a skill from childhood again, something students have commented on favourably). We also just leave colouring sheets out in our spaces for students to help themselves and then display their work for everyone to enjoy. Students can also learn to play the ukulele. This is a fun lunchtime session in one of our learning spaces, a collaboration with Warwick's Music Centre, in which students can pick up a ukulele for the first time and be able to play a simple tune by the end. This taps into self-actualisation and means – for 30 minutes at least – you forget about exams.

De-stress at your desk
We encourage students to be more active to aid relaxation with yoga, body balance and 'de-stress at your desk' sessions, collaborating with our partners in Warwick Sport. The Smoothie Bike is also popular, as this combines exercise with a delicious smoothie created by the student's pedal power. The weekly Wellbeing Walk around our beautiful campus lakes is also a good way for students to get some fresh air and be active. And to appeal to those who just want to focus on the relaxation part, there is always the massage chair.

Most of our activities give students the opportunity to connect as well. 'Alice in Libraryland', celebrating World Book Day and University Mental Health Day, combined a Mad Hatter's tea party with crafts, games and puzzles, along with

student development workshops, poetry and meditation. Some students came for a short while, others stayed over an hour enjoying the company and atmosphere. Meditation encourages students to 'take notice' as do our Discover cards – cards with encouraging words on, popped into books for students to come across and feel more motivated.

Free penguins

Students are always happy to be given freebies. We give away a penguin stress toy, Kirby, who has become the mascot of our campaign. Not surprisingly we find students engage well when we give out food too: fruit and cake. While this is a good way to encourage students to take a break we also grasp the opportunity to ask them for their tips on a post-it note on different exam-related topics such as revision tips or simply sharing the best music to listen to when revising. We have had a plethora of useful tips from: 'Forget your phone – much more productive' and 'Cup of tea breaks' to 'Don't panic!'. Revision soundtracks range from Bach to Beyoncé. The value of these tips is the fact they are peer-to-peer – not from their mum or a 50-something librarian! Interestingly, while we have had some fantastic feedback when we have given out cakes, our students, when offered the choice between cake and fruit, mostly choose the healthy option, which suggests the messages about wellbeing are getting through.

Queues to pat the dogs

By far the most popular Study Happy events, though, are when we invite the PAT dogs in to the library. Four to six volunteers from the charity Pets as Therapy bring their dogs for small groups of students to pat for 15 minutes. The first time we offered this, the queues of students wanting to meet the dogs stretched the whole floor of the library. We have since implemented a booking system to manage the queues and are mindful not to tire out the dogs, some of whom flip onto their back for a tummy tickle the instant the students enter the room and stay there the whole time. With typical hyperbole, the students rate these sessions highly: 'I'm lost for words about how great that was [heart]'; 'Cutest dogs'; 'Perfect start to
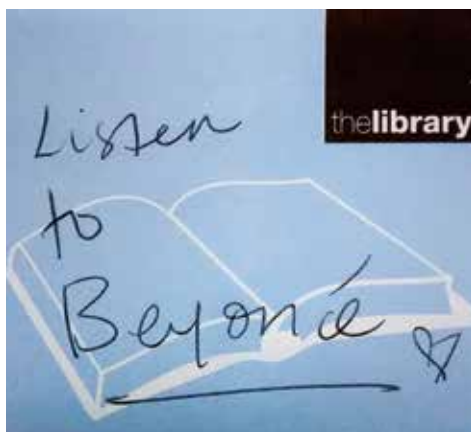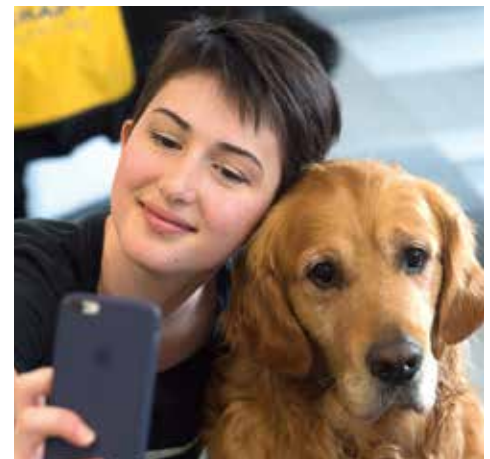
term! Need it all the time, it is so calming. I miss my dog so much!' Missing their own dog is a common theme, but we think they also miss socialising with a different generation – parents, grandparents – and these events provide this too as they chat about their life to the volunteers. 'Brilliant dogs and brilliant people' is a frequent piece of feedback. The dogs have become instant stars of student Instagram accounts and they dominate Warwick's Twitter activity every time they come around.

All this is, of course, great fun but, as we hope we have shown, it has a very serious objective. It is fabulous to watch stressed-out students become more relaxed, more vital young people once again, better

equipped to deal with the pressures of their studies, better equipped to succeed.

The library is here to help them study happy. [U]

Note and references

1 'Power to support communities', *CILIP Update*, **March 2016, p.13**

2 Carnegie UK Trust. *Speaking volumes: the impact of public libraries on wellbeing*, **2014, p. 2.** (http://bit. ly/2cgxRSJ**).**

3 Abraham Maslow, A theory of human motivation, *Psychological review*, **1943, 50(4), p.370-96; image from** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

4 See http://studentblogs.warwick.ac.uk/postgraduate

5 See https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/students/ study-happy or on Twitter, #StudyHappy

6 See http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being