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# **THE LIBRARY STEEPLECHASE: A NEW BREED OF LIBRARY TOUR AT VCU**

**RACHEL A. MCCASKILL AND JENNIFER A. STOUT**

## **VCU AT A GLANCE**

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is a large, public research university located in Richmond, VA with an undergraduate population of approximately 24,000 students, over 4,000 of which are first-time freshmen. VCU librarians have traditionally offered tours of James Branch Cabell Library at the beginning of each semester as well as on-demand for faculty members who request them for their classes.

While the slate of tours at the beginning of the fall and spring semesters have set dates and times, faculty could, in theory, ask for tours for their classes at any point during the academic year. The vast majority of the faculty who request tours for their classes teach UNIV 111: Focused Inquiry, an introductory research and writing course all VCU students are required to take. The Teaching, Learning, and Information (TLI) department at VCU Libraries is charged with working with these faculty members and, as such, we lead the tours faculty request for their classes.

## **WHY A MOBILE TOUR?**

TLI librarians were looking for opportunities to shift tour responsibilities away from our department for a few reasons. First, tours on demand take up time in our workday that could be more productively spent. As teaching librarians, we are often very busy preparing for and teaching library classes during the height of tour requests. Additionally, we noticed an issue with students on tours “zoning out.” During in-person tours, we observed students playing on their phones, talking with their friends, and sometimes simply staring off into space. We wondered if there was a way to encourage students to become active participants while touring the library. Also, the VCU Libraries is venturing into producing more online learning tools for distance learning students and we saw this situation as an opportunity to add to our suite of online tools. At LOEX 2016, Laura Gariepy, the Head of Teaching, Learning, and Information, learned about an up and coming woman-owned small business, Green Door Labs, which offered a software called Edventure Builder that allows users to develop interactive games for mobile devices. The software would make it easy to create mobile tours for VCU students.

## **ADVOCATING, PLANNING, CREATING, AND LAUNCHING**

A task force of two TLI librarians and one Information Associate (a non-librarian professional staff member) worked over the summer of 2016 to plan out, create, and launch an interactive library tour aimed at freshmen using Edventure Builder software.

After proposing the idea to library administration and receiving their approval, the task force prioritized and storyboarded tour stops. We had to decide what services and locations in Cabell Library were most vital for students to learn about without making the tour overly long or complicated. We decided that the tour should direct students to every floor in the library (five floors total, including a level below ground), so we used the main elevator as the tour’s home base, from which all directional language would stem.

Additionally, we designed the tour so that it was partially randomized. After the initial instruction screens, the tour would randomly direct students to one of the five floors. However, once they were on that floor, they would complete all the stops on that floor before moving to the next floor. This design served two purposes. First, since many UNIV 111 faculty members use class time to bring their students into the library for a tour, we did not want 20-25 students all on the same tour route simultaneously. Having each student use their mobile device that would randomly direct them to various floors guaranteed a smaller number of students on each floor at any given time. Secondly, by designing the tour so that students complete all the tasks on one floor before moving to the next, we made sure students would be able to complete the tour in a timely manner without having to go back and forth to the same floor multiple times.

Each stop on the tour required students to answer a question and/or interact with a library employee. For example, when students were directed to the library's information desk on the first floor, they were instructed to ask the employee working there what the options were for asking for library help (e.g., email, text, chat) and then type into an answer field the way they would most likely get in touch with the library. While a couple of the questions had correct/incorrect answers, the majority of the questions were opinion-based (i.e., "what is your favorite way to study?"). This was because the task force made the decision to design the tour as a teaching tool and not a quiz. Edventure Builder has the option to award points for correct answers and we elected to disable that option. Additionally, when a faculty member inquired about how they could see how many points their students received on the tour, we explained that the tour was not intended to be quiz-like in any way, but instead a casual, friendly tool to introduce students to Cabell Library.

Before officially launching the tour in August 2016, the task force did extensive internal testing, walking through the tour ourselves and asking library staff (particularly new staff who were less familiar with the library) to take the tour and give us feedback. We found that the biggest challenge in creating the tour was the directional language. Describing how to get from point A to point B on an interface with limited space proved difficult. The task force modified the language to make it as simple as possible to follow the directions and based on feedback we received from students who took the tour during the Fall 2016 semester, we feel that we succeeded. However, we failed at an attempt at external testing. Over the summer of 2016, we sent out a call to student groups on campus to come to the library and test the tour. In the email call for volunteers, we bribed them with bags of fun library-branded items (e.g., sunglasses, pens, yo-yos), but we weren't able to get any takers.

While launching and promoting the tour in Fall 2016, we reached out to faculty teaching UNIV 111 (as well as UNIV 112, the second half of the year-long Focused Inquiry course) and encouraged them to have their students take the mobile tour. We know that at least seven faculty members assigned the tour to their students and one offered it for extra credit. We sent a survey to one faculty member's students and received additional feedback on the tour, much of which was positive. Multiple students mentioned that they enjoyed interacting with library staff on the tour, so we modified one of the questions on the tour to make it more interactive. Some students mentioned that the directional language was a bit unclear, so we modified and simplified the directional language to the best of our ability.

## SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

We did receive some pushback from faculty. A few faculty members strongly preferred in-person tours for their classes, so we continued to do them (but only when asked directly) during Fall 2016. In Spring 2017, we offered regular weekly in-person tours conducted by Information Associates. The original goal was to shift tour responsibilities away from TLI librarians, so although we continue to offer in-person tours the tour responsibilities have shifted to Information Associates and librarians have more time to focus on their instruction duties instead of tours.

Between August 1, 2016 and May 1, 2017, 518 unique users completed the mobile tour. Some of these were internal tests done by library staff, but the overwhelming majority were students who completed the tour. Based on this success, we elected to continue subscribing to Edventure Builder and, in fact, moved up from their one tour tier to their three tour tier (for the first tier, we pay \$250 per month for the option to create one tour or mobile game. For the second tier, we pay \$450 per month for the option to create three tours or games). A colleague who works with the English Language Program at VCU is launching a tour aimed at international students whose first language is not English in Fall 2017. This second tour will rely more heavily on images than text, unlike the first tour.

With the launch of the mobile library tour, students can no longer "zone out." The tour requires them to walk around the library, talk to staff, and answer questions. There are also highly interactive steps in the tour—for example, one step explains how to read a call number and the book on the shelf. The student is then given an abbreviated call number and they must find a book near that call number, take a "shelfie" (an image of them in front of the bookshelf), and submit the image to the tour as their "answer" for that step. Although the benefit of an in-person tour is that the person giving the tour can talk about and showcase many more library services and spaces in half an hour than students will learn about while taking the tour, we feel that the quality of the students' learning is increased when they take an active role in that learning. Additionally, students are able to take the tour on their own time and at their own pace.

However, the mobile tour had some limitations and opportunities for improvement. Since Green Door Labs is a young company, they are still growing and expanding their options for users. The task force ran into a couple issues when creating the tour, including the lack of if-then logic, which would help randomize the tour stops further. We were able to find work-arounds, but we hope that Green Door Labs makes the tours/games easier to customize and randomize in the future. Additionally, the task force realized that there is currently no option to have a confirmation of completion email sent to the email address entered by the student at the beginning of the tour. Such an email would be ideal proof of completion for their professor. Currently, the last step on the tour is to take a selfie in front of Cabell Library as visual proof they finished the tour, but we hope an email confirmation will be an option in the future. Even with these minor setbacks we experienced, the process of creating and maintaining the tour was quite simple. Because Green Door Labs is still so new and operating as a small business, it's very easy to quickly get in contact with the app developers to ask questions and submit requests for features.

Pricing can also be an issue, depending on a library's budget. We are fortunate to be able to afford the monthly price for the three-tour tier, and although Green Door Labs' pricing has increased, we have been able to keep our original price point since we were early adopters of the software. Something for other librarians to consider is how much time Edventure Builder will ultimately save them and how many users they expect to take the tour/play the game on a semester/yearly basis. Green Door Labs also has a "per player" pricing option that might be better for smaller libraries that expect only a handful of students to take the tour per semester/year.

In addition to the limitations of the software itself, the task force faced our own limitations and challenges getting the tour off the ground. Concise, non-confusing directional language was something we worked on and tweaked throughout the year. Our colleague who is currently working on a tour for international students avoided directional language completely by linking out to floor maps of the library—an option we might look into as we revise the tour for freshmen. Getting faculty on board with a mobile tour also proved to be a bit of a challenge, although not nearly as difficult as we expected. With the exception of a couple faculty members, most of the faculty who teach UNIV 111 and UNIV 112 reacted positively or neutrally about the mobile tour option. We hope to get more faculty members on board in Fall 2017 and increase our number of students who complete the tour.

## **THE FUTURE OF LIBRARY TOURS AT VCU**

One thing the creation of the mobile tour allowed us to do was to change the "tour culture" at Cabell Library. Whereas TLI librarians, especially those who work with freshmen and sophomores, used to lead the vast majority of library tours, we now only lead a few tours at the beginning of the fall semester. We no longer offer tours on demand to faculty and instead offer in-person tours (lead by our incredibly capable Information Associates) at set times each week during the semester as well as the mobile tour. This way, students who are required to take a library tour as part of their UNIV 111 or 112 class (as well as students who are just interested in learning more about the library) have plenty of options: they can attend one of the slate of tours given during Welcome Week and the first week of classes, they can show up for one of the regular in-person tours, or they can take the mobile tour. Meanwhile, TLI librarians are free to focus on class planning, instruction, their liaison relationships, and other projects related to online learning and outreach. Although creating the mobile tour was a lot of work up front, we feel that it will save time in the long run with the added bonus of offering students an interactive mobile tour that they can take at their leisure and at their own pace.