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Ask the audience! Using a Personal Response System to enhance information literacy and induction sessions at Kingston University

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the use of a Personal Response System (PRS) as a tool for engaging students during initial library induction sessions. The Personal Response system is an interactive tool that is appropriate for a wide range of learning and teaching activities. The PRS works by each student (or group of students) responding to questions or statements using a handset. A virtual library tour created by Kingston University library staff was developed interspersed with the use of the PRS. The paper explores the background to the development of this virtual tour and the use of the PRS in information literacy sessions prior to the introduction in the library induction sessions. It reflects on the advantages of using this technology and the benefits for both staff and students.

Keywords

Information Literacy; Personal Response System; Marketing; Induction Sessions; Undergraduate students

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the use of a Personal Response System (PRS) as a tool for engaging students during information literacy and library induction sessions. The PRS is an interactive tool that is appropriate for a variety of teaching and learning activities. Popularly referred to locally as “ask the audience” it enables group participation and interaction (between instructor and students; also student to student).

At Kingston University the PRS was purchased in 2002 by the University’s Educational Technology Unit (ETU). The initial aim was to make this tool available for any staff to use via the ETU leaders (who are members of academic staff, based within faculties). The Science librarians have historically had a close and productive working relationship with their ETU leader. This is due in part to both parties having a sustained interest in acquiring knowledge of new technologies and promoting such technologies to a wider audience. As a consequence, the PRS was demonstrated during a meeting of Library staff. Staff had the opportunity to experience the system themselves and it was immediately clear that this was a technology that we could apply in a variety of circumstances.

2. The PRS and information literacy

The PRS has been used in a number of information literacy sessions. The initial use by Library staff was in an existing information literacy session for Human Geography Students in 2004. In previous years students had been given a brief overview of resources (statistical resources in particular), then handed a worksheet. To complete the worksheet students had to use both physical and electronic resources to answer a number of multiple choice questions. Completed worksheets were returned to the Librarian for marking.

Whilst this exercise did help to familiarise students with some subject specific materials it was quite dry. The worksheet was relatively brief, students tended to work in groups (sharing answers) and the marks did not contribute towards their module. For the revised PRS session it was decided that instead of completing and handing in the worksheets students would be told to make a note of their answers and then return to the lecture room. Students were warned that they would have to indicate their answers on their return but assured that they would not have to ‘present’ to the class!

PRS works by each student (or group of students) responding to questions or statements, using a handset. The idea is immediately recognisable to participants due to the popularity of a similar approach utilised on the British ITV1 show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Each student was allocated a handset, and the worksheet multiple choice questions were displayed in turn. Using the handsets students could then indicate what they thought was the correct answer by pressing the corresponding numbered button. The handsets must be pointed at a small receiver box for the results to be displayed. The student response to this button pressing opportunity was quite overwhelming and all students became very animated.

Each handset has a number on the reverse and when a response is received from that handset this number displays on the screen. Competition to display your handset number first was intense! From a Library point of view this was an overwhelmingly positive experience. Using the PRS brought a sense of fun and increased engagement with the students. The immediate feedback also allowed any mistakes to be corrected immediately, and any queries clarified. Although this session involved a small group of students and the exercise consisted of simple questions, it was hoped that students would have had a positive encounter with the library and would encourage them to attend further information literacy sessions.

The PRS was then used on a number of other occasions by the subject team. Library staff teach on the Life Sciences Research Methods module. This introduces students to specific databases and covers the basics of database searching. Although students are expected to apply the knowledge from the lecture in a follow up hands-on session, the subject matter delivered is quite dry and there is no interaction with the students. The PRS was therefore introduced to this session. The results were encouraging as not only did the students seem to be listening but there was a general buzz as they answered the questions. Questions ranged from “Had students used databases before?” and “Did they know what their ATHENS username and password was?” to then asking whether they understood what to do to access an electronic journal.

Second year Life Sciences students attend a project day following the exam period and prior to commencing their dissertations. This involves an introduction to all aspects of their dissertation and includes an information literacy session delivered by Library staff. There were two presentations with Biosciences students (approximately eighty) and nutrition students (fifteen). This was a refresher session on subject databases and also covered information on other Libraries available for students and Inter-Library loans. The PRS was used to develop active participation in this session. Introductory questions were used to gauge students’ knowledge and use of particular resources. This helped in pitching the talk at an appropriate level. As with the Geography students, using the PRS resulted in increased engagement by the students.

Each of these three sessions proved to be learning experiences for Library staff as well as (it is to be hoped) for the students. Over time the structure of each presentation was refined to make best use of the PRS. In the earlier sessions questions tended to be asked in clumps at the start and end of a session. With experience it was found that it was far better to intersperse the questions throughout the presentation. Staff also realised that the number of questions posed should be quite limited. Each question can require a few minutes to allow students time to read and consider the question and to submit their response. This initial use of PRS was highly valuable in developing staff awareness of such issues and in determining which events this tool would be most suited to.

One barrier to effective delivery of information literacy via the university library has often been image. Students do not generally perceive the library as a provider of fun! Awareness of this combined with the interactive nature of the PRS led us to adopt it for student induction.

3. Use of the PRS in induction

Traditionally, Library induction sessions at Kingston consisted of a physical tour of the building followed by a short worksheet introducing students to the library catalogue. The tours have become increasingly impractical in recent years due to the increase in student numbers, whilst the worksheet became a passive activity that students viewed as a chore and which gave limited information about the level of support the students might need. Library staff were concerned about the overall effectiveness of this approach and were keen to investigate methods which would improve the engagement of new students. Demonstrations of the PRS in action (during lectures in the Business Faculty and by the Library’s Science subject team as described) showed the enthusiasm with which students embraced the idea and inspired the Library’s Science subject team to completely revise the approach to induction moving to a large lecture approach with PRS embedded.

A PowerPoint presentation was created, including photographs of the LRC (physical space, resources, library staff and students) to provide a “virtual tour”. Experience had taught us to ensure that the presentation was varied and not simply a written description of the facilities available. To ensure variety seven questions were asked at various points throughout the presentation. Two members of staff gave the presentation, regularly swapping from the role of speaker to managing the technical aspects of the presentation: again, to increase variety. As this was in part an exercise in providing a welcoming Library face, each question had at least one light hearted option included in the list of possible responses. The nature of each question was slightly different, with some gauging assumptions about the Library, some observation questions (including a visual observation test!) and finally some questions for students to evaluate the presentation.

The induction presentations were the culmination of a great deal of preparation whilst the software and equipment are quite simple to use there are a number of pitfalls which the team had to negotiate. Centrally programmed teaching rooms often have differing layouts and equipment provision. This lack of consistency can prove time consuming when it comes to setting up the PRS, therefore the team took to visiting rooms in advance if at all possible to assess the facilities and where necessary, acquire additional kit, for example cables or extension leads. Most induction sessions involved at least three members of Library staff: Two to set up the equipment and to present: The third on hand to allot handsets to latecomers, troubleshoot handsets and distribute library guides and promotional materials. Despite this appearing to be staff intensive, this should be set against the complex timetabling required to conduct library tours. Only six induction sessions were required using this method set against up to twenty physical tours of the Library in previous years.

4. Conclusions

This completely fresh approach to induction has brought a number of benefits: increased engagement of students, providing a positive first experience of the Library, raising awareness of library support for their studies, enabling students to reveal gaps in their knowledge without embarrassment (due to the anonymity of their responses) and raising the profile of friendly approachable library staff.

Using the PRS has had the additional benefit of providing a practical exercise in staff team building, with all contributors finding the sessions much more enjoyable and satisfying than in previous years. It is hoped that this sense of enthusiasm and satisfaction is fully conveyed to anyone with an interest in improving the image and status of information literacy.