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Reaching First-Year Students during Orientation Week

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Abstract

Every fall, academic librarians are given a fresh opportunity to attract first-year students to the library and its services. Often having only one chance to ‘wow’ the students, University of Waterloo librarians have discovered a recipe for a successful outreach and promotion program for first-year students. Focusing on a student-centered approach, the librarians have amassed a collection of testimonials, stories, and projects that are shared during library outreach events. This, combined with an effective delivery style, has left first-year students not only enjoying the presentation, but likely to develop a positive connection to the library.

In this article, the authors outline the specific outreach approaches that Waterloo librarians are using in their communications and presentations to first-year students during orientation week.

Keywords

outreach; first-year students; academic libraries; orientation; frosh; library anxiety

Introduction

Orientation week is an exciting and high-energy time. To reach first-year students during this week requires an approach that matches this level of energy and excitement while also thoughtfully addressing the circumstances and emotions that students may be experiencing.

At the University of Waterloo, librarians have been expanding their outreach to first-year students during orientation week dramatically over the past few years, with efforts including involvement in department, faculty, and campus-wide orientation events. The goal of librarians during orientation events is to provide students with a positive introduction to the library that will elicit interest and encourage feelings of comfort and connection with the library. Doing so directly addresses students’ emotional state by acknowledging the anxiety they might feel not only about orientation week in general but also, more specifically, about the library.

Literature Review

Library anxiety is not a new phenomenon. A study conducted over twenty-five years ago by Constance Mellon revealed that 75 to 85 percent of 6,000 undergraduate students expressed fear or anxiety about using the university library. Since this time, librarians have been developing strategies to help reduce students' library anxiety, mainly in the form of library instruction sessions.

Library instruction is generally offered in the form of orientation events, lectures, course-integrated instruction, video recordings, and guides. Studies have shown that providing students with multiple exposures to library instruction can reduce their anxiety (Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, and Lichtenstein), and that personal interactions with librarians are more effective at reducing anxiety than computer-assisted instruction (Van Scoyoc). The timing of library instruction appears to be relevant also, with studies showing that library introductory sessions that are offered before school work intensifies, such as during the first six weeks of the school year, will foster a calmer and more positive learning environment (Keefer).

Some libraries have taken a less formal approach to library instruction and have introduced the element of fun into library instruction events. Examples include offering information in the form of scavenger hunts (Brown, Weinhart, Johnson, and Dance), online games (Markey et al.), and using social networks such as QR codes and YouTube videos (McDonald). Introducing the library in such ways may help to put nervous or otherwise unsure students at ease. Students can learn that the academic library is not to be feared, and that it is staffed by friendly, casual, and approachable librarians.

An informal and enjoyable first impression of the library can be an ideal way to alleviate any fearful preconceptions or anxieties that new students may have. The first encounter, however, may need to be provided very early on in the new school year – before new students have the opportunity to experience the library on their own. A study conducted by Vidmar in 1998 suggests that offering a less information-driven session first may encourage students to want to attend future formal library instruction sessions. Vidmar investigated the effects of offering new students a library pre-session in advance of a typical library instruction class they were going to receive. The ten or twenty minute pre-session took place in the students' classroom and consisted of an introduction to the librarian and an explanation of the objectives of the upcoming library session. The session was intended to build positive attitudes and the belief that what is being taught is useful and relevant, as well as to help reduce anxiety in the students and build rapport with the librarian. A comparison of pre-test and post-test scores demonstrated that students taking part in the pre-session did feel better about the library, the librarians, and the materials available in the library (Vidmar).

Other librarians have also recognized the importance of spending time with first-year students in an informal pre-session program. In a study of at-risk students' responses to initial library orientation sessions, one librarian found that if pre-sessions that are offered before school begins and that are less structured and more entertaining may encourage students to visit the library again in the future (Hassig).

Sparking Interest and Encouraging Comfort

Waterloo librarians' orientation efforts are intended to provide an enjoyable introduction to the library similar to the "pre-session" approach described above. With a focus on reducing library anxiety, Waterloo librarians approach orientation week planning with the assumption that students may forget most of the information they are exposed to, but that they will likely take away a general impression or feeling about the library. Operating on this assumption, librarians design their communications pieces and presentations with a focus on eliciting positive first impressions about the library.

To spark students' interest and encourage greater comfort and familiarity with the library librarians aim to 1) create clear and concise messaging for delivering essential information, 2) demonstrate how the library will fit into students' lives, and 3) deliver content in a high-energy and upbeat way.

The University of Waterloo Library's Top 5 Tips for Using the Library

1. Use your WatCard

Your WatCard is your library card. Use it to sign out books, journals, reserve materials, and more! You will also need your WatCard barcode number for accessing the Library's electronic resources from off campus. Additionally, your WatCard is your printing and photocopying card for use in all of the Library's locations.

2. Sign up for a Library workshop

Save yourself time and headaches during the assignment crunch. Sign up for a Library workshop to learn the basics of library research: www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/usered/

3. Check out the Library's Subject Guides

The Library's Subject Guides are your starting point for research! The Library has over 70 Subject Guides to help direct you to the most important resources in each discipline. Find your Subject Guides and use them to locate the best books, articles, and other information for your assignments.
<http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/discipline/discip.html>

4. Connect from home

Living off campus? Visiting your parents for the weekend? Before you start your research from off campus, remember to "Connect from Home" on the Library's website using your WatCard barcode and last name: <https://login.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/login>. This will give you access to the millions of articles, e-books, and other electronic resources available through the Library's website (the stuff you'd never find for free using Google).

5. Ask a librarian

Don't get stuck! If you need help, contact a librarian via IM, email, phone, or at our Research Help Desks: www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/asklib/. Did you know that there's also a librarian for every subject area? Learn who your librarians are and don't hesitate to contact them with questions too! www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/tour/

Figure 1: The University of Waterloo Library's top 5 tips for using the library

Create Clear and Concise Messaging

Librarians naturally want to share everything they know with students. Everything seems important. However, there can sometimes be a tendency to overwhelm students with too much information.

When creating messaging for new students at Waterloo, librarians aim to keep their key messages simple. To share essential information in a digestible way they have created the “Top 5 Tips for Using the Library” (see Figure 1). These tips are informed by the feedback that librarians often receive from upper-year students (i.e. “I wish I would have known about this sooner”) as well as knowledge gaps identified by librarians when helping students at the reference desk and in personal consultations. This information is updated yearly when all liaison librarians are contacted to provide feedback on the tips.

Creating and revising the Top 5 Tips is an invaluable exercise for obtaining clarity regarding what information is actually essential for new students. The tips have enabled librarians to be consistent and confident in their messaging to students at orientation events, as well as throughout the year during instructional workshops, in print and web communications, and in communication with academic departments. The Library highlights the Tips at the start of every term, since Waterloo has new students returning to campus from co-op work terms throughout the year.

Demonstrate How the Library Will Fit Into Students' Lives

During orientation week librarians also aim to illustrate for first-year students how the library will fit into their lives at Waterloo. In *Marketing Today's Academic Library*, Brian Mathews stresses the importance of understanding how the library fits into students' lives. “Students constantly juggle complex social, personal, and academic responsibilities; if we want to communicate with them, then we have to recognize how the library fits within their lifestyle” (7). From Mathews' viewpoint, this requires that librarians move beyond their focus on collections and information literacy and recognize that, for students, the library might just be a place to wait for a friend, check email, study, and so forth (7).

When it comes to orientation week, Mathews indicates that “anything too serious or detailed will be ignored” (123). Instead, he suggests that librarians focus on providing a simple introduction for students that is unusual or unexpected to make them curious about what the library has to offer (123).

At Waterloo, librarians have actively incorporated Mathews' insights by giving new students real-world examples of how they might use the library and by illustrating how other students use and connect with the library.

Real-World Examples

During orientation presentations librarians paint a picture for students using visuals and tangible stories to illustrate how current students use the library. For example, they

show how an English student might use the library as a place to grab a coffee and meet with his friends in between classes, or how a biology student might take advantage of the library's extended hours during the exam period to study for her cell biology class using the library's silent study carrels. These examples, although not difficult to imagine, are personalized and tell a story, making them more understandable and easier to remember than just explaining the facts.

Illustrating How Other Students Use and Connect with the Library

First-year students entering a new university likely have no preconceived notions of the library's reputation and perception by other students. Is the library 'cool' enough to enter? Is it acceptable to be seen in it and will the library's resources be useful? New students have had no exposure to campus culture yet, and they're not sure whether librarians are friendly or not.

Although librarians could spend time during orientation events explaining to the new students why they should use the library, this approach may not be overly convincing or effective. Trust has not yet been established, and the library buildings have never been visited. Waterloo librarians have opted to use a student-centered delivery approach instead, which consists entirely of testimonials, student-generated material, and a compilation of student-centered events and programs that the library describes and shares with the audience. The students themselves are actually the ones promoting the library, revealing to new students how they too can be easily woven into the library's fabric and culture. When the new students see current students speak of the library with warmth and respect, their very first impression of the library is shaped into a positive one.

To create a student-centered presentation, Waterloo librarians have accumulated a portfolio of student generated content. In the last several years, the library's outreach team has coordinated contests and events that have sparked the interest and creativity of students. These have included a "why do you love the library" video contest and a photo contest where students submitted pictures of their favourite spots in the library with descriptions of why they like them. Upon entering contests, students provide the library with the permission to use their creative content in future promotional campaigns and presentations.

By designing library events and promotions that are engaging and student-centred, the library continues to accumulate more material. During the library's annual "Library Day" event, for example, the library offers fun activities to thank students and celebrate their connection to the library. For the last three years, Library Day has included picture postcard booths, where pictures of students were taken and digitized into personalized library-themed postcards, which are later emailed to students.

After establishing solid student-focused relationships across campus, students and faculty started to approach the library with library-themed course projects. Students started to select the library as their site for various projects. Examples of these projects, most notably a wide range of art installations, are often shared during presentations to illustrate students' engagement with the library.

Providing the new students with real-life connections tells the library's story in students' own words. Through videos, pictures, and stories, new students can come to understand the library as a warm and welcoming resource on campus – one that is highly admired and used by students.

Deliver Content in a High-Energy and Upbeat Way

Regardless of how interesting and intriguing the content of the presentation may be, the delivery style used within the presentation will ultimately determine the success of the session. In the last ten years there has been research to show that today's generation (the Millennials) learn differently than previous generations. Neil Howe and William Strauss point out in *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, that Millennials are technology savvy, are visual learners, and get bored easily. As soon as librarians enter the classroom, this theory is apparent as students interact with their laptops and mobile devices. These activities do not always stop during lectures, as some students may continue to multi-task. Many have developed the ability to process information quickly and appreciate graphics and other visuals, prompting the importance of speedy delivery styles and to-the-point explanations.

Christy Price has also shared some New Generation teaching hints in her essay "Why Don't My Students Think I'm Groovy? The New "R"s for Engaging Millennial Learners." Based on a qualitative analysis of narratives provided by over a hundred Millennial students, Price has concluded several factors that influence a successful learning environment. Included among them are the notion that learning is relaxed, enjoyable and fun; that multimedia format is used, including podcasts, videos, and Powerpoints; and that real and relevant examples to their culture are used. Price also noted that the respondents favour instructors that are energetic, enthusiastic, upbeat and have a positive attitude.

Taking the Millennials' characteristics and learning styles into account, Waterloo librarians have developed a presentation style that caters to the audience's fast and furious ways. Labelling their presentation method as "Fast, Flashy, and Fun," information is provided in a quick manner, using a variety of technology embedding with sounds and graphics, being delivered in an entertaining way.

By keeping the content moving, and alternating speakers, the audience doesn't have the opportunity to lose interest or even attempt to multi-task with distracting personal devices. Presentations use a lot of visuals, short videos, and pre-corded media to reduce the time that live demonstrations often take.

Have fun!

Perhaps the most important aspect of librarians' delivery is that they make sure to enjoy themselves and bring out the library's fun side. In addition to showing videos, offering candy, and asking lots of questions to keep things interactive, Waterloo librarians also aim to "wow" students through a screencast called "Research in 2 minutes" that is narrated live in a highly coordinated fashion. "Research in 2 minutes" is a concept

created by Waterloo Librarian Tim Ireland that shows students in two minutes the research process for finding articles, beginning at the Library's website and ending with generating a list of works cited using the electronic citation manager, RefWorks. The expectation isn't that students will learn how to conduct research or use RefWorks, but rather that the process can be made exciting and fruitful. It offers them a taste of what's possible.

Conclusion

To reach first-year students during orientation week, Waterloo librarians focus on providing a positive introduction to the library to help reduce students' feeling of library anxiety and to encourage greater comfort and familiarity with the library. They do so by delivering content in a high-energy and upbeat way, by illustrating how the library will fit into students' lives, and by communicating only the essential information in a clear and concise way.

Waterloo librarians recognize that, once orientation week is over and students have started classes, students may not remember any of the information that they were exposed to during orientation. However, they will likely remember a general impression or feeling about the library. As the experience of Waterloo librarians and the literature suggests, if this impression is a positive one, it can create a foundation for future learning and engagement by increasing the likelihood that students will take advantage of the library in the future.

Areas for future research that are being explored include measuring the impact of orientation or "pre-sessions" on students' comfort-level and willingness to use the library in the future.

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