
From fairytales to real-life stories: sharing experiences at the library information desk

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INTRODUCTION

As all of us librarians know, an effective information-desk service is central to the main goal of any academic library, that being to help students to become information-literate, lifelong learners who recognise a need for information and who have the ability to locate, access, evaluate and use the needed information.¹

ONCE UPON A TIME ...

Let me tell you a story that charts the progress of a typical student towards this end. Let me begin by 'unpacking' the student's concerns as he approaches the information desk. He is anxious and uncertain; he is desperately hoping for a welcome; he has any number of questions and is relying on the librarian he encounters at the desk to empathise with his plight.

For her part, the librarian in this story may be depicted as an intermediary between the student and the information in the library. She is aware of the phenomenon of library anxiety and the related importance of a customer-oriented approach at the desk. She is also aware that she needs to keep her knowledge of the library resources and services up to date. She projects a welcoming image and treats all queries, no matter how basic, with respect. She is patient with students and her explanations are comprehensive and concise. Let us allow the story to help us envisage a successful encounter between the student and the librarian at the information desk. At first, the student is confused, dependent on the librarian's

knowledge to guide him forward towards the information he requires for resolving the problem or issue at hand. By working with the student on his information need, the librarian not only helps him to overcome his initial library anxiety, but also sets him on course towards becoming a confident, competent library user. He is thus provided with an opportunity to develop a positive relationship with the librarian, which is likely to lead to his increased usage of the library service in the longer term.

As the story shows us, this kind of constructive interaction at the information desk ultimately helps the student to develop as an independent, self-directed, lifelong learner with an awareness and appreciation of the library's resources and services. In summary, then, the librarian's intervention at the information desk is seen to act as a catalyst in terms of bringing the student from a state of library anxiety towards one of information literacy. Naturally, as with all good stories, all of the characters involved live happily ever after.

THE REAL WORLD

This is an ideal world; this is a story. In real life, in my experience anyhow, students' information-desk encounters are likely to be much more fragmented and fraught than this fairytale sequence, while librarians' information-desk experiences are likely to be much less charmed than is the case in this story.

Let us be honest: the true nature of students' information-literacy journeys is that they are not always linear ones: it is more a case of one step forward and two back than of a straightforward trek to the top. Indeed, as Gardner and Eng describe it,² students these days have an 'ATM attitude' to using the library so that, rather than sitting down for a consultation at the information desk, they just want to grab whatever information they can 'on the fly'. Couple this with contemporary students' perceptions of themselves as technological experts, who suffer from a syndrome defined by Bell as IAKT – or 'I already know that' – which prevents them from taking full advantage of the information-desk offerings for fear of losing face in front of their peers,³ and you have a severely challenged information-desk service.

This makes for a difficult life at the information desk from the librarian's point of view. Little wonder then that she feels somewhat disenfranchised in her role. On the one hand, she is meeting over-confident students who are unwilling

to invest time in learning about the library and who just want a ready-made or one-stop answer every time, while on the other she is failing to meet under-confident students, who are relying on their often misinformed peers for help in using the library. How does the librarian get around these issues, and what can she do to help improve the situation: to get students to make time for the library and to start talking to us? And what long-term role does she see for the information desk in the midst of it all?

WORKSHOP @ WIT LIBRARIES

In light of these issues, and as the information-desk coordinator at WIT (Waterford Institute of Technology) libraries, I recently facilitated an afternoon workshop for the information-desk team. The team is composed of up to twelve library staff. It includes a mixture of professionals and paraprofessionals, some of whom have worked on the desk for a number of years while others have joined the team in the last year or two. Although all the members of the team had had the opportunity to attend various types of in-house library training, including customer-service and electronic-database sessions, this was the first time they had had an opportunity to attend a workshop specifically tailored to the diverse needs of the information desk.

The workshop itself was broadly based on a constructivist, active, learning-by-doing pedagogy. Its main basis involved defining the role of the information desk at WIT libraries. Within this, it sought to help participants develop a sense of solidarity as a team, by giving them a feeling of ownership, involvement and, indeed, responsibility towards the desk. To this end, it incorporated a series of practical, learner-centred tasks, all contributing to and culminating in one overall task, that being the development of a mind-map to represent the team's overall concept of the library information desk. The idea behind these tasks was that they would act as valuable learning experiences for the team in terms of giving them a chance to draw on each others' knowledge and strengths and to learn from each others' encounters and experiences at the information desk.

The tasks were scheduled at various stages throughout the workshop and included:

- 1 team-building: the overall team divided into smaller teams that the participants worked within for the duration of the workshop

- 2 exchanging and sharing experiences: the teams were involved in discussion and dialogue with a focus on their own experiences at the information desk right throughout the session
- 3 problem-solving: the teams were presented with a number of typical information-desk queries which they collaborated together to resolve and which placed a strong emphasis on communication and customer-service skills
- 4 reading and reflection: a snapshot reading task towards the end of the workshop seemed to really capture the team's attention and acted as a key learning tool that ended the session on a positive note.

The mind-map was developed as a set of keywords and phrases based on feedback from the teams at each stage of the workshop. I used the 'wordle' application (<http://www.wordle.net>) to publish the list as an image at the end of the session (see Figure 1). Participants seemed impressed with the outcome and there was a real feeling of solidarity and satisfaction, a sense of 'I made this' within the group. We agreed to print the image as a poster and to hang it on the wall behind the information desk.



Figure 1.

MY OBSERVATIONS

From my perspective as coordinator and facilitator, I believe that the task-based approach worked very well and, although some of the tasks highlighted gaps in the team's knowledge of the library's resources and services, we did not see this as a negative thing. Indeed, the fact that the workshop helped the team to realise that they needed to engage more meaningfully and more consistently with the library's resources was seen as an overall positive outcome.

Aside from grasping the relevance of being able to respond effectively and efficiently to a variety of

information-desk queries, this workshop underlined the importance of good customer service and communication skills at the desk, I believe. If nothing else, I am optimistic that the team left the session realising that they are in this together and that they have a key role to play as intermediaries between the student body and the information in the library, and with an increased sense of respect and pride in the importance of this position.

FEEDBACK FROM THE TEAM

But don't just take my word for it – feedback from the members of the information-desk team who participated in the workshop is outlined below. This feedback represents the results of a small-scale evaluation study that was carried out to determine the success of the workshop. The evaluation took the form of a short online survey, created and distributed using the 'Survey Monkey' software (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). Nine of the eleven participants who participated in the workshop replied to the survey. The results are as follows:

- Question 1 asked the participants to express their level of agreement with the statement: *'I enjoyed participating in the workshop. The atmosphere and environment were conducive to a positive learning experience.'* 100 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement.
- Question 2.i asked the participants to express their level of agreement with the statement: *'I believe that the workshop helped me to enhance my information desk skills in terms of general knowledge of the library resources.'* As Figure 2 shows, 44 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, while 56 per cent agreed with it.
- Question 2.ii asked the participants to express their level of agreement with the statement: *'I believe that this workshop helped me to enhance my information desk skills in terms of awareness of communication and customer service skills.'* As Figure 2 shows, 78 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, while 22 per cent agreed with it.
- Question 2.iii asked the participants to express their level of agreement with the statement: *'I believe that the workshop helped me to enhance my information desk skills in terms of empathy towards the person at the other side of the desk.'* As Figure 2 shows, 44 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, while 56 per cent agreed with it.

- Question 2.iv asked the participants to express their level of agreement with the statement: *'I believe that this workshop helped me to enhance my information desk skills in terms of overall appreciation of my team's contribution to the service.'* As Figure 2 shows, 100 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement.
- As Figure 2 also shows, nobody disagreed or strongly disagreed with any of the statements.

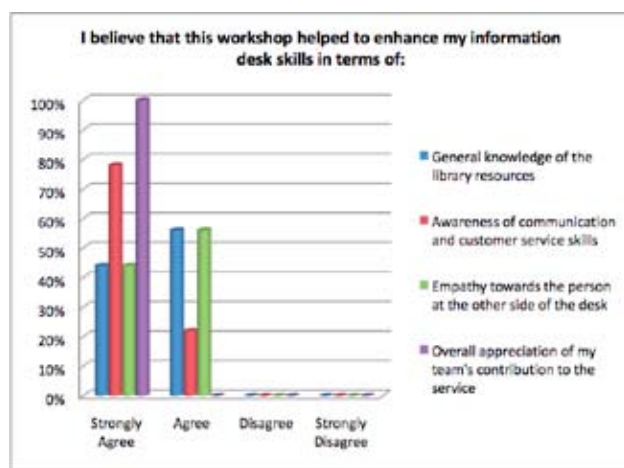


Figure 2.

Question 3 asked participants for any further comments. Results were similarly positive. Some examples of typical comments include:

- *Very enjoyable and informative.*
- *I thought it was great – it highlighted some resources that I underuse.*
- *The time flew by, and I think everyone liked the format of the small groups and the very participatory element.*
- *A lovely way of making the group feel that it was informing itself and increasing its knowledge in such a shared way.*
- *Very worthwhile.*

CONCLUSION

I believe that this workshop has been a positive first step towards defining the role of WIT libraries' information desk and has definitely made for an increased sense of confidence among the team in terms of seeing the value of the information desk for the overall library service. I see it as the basis of additional get-togethers to further analyse and explore the role of the information desk, particularly for contemporary learners. Plans for the future include focus-group sessions, which will zone in on such issues as the location, culture and overall rationale of the desk, and all with a view

to re-launching the service in the new academic year. Wish us luck...

NOTE

Thanks to everyone who participated in the workshop outlined above.

REFERENCES

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- 2 S. Gardner and S. Eng, 'What students want: generation Y and the changing function of the academic library', *Portal: libraries and the academy*, 5 (3), 2005, pp 405–20
- 3 S. J. Bell, 'Stop IAKT syndrome with student live search demos', *Reference services review*, 35 (1), 2007, pp 98–108