



Love at first sight: consolidating first impressions

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Background

In 2017, the Library at Royal Holloway moved to a brand new library building. We made it just before the start of the academic year, so there wasn't a huge amount of time to conduct any research during that period. However, smaller projects throughout the following year prompted the realisation that some more insights would be welcome.



Figure 1 RHUL Library.

In Summer 2018, we were able to combine forces with other teams around the College, who had heard about our use of UX techniques to gain insights into our students, and were interested in finding out about students' experiences early in their time with us. A joint UX project seemed a perfect fit, and between the three stakeholders in the project – Library, Communications, and Campus Life (the team responsible for organising events for students) – we set about discussing different methods that might give us the different types of insight that we were looking for. We hoped that this cross-team approach would allow us to find general insights across all three services. We felt that we wanted to get a holistic view of how students see the College as they arrive, so rather than running several small projects, we settled on a cultural probe as the most useful method of achieving our needs, basing our approach on the Snapshot project from Cambridge (Priestner and Marshall, 2016) and Kate Sohng's (2016) cultural probe kits. Although this would be more time consuming than some other methods, we felt that the richer data would be more beneficial.

Participants

Having the involvement of the Campus Life team meant that we could start recruiting students before they even arrived at Royal Holloway. Information about the project was sent out with students' welcome packs, and those who volunteered knew that they would receive an Amazon voucher for their participation. We also recruited at a stand at Welcome Weekend, when new students arrive at the campus, in the hope that we would attract a few more participants.

In total, we recruited 28 students, and 13 of those actually completed all the tasks. We got a reasonable mix of UK and overseas students – Royal Holloway has a high proportion of students who are not from the UK, so we were keen to engage with them, as they were likely to have a very different perspective on the arrivals process and the College in general.

What did they do?

We gave the students a diary, with a single task every day for their first 14 days. These varied between diary entries, taking photos, and some more creative tasks such as designing a postcard. For their final task, they were asked to stick emoji stickers on a campus map, to mark up any strong feelings about areas of the College.

The diary tasks featured six questions, with two from each of the stakeholder services. These were open ended, with prompts to encourage them to comment. We wanted to get as broad a perspective as possible. For the library, our first question focused on initial encounter with the Library space, and then we asked them to describe their experience of finding an item later in the week.

What did we find out?

In general, students painted a very rosy picture of their initial time at Royal Holloway, mentioning that they enjoyed the campus, the events, and were happy with the amount of information that they received. One of the questions asked by the Campus Life team was about their first experiences of the campus as a whole, and they often mentioned that they visited the Library as one of their initial activities. It is interesting to note that this was not actually a library-specific question, so students were not actually prompted to visit us at this point. This is one way that making this a general project, rather than a library-specific one, was very useful – it was less likely in this case that students were telling us what they thought we wanted to hear.

When they were prompted to visit, their initial impressions were still favourable, mentioning aspects like the modern, spacious and contemporary design of the building, and that they found it easy to navigate. The library building also received only positive emojis on the campus mapping task, which again shows that it really did seem to be a case of ‘love at first sight’.

They also mentioned that they enjoy the view from the Library, and as we are opposite the stunning Founder’s Building, who can blame them?



Figure 2 Cultural probe kit.

There was more mixed feedback in the second library-based diary task. Students were asked to visit the library and locate a book, DVD, or an online resource, and write about how they found the experience. On the one hand, the students generally reported that they were able to find what they were looking for, and if they couldn't, they were usually able to find help either online or from a member of library staff. We were happy with that, as it meant that some of our fears about the library being difficult to navigate were unfounded.

However, the question also prompted students to relate whether they had attended their library induction session: only half of our participants had done this. We had suspected that attendance at these sessions was not a priority for some students, and this was borne out here. Reasons given included that they didn't know about the session, that they were unable to attend, or that they felt that they could find this information on their own. This was a concern for us – while students were evidently able to navigate the physical library building easily, they could be missing the other integral parts of the library, namely the online resources and the teaching and support available, both of which are crucial to success in their degree.

Finally, students were asked to describe how they felt about the College in three words. The most frequently used were: welcoming, friendly, and relaxed. This was not only reassuring to read, but also gave us a way to frame what we wanted to achieve with Welcome Week 2019.

So what did we change?

As a library, we wanted to take these experiences and make our Welcome Week more effective for students. A problem seems to be that students don't know what they don't know, and while it seems that they are happy to orient themselves in the physical library space, there are likely to be gaps in their knowledge of the full range of library services. We identified three ideas that we felt were worth trying for Welcome Week 2019.

Many students mentioned that they found the pre-arrival information from the College useful, and that they liked to find out information before they arrived. We felt that we could emulate this on our social media, and planned to start giving out simple information before the start of term.

One key thing was that students visited the Library early and that the physical building made a good impression. We wanted to capitalise on this, and find a low-key way to 'stealth induct' students; if they were visiting us anyway, why not try

to take advantage of that and introduce them to the idea that the Library is more than the building? As the Library has a subscription to ActionBound (an app that allows us to make scavenger hunts and quizzes) and we have had success with it for our students on a small scale, we felt that this would be a useful tool to use. We created a treasure hunt, allowing students to guide themselves around the Library, and, to incentivise students, we decided to offer a prize for the fastest time each week. We would then promote this through our social media accounts, trying to make it as friendly, relaxed and welcoming as we could, to fit in with the student experience of Welcome Week.

We also intended to make better use of signposting our services – the treasure hunt would mention the induction sessions, and the induction sessions would mention the treasure hunt. Likewise, using our social media to explicitly mention both these things is a more cohesive approach than we had tried before and we hoped that this would remove some of the uncertainty for students over whether to attend.



What happened next?

For the other teams who were stakeholders in the research, they found little to act on. Welcome Week events were appreciated, and the communications around the start of University life were effective. While they were happy to participate in the work, they felt that there were no service improvements to undertake as a result.

In the Library, since UXLlibV, we have had the opportunity to put these suggestions into practice. We have revamped our induction session and been promoting the treasure hunt. So far, it seems to be working – the feedback we're getting is positive, and students are actively enjoying the treasure hunt and seem to be responding to the more informal induction session.

Sadly, due to changes in staffing and the fact that the other two College departments chose not to be involved again, we haven't had the opportunity to run another cultural probe this year to assess the changes that we made. Instead, we are hoping to create more online resources (such as a 'virtual induction') that will be easily accessible, and catch those students who have missed information.

References

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