Breaking new ground: introducing special needs students to Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) libraries

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Introduction

> Attracting new borrowers is always a challenge but the potential barriers are exacerbated when your target audience is people with basic skills or learning difficulties and disabilities.[1]

When I received a request for introductory library training for a group of special needs students enrolled on the Certificate in Skills for Independent Living course facilitated by the nursing department at WIT, my first reaction was one of apprehension. The sixteen students enrolled on the course have mild to moderate developmental disabilities and comprise a mix of male and female students ranging in age from 18 to 30. While I have some experience teaching students at certificate level, this would be my first experience working with a group of students with learning difficulties. I worried that I would pitch the class at the wrong level, upset the students, the lecturer and teaching assistants and turn everyone involved against the library for ever after.

However, when I considered the challenge, although I knew I was unprepared for it in some ways, I was looking forward to it in others. In preparation for the sessions I read Bostick's work on library anxiety, focusing on affective barriers, which refer to students' perceptions of themselves as inadequate library users as compared to their peers.[2] Barker makes the point clearly:

> In my experience, the greatest barrier facing young people with disabilities comes from not the physical aspect but how others perceive them and at times treat them differently because of their disability… By library staff working with organisations and agencies involved with service provision to young people with disabilities they can encourage them to come to libraries.[3]

Developing learning outcomes

When I met with the course leader on the programme my brief became clearer. Our discussions on what we might expect the students to gain from the library visits enabled me to develop a broad set of learning outcomes for the library training sessions, which we agreed would consist of two separate one-hour sessions over a two-week period.

I categorised the learning outcomes into five basic goals: by the end of the library training sessions, students will be able to:

- use their college cards to enter through the library access gates
- behave appropriately in the library and ask library staff for assistance as required
- browse the library shelves for books of interest
- use their college cards to borrow books
- return library books on time so as to avoid fines.

While the learning outcomes were not articulated to the students themselves, they were discussed with the course leader, and lecturers on the programme were encouraged to plan homework for the students based on these learning outcomes. One homework task involved a discussion on appropriate library behaviour while another involved finding a book relating to a hobby and borrowing that book.

In addition to these explicit learning outcomes, I was also very conscious of the importance of making these students feel welcome in the library, what Hopkins calls 'the physical and social inclusion of students'.[4] In order for the students to begin to perceive the library as an accessible, welcoming and non-threatening space, I was

conscious that I needed to emphasise (as I do with all new library users) that this library is your library, that the library staff are here to serve your needs and that we want you to feel comfortable and confident in the library at all times. Obviously this principle has heightened emphasis with a group of special needs students as compared to mainstream ones.

TRAINING SESSIONS

In terms of the training itself, it was designed from the outset to make the library more accessible to the students by building their comfort levels when accessing the library as well as their confidence levels, with the ultimate goal of helping students to use the library independently. Homework tasks ensured that students visited the library outside regular class time to browse the shelves, ask questions and borrow and return items.

Hour 1
I initially met the students with their lecturer in one of the library meeting rooms. The students were accompanied by three teaching assistants. Following introductions, I welcomed the students and spoke to them about appropriate behaviour in the library. In line with Dillon [5] I reduced the library rules to three:

- **quiet**: emphasis on mobile phone etiquette, whereby students are asked to take or make phone-calls in the library stairway areas
- **walk**: emphasis on respecting fellow users when navigating the library and remembering to be quiet while walking round the floors
- **work**: emphasis on the different types of study spaces available in the library depending on student needs.

We then took a tour of the building in order to increase students' comfort and confidence levels while accessing different parts of the library. I focused on the size and scope of the building as I do with all library tour groups, providing students with some headline information and encouraging questions as we went.

Following the walk-around, I took them back to the meeting room where we reviewed the information they had just received in a question-and-answer type session using slides to guide the discussion. I quickly discovered that while some of the students were very vocal, others relied on the teaching assistants to speak up for them. In

a bid to include all students and also to generate some ideas for the second library training session, I finished the session by speaking to them individually about their hobbies.

Hour 2
The conversation at the end of hour 1 made for a natural lead-in to hour 2, which focused on locating library books of interest and going to the circulation desk to borrow them. Part of the second training session took place in the library training laboratory. The rest took place on the library floors. The lab work gave students the opportunity to log on to the library catalogue and to run a subject search for material of interest. Approximately one third of the students were comfortable with this task; however, the majority were much more comfortable being directed to the area of the library where their topic of interest is shelved and browsing the shelves for books.

Students went to the book-stacks in small groups, depending on their topic of interest. Some were accompanied by a teaching assistant, while I circulated and liaised with all groups. In the meantime I was pleased to see that the groups mingled with other students in the library, and sometimes even asked questions of them. Key interest areas included cookery, dance, literature, sport and travel. Each student chose a book to borrow before being shown to the circulation desk where they engaged with library staff members and borrowed their books.

Feedback
Student feedback was elicited in terms of tailor-made happy-sheets. Fourteen of the sixteen students enrolled in the programme submitted completed happy-sheets. The results are collated in the appendix to this article. Feedback was very positive, particularly in terms of students' overall enjoyment of the library visits. Students stated that they felt welcome in the library, and although some of them were a bit uncertain about their confidence levels in terms of using the library in the longer term, they all stated that they felt happy or very happy about visiting the library again.

The positive anecdotal feedback I received from the course leader and lecturer following training was also very encouraging. Meanwhile, my own sentiments at the end of the sessions corresponded with those of Dillon:

> I did not expect that all of these students would become independent library users, but I did want them to feel welcome. The students

demonstrated both enjoyment and learning, so I deemed the unit a success.[6]

CONCLUSION

Despite my apprehension at the start of this initiative, I was pleasantly surprised at how well it worked out. The library is certainly a richer place for having opened its doors to the Certificate in Skills for Independent Living group. I am already looking forward to meeting next year's cohort.

REFERENCES

1   Richard Ashman & Sarah Taggart, 'Licence to skill', *Library and information update*, 7:1/2 (2008), pp. 56-57

2   Sharon Bostick, 'The development and validation of the Library Anxiety Scale' (1 January 1992), *ETD Collection for Wayne State University*, Paper AAI9310624; available from http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/dissertations/AAI9310624 accessed 12 March 2012

3   Denise Barker, 'On the outside looking in: public libraries serving young people with disabilities', *Australasian public libraries and information services*, 1 (2011), pp. 9-16

4   Janet Hopkins, 'Extending inclusive learning: library and special education collaboration', *Library media connection*, 23:6 (2005), pp. 17-19

5   Brenda Dillon 'Including students with developmental disabilities in high school libraries', *Teaching librarian*, 15:2 (2008), pp. 34-37

6   *ibid*.

APPENDIX
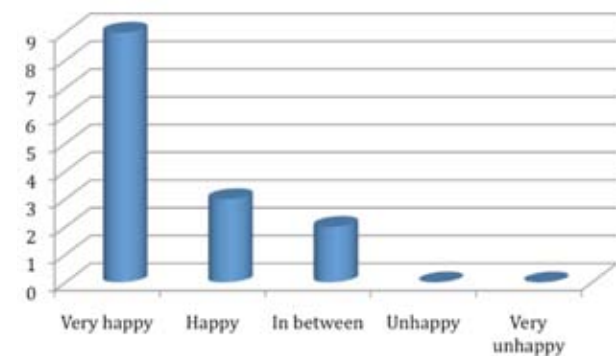
FEEDBACK FORM

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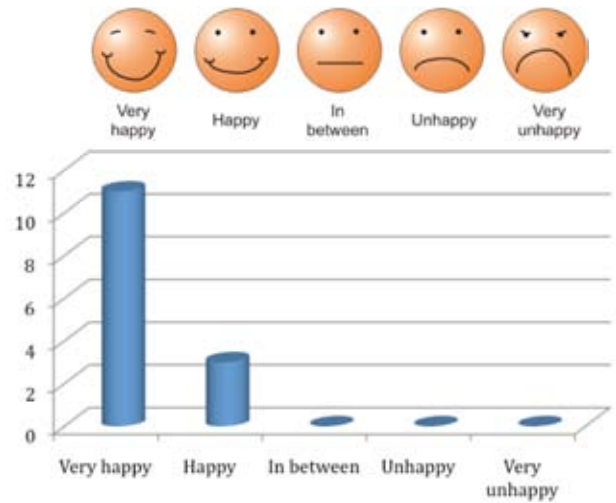
I felt welcome at the library

I felt confident using the library

How I feel about visiting the library again