Engaging students, shaping services: the changing face of student engagement at The Hive

Library roles with a unique focus on student or customer engagement are relatively new in the sector and Worcester is one of the first universities to recruit to this area. Rather than focusing on the relationship between engagement and learning, this role seeks to engage with students as partners and agents for change who are actively involved in evaluating, developing and delivering our library service. This article outlines some of our initial successes and impacts, which are already changing the way we interact with our student population. It will also cover some of the challenges faced along the way, particularly in delivering service change in the context of the radical new service model of The Hive.

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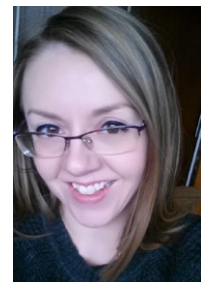
Student engagement: the problem of terminology

The term 'student engagement' is used frequently in higher education at the moment, a term that often seems poorly defined and vague or is used to cover a multitude of meanings. In preparing to speak at UKSG, where this paper was first presented, I found myself reading some tweets from Teesside University Festival of Learning, where a keynote on student engagement was being delivered. One such tweet ran as follows: 'student engagement – poorly theorised potentially – all things to all people and unclear'.[1] This summarizes my own experience of talking to people about student engagement over the last year or so, where it has become apparent that different expectations and definitions mean that we end up talking at cross-purposes.

SARAH PITTAWAY

Team Leader:
Academic Services,
University of
Worcester

Before defining my understanding of student engagement, I challenged the UKSG audience with the following proposition: there is no such thing as an engaged student. At first, this sounds like complete nonsense. We instinctively feel we know what an engaged student looks like; they are in the library, reading around their subject. They research, and participate in seminars. They get feedback from their lecturers. Conversely, the disengaged student does none of this.

'there is no such thing as an engaged student'

But this way of thinking defines engagement as a permanent state. It suggests that each student is fundamentally intrinsically engaged or disengaged, whereas in practice, students exhibit engagement behaviours that sit upon a continuum. Their position on that continuum might change on any given day and might depend on a variety of factors, both positive and negative: their health, their relationships, money worries, their enjoyment of a particular topic, or their responsiveness to a particular teacher's style.

Whilst delivering this paper, I suggested that the same people who were very engaged with my talk – nodding and taking notes – were exhibiting one type of engagement behaviour. Some of those same people might, I suggested, overindulge at the conference dinner that night and were I to attempt the same talk the following morning instead, I might see very different engagement behaviours. A variety of factors from sore heads to lack of sleep could impact on how they engaged with me and my subject.

So what is student engagement?

If there is no such thing as an engaged student and student engagement has numerous definitions, how do we negotiate this minefield of terminology? To start with, let's tackle some assumptions that I have heard whilst talking to colleagues from across the sector, but particularly within the library community. The first assumption I have heard made is that we are trying to turn disengaged Student A into engaged Student B. However, this is at odds with the idea that students are displaying engagement behaviours. Students displaying behaviour influenced by internal and external factors cannot simply be turned into 'engaged students', although by creating favourable conditions (e.g. supportive frameworks and opportunities) we can facilitate the likelihood of more engagement behaviours.

'we can facilitate the likelihood of more engagement behaviours'

A second assumption is that student engagement is about 'bums on seats', simply getting students through the library doors, as though this alone will improve their learning experience and our National Student Survey (NSS) scores. There may be some truth to this position, but reducing student engagement to such a simplistic metric is not a helpful way of thinking about our relationship with students.

Alongside these assumptions sit accepted sector definitions. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Quality Code, Chapter B5, states that 'the term covers two domains relating to:

- improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently

- the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience.'[2]

When I first spoke to colleagues both at Worcester and elsewhere in the sector about student engagement, it was clear that the former definition was the one that sprang to mind. I was asked questions like, 'Aren't we in trouble if we're not engaging students?' and 'Shouldn't your liaison librarians already be doing this?' It is certainly true that engaging students with their learning is a key aspiration of any library team and this definition should not be ignored. However, it is the second QAA definition that informs my take on student engagement. This is about working with students as partners to make positive changes to services, from learning spaces to online resources to customer services and more. It is an approach that impacts on everything we do.

'working with students as partners to make positive changes'

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) framework on student engagement through partnership backs up this approach, stating that a student engagement partnership is a 'relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. It is distinct from listening to, or consulting with, students'.[3] The HEA framework is primarily focused on learning and teaching but the value in transformative partnership working it espouses transfers equally to library student engagement. We see this as engaging students in dialogue, with a move away from viewing them as passive recipients of services. When done well, it can result in students making improvements for other students.

Setting the scene at Worcester: The Hive

To understand student engagement at Worcester, you need to understand the context in which our service is delivered. Like many academic institutions, the University is keen to explore ways of working in partnership with students and with the wider community. Student Academic Representatives (StARs)[4] and Students as Academic Partner (SAP) projects[5] seek to engage students in University processes and practices, enhancing the educational experience for themselves and their peers.

At Worcester, partnership working extends far beyond the hallowed halls of academia. Library Services at Worcester is based in The Hive, the first fully integrated public and university library in Europe. We share the building with Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Service, as well as Worcestershire County Council's Customer Service Hub. This provides students with a host of benefits, including more books, great facilities, and membership of all county council libraries. Furthermore, alongside traditional front-of-house customer service roles, The Hive provides opportunities for students to develop and deliver their skills in a real world setting. They can exhibit their work to the public, become digital champions, volunteer at job club, or support interactive story times in the children's library, to name but a few.

'The Hive, the first fully integrated public and university library in Europe'

'opportunities for students to develop and deliver their skills in a real world setting'

But our unique model can also bring challenges, particularly around the student sense of ownership of shared space. For example, we can get complaints about public members of the library taking up valuable student study space to play Candy Crush Saga or check Facebook.

Partly as a measure to respond to this and partly to enhance our service model, we developed a new role, that of Student Engagement Co-ordinator. The aims of this role are twofold:

1. In partnership with students, to make more of the 'value-added' opportunities that The Hive facilitates. Rather than having an offer which we present to students, we are increasingly talking to them about what opportunities they want, and about how to make the existing ones more visible and more attractive. Ideally, these value-added opportunities will have impact not only for the students involved, but also for other students.

2. To talk to and listen to students, giving them the opportunity to help us shape and improve services and feel a sense of ownership. In the past, we have typically analysed annual survey results or responded to (often negative) ad hoc feedback. Now we are working with students to develop and improve services in a constantly evolving fashion.

In all of this, we have to accept that students' behaviours and motivations vary from day to day and that we cannot simply make them more engaged. But, as above, what we can do is create favourable conditions in which more students have the opportunity to engage with us and to create a culture in which this is the norm rather than the exception.

Putting theory into practice

In practical terms, these aims translate into three strands of work which all feed into one another:

1. Feedback: by getting lots of 'quick and dirty' feedback via surveys and questionnaires, often face to face and gathered from students on campus, in the café, outside lecture theatres, etc., we are able to be more proactive in seeking feedback on explicit issues. Recent examples include: redeveloping an area of The Hive, planning for Study Happy (a holistic wellbeing and study support programme),[6] and induction. It is also a useful way of talking to a wide range of students, including those who would not normally complete surveys.

2. Focus groups: these allow us to develop ideas and interrogate trends gleaned from surveys in a more structured fashion.

3. Projects: all the information from surveys and focus groups feeds into projects that we can develop with and for students. We then start the process again, checking with students whether projects have achieved their aims.

A key feature of this work is that our Student Engagement Co-ordinators are very explicitly given the opportunity to try new things and experiment. If initiatives do not work, so be it – we learn from what happened and move on.

Top tips, mascots and shelfies

From our initial surveys and focus groups, we have been able to implement some quick wins. One of the simplest of these was our library top tips. Like many other institutions, we had some top tips (written by librarians) for distribution to students (Figure 1). But had we got them right? Upon asking students, it became apparent that they loved the idea but that we needed to rephrase them. Students were also keen to include their own top tips, which were very different from ours. Examples include 'know your shelf' – an obvious tip when you think about it from the perspective of a new student unused to navigating a large academic library – and 'take a screenshot of the books you're looking for'. These are now used as inserts in our referencing guides and are used on social media during the beginning of semester one (Figure 2).
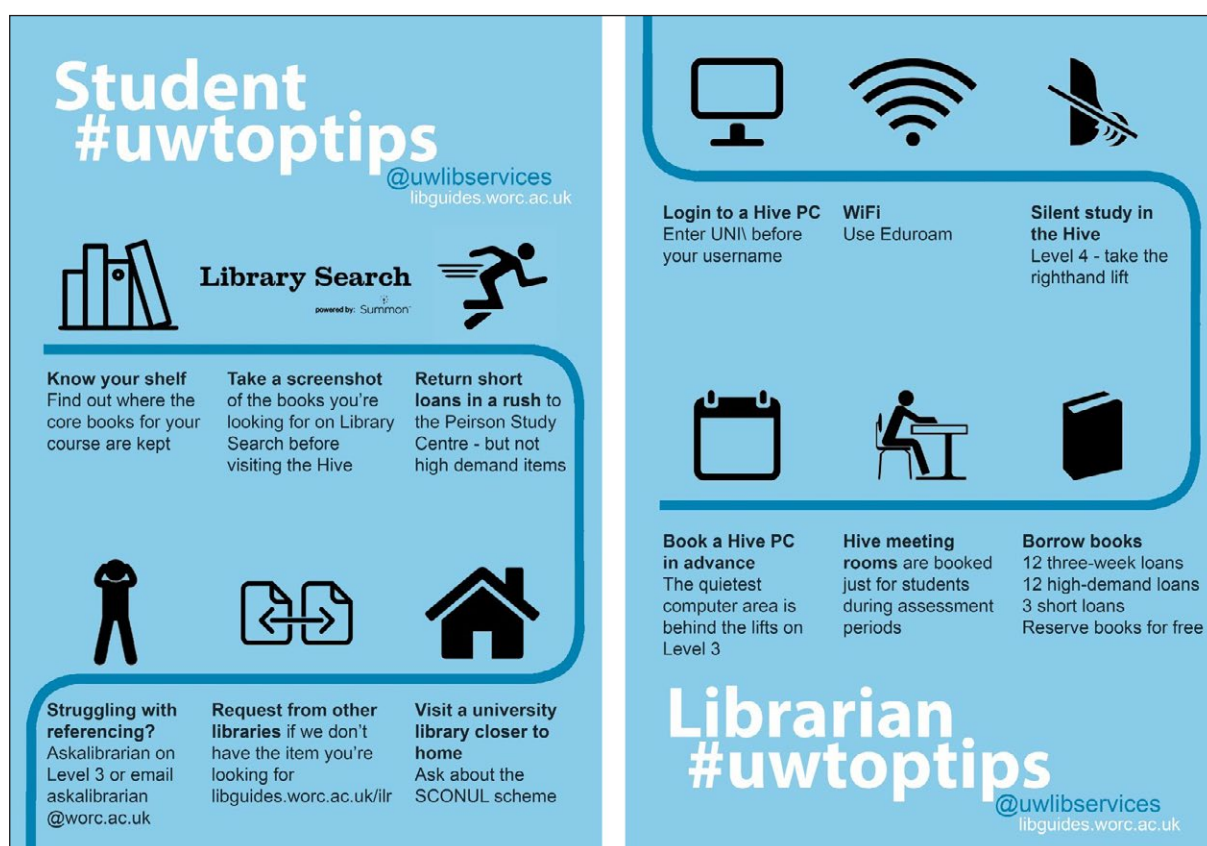
Figures 1-2. Student and librarian Top Tips, created using Piktochart

Students in focus groups also helped us to design and create a self-guided tour for induction (Figure 3). We wanted to replace staff-led induction tours, so worked with students to work out what they actually needed from their experience. Fundamentally, their requirements are to break down the initial barrier of getting through the door, navigating the building, and finding their shelf. This orientation might not be needed in induction week only but at any time during the first few weeks of semester. We are now entering our second year of using the self-guided tour, and plan to do further work with students on an online version in 2016/17.

Figure 3. Student self-guided tour of The Hive

Another area where dialogue with students has proved invaluable is in the overhaul of our library web pages.[7] In focus groups, students fed back on what they thought about existing pages, which helped evidence the pressing need to work on our web presence, and gave us real insight into how we should structure our information. Since launching, hits on our website have increased by 240%. Website work continues, as we interrogate our users' information-finding habits so that we can ensure our information structure supports their needs.

'hits on our website have increased by 240%'

A slightly longer-term project was in the development of our mascot, Reffie the Raptor. A group of librarians had come up with the idea of creating a

Figure 4. Reffie the Raptor and his creator, Leanne Haworth

mascot, Harvey, to represent our Harvard referencing guide, to attempt to inject a little life into a dry and dusty topic. However, opinions were divided as to whether this was a good idea. Focus groups were asked and, interestingly, the first group thought the idea was childish. Subsequent groups were much more enthused but told us that as they did not use the Harvard style, Harvey was no use as a name. Thus Reffie was born! Students created Reffie's identity as a raptor and one very talented drama student, Leanne Haworth (pictured in Figure 4), created a real-life Reffie for us. It might seem slightly frivolous, but Reffie has proved to have a feel-good factor and is a real talking point. Recent surveys on last year's inductions have proven that some students appreciate this more light-hearted approach and feel that he breaks down barriers.

Reffie also took a starring role in induction. At the end of their self-guided tour, students were encouraged to take a 'shelfie' with Reffie, i.e. a selfie when they had found their shelf. (See Figure 5.) Again, this was a student-led initiative designed to engage students with the library in a positive way, taking ownership of spaces and services.

Figure 5. 'Shelfies'

Longer-term projects

Not everything is about quick wins; we are also embarking on a series of longer-term projects to create our culture of student engagement. One of these is to better define and promote our work placement project module offer. Many modules at the University of Worcester have such modules, including subjects like History and English. We often provide projects for students on these modules, but it relies on a personal approach being made from a lecturer to a librarian, and some last-minute scrabbling around on our part to find a project that fits their needs.

So, we need to do much more to present an offer of these placements that is clearly thought out in advance, that is appealing to students, and that makes more staff and students aware of the sort of things we can offer to them.

The Great Hive Book Rescue project

When these projects work, they have fantastic impact. For example, last year we ran the Great Hive Book Rescue for the first time. This textbook rescue scheme, which united over 600 books with new owners and raised over £300 for the Students' Union RAG charities, came to pass through the work of Loretta McKeever, a second-year history student working with us. (See Figure 6.)

This is precisely the kind of project we wish to develop, aiming to work with students so that they learn more about us but also develop services and initiatives that benefit other students. Loretta enjoyed working with us so much that she negotiated a follow up module for her final year to do some analysis of the Great Hive Book Rescue and help us plan for 2016/17.

Figure 6. Loretta McKeever and Allie Taylor at the Great Hive Book Rescue

Student library representatives

A second large project has involved the development of student library representatives – another idea we had wanted to explore with students, who were overwhelmingly positive about it when we did. They identified very strongly with the idea of The Hive and therefore, alongside their official 'library representative' titles, came up with an informal name to use around campus: the Bees. Students have been very definite about what they want to do as Bees so we are planning to trial two different types of Bee in the 2016/17 academic year. One is an Institute Bee. These students will offer peer-to-peer support on library resources and will be mentored by their Academic Liaison Librarian. The other is a Digital Bee, who will work on providing material for social media, particularly using Reffie the Raptor as he negotiates his way around The Hive.

Learning spaces

A third project sees us contributing to institutional interest in learning spaces. We have spent time using campus maps and colour-coded smiley stickers so that students can show us where they study alone, in groups, where they attend lectures and where they socialize. We hope to develop this work further into something like the Cambridge Spacefinder app (Figure 7).[8] Our plans involve getting students to further supply information about study spaces, including proximity to coffee, power plugs, etc., and then to utilize a computing project student to make the information accessible.

Figure 7. Study mapping

Challenges and added benefits

Although good progress is already being made, it is still early days for student engagement at Worcester. We feel very positive about the changes that are taking place, but we still face challenges. One of the biggest of these is the need to manage student expectations. In creating dialogue with students, we are opening ourselves up to lots of requests for change and service implementations, not all of which can be achieved. Some are logistically or financially impossible, whereas others go against the very ethos of The Hive. For example, on occasion we are asked to make The Hive a student-only space, which is neither possible nor desirable. However, seeking engagement and appearing to ignore it can be very negative, so we have to be careful to set the scene carefully in any conversation.

The complexity of our service model also brings its own challenges. As a shared service, we need to meet the needs of a range of customers and serve the mission statements of both a university and a local authority. Despite an integrated culture of sharing, balancing needs and ensuring that services and initiatives fit together can be a challenge. For example, the inception of the Bees has required buy-in from lots of people and careful consideration of the remit of the Bees, who they are working with and for, what branding they should have (University or The Hive), and how they fit in with existing volunteering opportunities. These are not insurmountable problems but additional challenges that we face.

On the other side of the coin, benefits that we had not anticipated have come to the fore. One key change has been a transformation in library staff culture. As librarians, we are often very good at making assumptions about students. We work with them every day, after all. But it is quite different to talk to them and get their feedback before embarking on a project or altering services. We are now at a point where staff stop themselves before making an assumption, and say, 'Can we ask the students?' This is a really big change in behaviour and an important one for our service.

> 'staff stop themselves before making an assumption, and say, "Can we ask the students?"'

Equally important is the capacity this work has to raise our profile and involve us in wider educational discourse taking place throughout the University. One example has already been mentioned in the study mapping work we are doing, whilst elsewhere we are talking to the University's student digital fluency group about the Digital Bee role and how this ties in with the strategic agenda to raise student digital fluency.

Conclusion

The initiatives described in this article mark the start of a journey for Library Services at Worcester. We acknowledge that much of what we are experimenting with is also being done elsewhere and, with a remit to explore, it is inevitable that we will not get everything right. However, by having roles that focus exclusively on student engagement, I feel that we are making positive changes both in how students perceive us and talk to us and also in how our staff think about students. Currently, this is more anecdotal than evidential and our next challenge is to ensure that we become more systematic in demonstrating impact. Specific projects will be targeted this year to gather both quantitative and qualitative feedback to create an impact narrative. Overall, we would like to see our NSS Q16 scores continue to rise from their current position of 86% satisfaction (4.3), with students explicitly referencing the culture of student engagement that we are seeking to foster. It is to be hoped, as we provide more concrete impact evidence, that the value of the student engagement role will become ever more apparent and that others will be able to develop similar roles in their institutions. In the meantime, the changes that I have so far witnessed suggest that we are doing something right.

> 'we are making positive changes … in how students perceive us and talk to us'

Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insight*s articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: **http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa**

Competing Interests
The author has declared no competing interests.

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Dr Sarah Pittaway

Team Leader: Academic Services
Library Services, University of Worcester, UK
E-mail: s.pittaway@worc.ac.uk

ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6421-3871