CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE LIBRARY KIND: ASSESSING FIRST YEAR STUDENTS’ INTRODUCTION TO THE ALIEN WORLD OF AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY

DIANNA E. SACHS AND MEGAN E. BROWN

First-year college students have been dropped into an alien landscape full of strange places and creatures—including a giant library! How can we assure them that we come in peace? Our assessment of a library orientation program has led to a process of continuous evolution as we work to engage students and encourage them to seek out strange new worlds in an academic library.

In 2017-18, Western Michigan University (WMU) offered 47 sections of a First Year Seminar (FYS) course focused on helping students “develop a sense of responsibility for their own education and learning” (WMU Undergraduate Catalog, 2017-2018). The library has partnered with the FYS program since 2006 to offer an orientation with the following learning outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate competency in accessing library resources and services (a.k.a. “students will learn that the library has stuff”)
- Students will make connections with library faculty, staff, and peers to facilitate success (a.k.a. “students will learn that the library has friendly, helpful people”)

Until 2015, students participated in a library tour, followed by a facilitated group project to find an academic book, journal article, and reliable website. Each session was led by a Library Student Leader (LSL). Both the tour and group project were revised each year based on feedback from students, instructors, and library employees, but the basic structure remained the same.

Although student ratings of the library tour remained high (an average of 4.2 out of 5), by 2015 the LSLs had become increasingly frustrated with “zombie tours,” in which students refused to engage. Some students would complete the project quickly and were then bored, while others would goof off and drag out the session. Simultaneously, our library consolidated service points and many tour “stops” no longer existed. We also realized that we had little evidence that students were actually learning about the library. We wanted students to engage in a more meaningful way with both library resources and employees.

In re-envisioning the library orientation, we identified effective aspects of the program, reviewed other library orientation programs, and constructed missing pieces. One successful feature of the library tour was the relationships between LSLs and FYS students. As Brett Bodemer wrote in 2014, “the undergraduate session leader is more apt than librarians to use language understood by student participants… and can speak to personal experience as to what works well” (p. 164). We also incorporated new theories into the orientation, including gamification and self-directed learning. Elizabeth McMunn-Tetangco (2017) notes that gamification “entices cooperation or participation through external motivation” (p. 2), while Bernard Bull (2017) writes that “self-directed learning is about the learner competence and confidence to become more than a passive recipient of learning. The learners are active agents, even directors of their own learning” (p. 13). We hoped that through competition and by allowing students control over their learning, they would be more engaged and invested in the orientation, therefore learning more.
A NEW ORIENTATION IS LAUNCHED

We launched our redesigned orientation in Fall 2016. An LSL met each class, gave a brief introduction, and handed out instructions. The students worked in groups of 3-4 to complete tasks throughout the library. Students had the freedom to choose which tasks to complete, how many, and in what order. They would post their responses to each task on a digital canvas.

The key elements of this new orientation were that it be self-directed, encourage creativity and personalization, be competitive, facilitate the peer mentor relationship, and incorporate engaging technology. We used Padlet (www.padlet.com) for students to post their responses. Padlet is a free, collaborative, web-based digital canvas on which users can post text or photos; students can easily use the web browser on their smartphones to access the site in order to post material. The LSL reviewed and scored the students’ responses. When the students returned, any outstanding questions were answered, and the group with the highest score received prizes.

Our assessment of the new orientation during 2016 focused only on logistics. Although a primary motivator for the redesign was to ensure that students were actually learning, the orientation needed refining before learning could be properly assessed. In Fall 2017, we expanded our assessment to include three additional categories:

- Student engagement
- Student learning
- Return use of the library

We then designed several measures to assess specific questions about our program. Some assessment measures allowed us to compare results with the previous tour, while others specifically examined the new orientation and so established baselines for future comparison.

Student Engagement

A major goal of the orientation is to reduce library anxiety. We want to help students not only learn about the resources and services available, but to feel comfortable using them. One assessment that we continued from previous years was a simple measure of satisfaction, asking students to rate the program from 1 (terrible) to 5 (excellent). Immediately after implementing the new orientation, student satisfaction actually dropped from 4.2 in 2015 to 3.79 in 2016 (though ratings recovered somewhat in 2017 with an average score of 3.88).

We asked the obvious question—if student satisfaction dropped following the new orientation, should we return to the tour? We still had significant concerns about the efficacy of the tour, especially in terms of student learning. After reviewing other assessment data, we found that the new orientation did have significant advantages over the old program, especially in terms of demonstrable learning. We also identified specific issues with the program which, if improved, we hoped would result in higher student satisfaction while retaining the benefits of the new structure. We therefore chose to modify the orientation, rather than reverting to the tour.

Using qualitative feedback to complement the quantitative, we discovered a disconnect between student and instructor preconceptions of the orientation and its reality. Despite prior communication with the instructors that the program design had changed, many instructors continued to expect a tour, and so students expected the same. This miscommunication may have contributed to the drop in satisfaction.

Students’ qualitative suggestions for changing the orientation were varied, including suggestions to include “food and drink maybe beer” and “make it more dope.” The most common comment (approximately 20%) was “fine,” “good,” or indicated no suggestions for improvement. Only 3.6% of students said that the program was “boring” or that they would prefer to not participate at all. There were few patterns among the remaining responses.

Several instructors found the new program successful in the key areas of self-discovery, teamwork, and personal responsibility for learning. Nearly a quarter of instructors used the words “engaging” or “fun” to describe the orientation, while 36% valued the students’ physically visiting the library.

We also measured student engagement by examining both their scores and the rates of task completion. The average score was 46.67 points (135 possible), and the average number of tasks completed was 16.3. Assuming that students worked for 50 minutes, this averages to a completion rate of 3.07 minutes per task—quite fast! It is important to note, however, that a few groups completed as many as 36 tasks, suggesting they may have split up, contrary to instructions to work together; this may have skewed some results.
Another important measure of student engagement was the observation of LSLs. Being on the “front line” allowed them to evaluate students’ attitudes throughout the orientation. They noticed that students often arrived at the orientation expressing boredom or annoyance at “having to be there,” but their attitudes improved during the course of the session. LSLs reported that, in most cases, students’ actively participated and were more talkative by the end of the session, a significant improvement from the “zombie” classes reported in previous years. Perhaps most encouraging, LSLs reported that students took advantage of opportunities to be creative through their responses and photos.

Student Learning

We implemented several measures to assess learning, including qualitative feedback, review of students’ work, and examination of their self-directed choices. We asked students to share their “favorite thing” that they learned. While self-reporting is not a direct measure of learning, it does provide evidence of what students value about what they learned. Interestingly, there were no consistent patterns among students’ responses. Some focused on services (“how you can contact a librarian based on your major”) while others addressed specific resources and spaces (“where the mythology books are” and “I had no idea there was such cool furniture”). Still others commented on the structure of the orientation (“that when we worked more as a team we gained more points”) or aspirational goals (“how to be a better person”).

The instructors were asked to rate how well the orientation supported their course learning outcomes, giving an average rating of 4.37 on a scale of one (“strongly disagree”) to five (“strongly agree”). When asked to reflect on ways that the orientation was successful, 24% stated that it helped students learn about library resources while 14% indicated that it helped students learn about the library in general.

We also examined a representative sample of students’ work to determine if their responses were correct. Students’ average score was 97%, a clear demonstration that they learned about library resources and services.

We were curious to know if self-directed students would gravitate toward tasks focused on specific concepts. However, students chose tasks by format, not by topic. Students completed more tasks that required them to take photos of spaces or objects (32%), or that required them to find resources that met specific criteria (33%). They chose fewer “general information” tasks with a single correct answer such as “what hours are the Writing Center consultants in the library?” (21%). Students chose the fewest tasks that required the use of specific databases or resource guides (15%).

Return Use of Library

We asked students to list ways that they will use the library this semester, in order to measure what they valued enough to return for. Of the 618 students who responded, nearly 75% said that they would return to the library to study. Other popular reasons to return included printing/using computers (51%), books (35%), and research (19%). Only two students responded that they would not return.

LOGISTICS

We relied primarily on qualitative feedback when assessing the effectiveness of the orientation logistics. Instructors’ feedback focused on a desire for more instruction from the LSL introducing the library and the orientation, a tour of the building, better prizes for the winners, and fewer technology problems (we experienced problems with slow wi-fi on three occasions). Feedback from students was more varied. Nearly the same number of students wanted more time (9%) as wanted less time (8%), while approximately 14% wanted fewer choices. Some noteworthy suggestions included “just make it easier to understand where to look for things,” “make the prizes better,” and “do not do a scavenger hunt because your mind is so focused on wanting to finish first that you don’t get to know the library.”

The insights of library employees provided the most useful feedback due to their experience with many class sections. Some suggestions from LSLs included asking instructors to establish student groups before the orientation, advance communication with the TAs as well as the faculty instructor, stronger marketing to TAs and faculty instructors of the purpose and format of the orientation, clearly marked meeting places, and handing out instructions to students on arrival. One LSL even built a project for her Business Process and Productivity class around her experiences with FYS and applied business efficiency models to identify ways to streamline the orientation.

Another concern raised by both FYS students and LSLs was quality of the prizes. Winners had a choice of library-branded items such as USB drives, t-shirts, small notebooks, or mini candy bars. Limited availability of the “desirable” prizes meant that some classes only had candy as a reward. One LSL felt students were disappointed, thinking “Really? You made me do all this for a chocolate?”
CLOSING THE LOOP

The combination of assessment methods that we employed allowed us to identify several changes to the program which we will implement for Fall 2018. Both current and new FYS instructors still expected the tour despite notification of the change, suggesting the oral culture between instructors is perpetuating this misinformation. We are working with the FYS instructors to not only inform them of the orientation format but to also explain how it better meets their course learning outcomes. In response to the desire for a more thorough library introduction, we are expanding the introductory material and strengthening the LSLs training. New content will emphasize the purpose of the program and provide an overview of the physical layout of the library. Due to the consolidation of service points, a tour is no longer practical, but students will visit the Service Desk and receive a more detailed explanation of resources and services offered there.

Another major change will be to develop accessibility procedures to accommodate students with mobility, visual, and hearing impairments. Although we have not yet encountered accessibility issues, we are committed to addressing them proactively. We will be working with instructors to identify students needing accommodations and will consult with the Center for Disability Services. We will make every effort to enable all students to fully participate in the program.

Future changes to assessment methods include an end-of-semester student survey which will ask students to reflect on their engagement with the library and what they have learned. We also hope to examine institutional data to determine if participation in the orientation correlated with other library use, such as checking out books database usage, or printing. Privacy concerns have prevented us from accessing that data this year, but we hope to have sufficient protections in place to collect this data next year, and to track library usage over time. Finally, we hope to have an increased budget to purchase more desirable prizes!

LESSONS LEARNED AND SUGGESTIONS

Assessment of this program focused on student learning, how they feel about their learning, and their overall experience, keeping in mind the benefits and limitations of each assessment method (Table 1). Student satisfaction does not necessarily equal engagement or learning. Similarly, students’ intent to return to the library does not guarantee that they actually will. Combining different assessment measures allowed us to contextualize our results and make informed decisions for improvement.

Table 1: Benefits and Limitations of Assessment Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Limitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative feedback (students and instructors)</td>
<td>Easy to gather and analyze</td>
<td>Indirect; no explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative feedback (students and instructors)</td>
<td>Easy to gather; highly detailed</td>
<td>Indirect; time-intensive analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation by library employees</td>
<td>Moderately easy; personalized</td>
<td>Indirect; dependent on individual situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student scores, completion rates</td>
<td>Direct measure of action; easy to gather and analyze</td>
<td>Assumes students follow the rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student choices</td>
<td>Direct measure of what students value</td>
<td>Dependent on students’ individual situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student work/products</td>
<td>Direct measure of learning</td>
<td>Time-intensive to analyze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correlation w/ other library use</td>
<td>Direct measure of action; large-scale, generalizable analysis</td>
<td>Requires privacy policies, coordination w/ institutional data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from FYS director</td>
<td>Direct measure of program relevance</td>
<td>Indirect measure of learning, instructor satisfaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although we recommend using multiple assessment methods, it is not necessary to assess all questions at once, or to employ complex methods to yield useful information. Quick and easy methods can be an excellent start. For more time intensive methods,
consider limiting analysis to a representative sample as time permits. No matter what, it is essential to act on the results and communicate the changes and reasons for them to everyone involved. The process of regular and ongoing assessment will ensure that any program can grow to meet the needs of students, faculty, and libraries.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Library Orientation Tasks

1. Enter the names of everyone in your group. (required)
2. Take and post a photo of your group. (required)
3. Use Library Search to look up a book on a topic that interests you. Find that book in the library. First, post the Title and Call Number of the book. Second, take and post a photo of the book. Remember, you can ask for help at the Service Desk if you need it!
4. What are the different ways you can contact a librarian to get help with a research project (list at least 2)?
5. Look at the display cases from the Special Collections Department (in the library atrium on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd floors). Take and post a photo of the item that looks the most interesting to you.
6. Go to the Media Literacy guide and read about techniques for spotting fake news. Which techniques do you find most useful for fact checking? (list at least 2 techniques)
7. Use Library Search to find the ebook “Understanding Mass Incarceration.” Open the ebook, post a screenshot of the table of contents.
8. Find a book written in a language other than English. Either write the title or post a photo of your group with the book.
9. Use Library Search to find an online version of a magazine or journal article on “College Residence Halls”. Post screenshot of the article.
10. Search the “Statista” database to find statistics reports on a topic of your choice (i.e. fashion, health, basketball, puppies). Post at least one interesting statistic that you found about your topic.
11. Search the “ARTstor” database to find an interesting work of art. Post a screenshot of an artwork you particularly like.
12. Learn about historic beer brewing! Find a historic recipe for brewing beer from the “Beer, Food, and Home Comfort: Domestic Collections at WMU.” Post a screenshot of your recipe.
13. Take and post a photo of your group with your favorite piece of artwork in the library.
14. Leave a message or drawing on one of the moveable white boards in the library. Take and post a photo of the white board with your message or drawing.
15. How much does it cost to print in black and white? How much for color?
16. How many books can you checkout at one time? For how long?
17. What are “Course Reserves?” What do you need to do to check out a Course Reserve book?
18. Where do you get a key to access the group study rooms?
19. Take and post a photo of your group with your favorite piece of artwork in Waldo Library.
20. What are the three branch libraries that are part of the University Libraries?
21. Go to the Scholarly vs. Popular Journals guide and list at least two of the characteristics that are different between popular magazines and scholarly journals.
22. What is Interlibrary loan? How do you submit an Interlibrary Loan request?
23. What days and times are consultants from the Writing Center in Waldo Library?
24. Look at the list of databases for your major (or a major you’re interested in pursuing). Which one looks the most useful to you?
25. Who is the Subject Librarian for your major (or your potential major)? Post that person’s contact information.
26. Use Library Search to look up a textbook for one of your classes. Post the Call Number for the textbook.
27. Take and post a photo of a good study spot in Waldo Library.
28. Take and post a photo of your group with your favorite book from the WMU Authors Collection.
29. Take a photo of the Card Swipe on the Print Release Station.
30. Look at the books in the Popular Reading Area. Take and post a photo of your group with a book that looks like fun.
31. Where’s Waldo? Find the portrait of WMU’s first president, Dwight B. Waldo, and take and post a photo of your group with Waldo.
32. Find the display case of materials on WMU’s President Edward Montgomery next to the group study rooms. Post at least one interesting fact that you learned about our President.
33. Go to the Children’s book collection near the main atrium. Post the title or a photo of a book that you’d recommend to a younger sibling or friend.
34. Take and post a photo of your group with the cartoon Benjamin Franklin the window of the Government Documents department.
35. Find the purple and white 2010 Census books on the Government Documents shelves lined with pink paper. Look up your home town. What was the population in your town in 2000 and in 2010?
36. Look at the “Interesting and Fun” items on the pink shelf. Take and post a photo of your favorite.
37. Go to the Map Section of the Government Documents department. Find a map or globe showing the location of your dream vacation and post a picture of it.
38. Go to the Special Collections and Rare Books department. Ask an employee what kinds of materials are in this collection. Write down two types of materials that sound interesting to you.
39. Ask an employee in the Special Collections and Rare Books department about their favorite item(s) in their collection. Post the information that they share with you.
40. Take and post a photo of the printer’s mark windows in the Special Collections and Rare Book room. Ask an employee what they are and post their explanation.
41. Post a photo of the sign outside the Unisex restroom.
42. Post a photo of a tasty snack from the vending machines.
43. Take and post a photo of the group study rooms.