
Getting to Know Trinity Library: using video to improve library engagement for students with intellectual disabilities

What does Trinity Library mean to students with intellectual disabilities (ID) and what is their lived experience in an Irish university library setting? What barriers do they encounter along the way and what practical steps could be taken to improve their engagement with the Library?

This article describes a collaborative project between the Library of Trinity College Dublin and Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities which explored these themes and reflects on how the partnership process has yielded many benefits including a learning resource, an excellent inter-departmental working relationship and fresh insights into how reflective and inclusive practice principles can inform future library policy.

Background

In 2016, TCPID established the two-year Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP) certificate programme for students with ID. The Programme seeks to enable students with ID to “participate in a higher education programme designed to enhance their capacity to fully participate in society as independent adults” (Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, 2018). The course aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills to develop academically and socially. This very much ties in with the university’s vision of key graduate attributes. The Trinity Education Project has stated ideals of providing an education which enables students to “think independently, act responsibly, develop continually and communicate effectively” (Trinity College Dublin, 2018).

One of the objectives of the ASIAP programme is to be an exemplar for teaching and learning which can be rolled out to other third level institutions across the country and further afield. In 2017, the ASIAP programme received a Social Innovation Fund of Ireland award in teaching excellence. The inclusive approach to delivering the level five curriculum (National Framework of Qualifications) aims to provide students with unique opportunities to expand their academic and social skills. Examples include film production workshops and live music sessions with well-known artists as part of the Arts strand and participation in the SciFest@TCPID student science project showcase which is part of the science curriculum. An important element of the course is work placement for students, many of whom have been successful in gaining employment with leading companies once they have completed the programme.

Entry routes to the course are either through secondary education or directly from client services. Many of the students have sat state exams. Admission is competitive with an intake of only six to seven students per year. There is an equal split of male to female students with the average age profile being mid-twenties. There is a range of intellectual disabilities with some students also having autism.

University Supports for Students with Disabilities

In Trinity College Dublin, there is a dynamic and comprehensive range of supports for students with disabilities to maximise their potential in higher education. This includes expert staff, facilities, technology and academic accommodations. To access these services, students generally register with the Disability office. The Library is one of many departments providing support services to students including special borrowing entitlements and resources such as the Assistive Technology Information Centres (ATIC) where students can find quiet study areas, computing and printing facilities as well as in some locations, access to a disability officer for advice on supports.

ASIAP Programme and the Library

The Library has supported this programme from its inception through the purchase of course books and by providing an accessible location for the collection. A tailored orientation programme has, to date, included demonstrations of some common library tasks such as borrowing books on the self-service machines. A short guide to library terminology has been compiled and the course reading list was added to the Library catalogue.

Rationale for Collaboration

After a full academic year cycle, it became apparent that this student group was not using the Library regularly. Feedback from the course coordinator on areas of potential concern: physical space, security barrier alarms, dealing with staff, interacting with service points and “not belonging”, were classic examples of “library anxiety” (Mellon, p. 280). This is common among students, with the impact being that

students suffering from library anxiety have a greater propensity to avoid using an academic library” (McPherson, p. 319) .

In addition, the course coordinator advised on incorporating universal design features in key library communications such as replacing library jargon with plain English and making messages more visual. A task-based approach to using the Library was also recommended.

With this in mind two library staff members, the Education librarian and the Sub-librarian for Teaching and Research and User Experience, looked at ways to improve library experience. This would provide a perfect case study on student engagement through the user experience (UX) lens. The focus of UX in libraries is to “improve the overall user experience “ (Massis, p. 243). Findings from this cohort could in turn have wider application to other student groups.

Methodology

This research was approved by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee. Six students volunteered to participate (five second years and one first year). Following discussions, the most popular idea was to create a video guide to using the Library. Participants themselves would script and act in the video.

Subsequently, the Library applied for project funding from the university’s Equality office on the basis of student representation. The application was successful and the grant allowed for a professional video to be made. This

development generated a lot of enthusiasm in the group as they had recently completed their film studies module.

The medium of video therefore ticked a number of boxes in that it would:

- Play to the strengths of the group
- Express key library messages visually
- Be fully inclusive (student-led scripts, roles)
- Be an accessible, 24/7 learning tool
- Represent students with ID in a university library setting
- Enable peer learning

Research has shown that video modelling, where behaviours are acted out on video, can facilitate learning especially in the area of applied behaviour. One study of twenty year old adults with autism showed that it “capitalises on their relative strengths in visual processing, minimises human interaction and for many is inherently reinforcing” (Fitzgerald et al., p. 197). The study also described how those involved in video production “enjoyed participating” (ibid, p. 199) and that video modelling can be shown to be “more effective than virtual reality in facilitating learning” (ibid, p. 200).

The project got underway in January and finished with the launch in May 2018. The main milestones are summarised in the timeline below:

Project Timeline

Dates	Topics
5th April 2018	Focus group session 1 identified themes (known and unknown)
12th April 2018	Focus group session 2 further explored themes and developed scenarios using role play
18th & 25th April 2018	Focus group session 3 and 4 assigned roles, script production & rehearsals
1st May 2018	Filming (main video and reflective piece)
14th May 2018	Launch to participants, parents/guardians, staff and stakeholders

Prior to the first focus group, project participants visited the library on a book-finding exercise. Based on this task, library project staff investigated their attitudes to the Library using prompt questions. Participants’ answers which were written on post-its, were then arranged into themes. These confirmed the concerns identified earlier. In the second session, following informal discussions, additional information was gathered. These overall findings contributed to the shape of the final script. In the final sessions, participants volunteered for roles (speaking roles, extras, narrator, technical support). Students rehearsed and gave generously of their own time in preparation for filming which all took place on one day.

Findings

Physical space

Students were comfortable with the idea of a library setting with two of them mentioning using it as a child or as a place to do homework while in secondary school. However, the complexity of a university library such as Trinity was more daunting. One student described how claustrophobic he felt when navigating multiple floors and labyrinthine rooms surrounded by tall bookshelves. He felt that the “air was stiff” and that he would “pass out”. “ I have to take a breath ..afterwards”. Another student also felt uncomfortable in library social spaces, where students are free to chat. She felt that libraries should be silent places and that students making noise were “breaking the rules “. She disliked overcrowded areas where personal space was often undefined or compromised. She didn’t necessarily accept the concept of “social spaces” and saw the library as “just books and computers”. Another student felt that catalogue monitors were at the wrong height (too high) for some users.

Security barriers

Most of the group exited the library successfully but in the event of alarms sounding, one student revealed that she would panic as “fire alarms scare me”.

Dealing with staff

When some participants asked for help they were happy with the staff response and described them as helpful and nice. One student, however, felt it was a sign of failure and would be “ashamed” if she had to ask for help from staff.

Service points

One student described how anxious he felt when queuing to borrow books on the self-service machine. He sensed other students “were impatient” and admitted that, in the end, he abandoned the exercise. This had been one of his main library objectives that year. The student who felt claustrophobic in the Library also felt that the library catalogue was not clear in its results page. He found it difficult to work out which books were in the library collection, which ones he could borrow and was frustrated if they were out to other readers. He often resorted to buying books on Amazon if he could not find library copies. He stated that it was “harder on our own” to find material. In addition, getting books from storage (not all library books are on the open shelves) was a time management problem when trying to get assignments in.

Not belonging

Feeling awkward amongst other students, uncomfortable with noisy, social areas, or feeling that other students were impatient, indicate that this group were not used to the day to day reality of a busy university library and therefore did not yet feel part of the library community. Further negative experiences for some individuals when navigating the space, finding books or using computing/printing facilities compounded these feelings of discomfort.

“Getting to know Trinity Library” video

Armed with these findings, the project team incorporated the themes into a story-line in which two ASIAP students separately visit the library to get books on their reading list. It is taken from two perspectives; with one character choosing to ask for help from staff at various points and the other completing the task independently. The underlying message is that students can choose whatever option works for them with each ultimately achieving the same result. The cameraman’s professional guidance on video duration and impact helped the team to focus on

the main messages in the film and to keep the scenes short.

Even though only two characters had speaking parts, all participants appeared in the video as extras. For example, they may have been filmed entering the library showing their card, normalising the idea of being in a group study area, using a photocopier, using the self-service machine, or queuing to borrow a book at the desk. The two main characters demonstrated in more detail catalogue searching, book borrowing, using the ATIC area for quiet study and exiting through security barriers successfully. The book-finding scene included a shot where the two friends join up and discover the Library's DVD collection on the way to their book location. This was added as a point of information for the film studies module and to show that the Library has a variety of material other than books.

The narrator added to the positive portrayal of each scene by giving useful advice and reassurance. The video can be viewed below:

Student Reflections

The process of filming library scenes proved to be an intrinsically valuable exercise. In a separate short reflective video, students revealed their before and after moments. The whole process of identifying obstacles, being involved in scripting and acting these scenes helped them to learn through action or experiential learning and helped change their experiences of the Library. One student felt it was a "golden opportunity" to see the Library in a different light. Another felt that he better understood the role of the library and it's staff after completing the process and that his role in the video would encourage similar students to use the Library in the future. Another powerful contribution was one student's realisation that he had overcome his fear of using the self-service machine and successfully borrowed a book.

At the end of the project, students who were initially shy were more confident and outspoken. This may have been due to a great working relationship in the team. At the launch of the film to parents, staff and others, a normally reserved student in the group volunteered to speak to the audience about her experience.

Conclusions

The project was a worthwhile endeavour for all concerned. On a practical level it produced what we hope is a valuable and unique learning tool for third level students with ID on how to use the Library. Library staff involved in the project have benefited hugely from working with staff and students in TCPID by gaining new knowledge and insights around intellectual disabilities in a higher education setting. Approaching library services and resources as task-based exercises will inform future approaches to library support. Library anxiety findings will also improve staff awareness of issues around student engagement in the library.

Students and staff in TCPID now have a greater understanding of the potential of the Library in supporting learning and research and discussions on the availability of appropriate course materials including alternative formats are to be progressed. The Library has since been included in the TCPID Summer school programme and is liaising on providing support for a new research module for second year students. Recent developments in the Library such as simplifying borrowing rules and the prospect of providing 3D maps to aid navigation, are concrete examples of how the Library is trying to improve users' experiences and making it a more welcoming space for all.

For further information on the project you can email Geraldine.Fitzgerald@tcd.ie

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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
