Library Staff Development Programme Evaluation Report
Managing Challenging Situations

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Since 2008, MMU has undergone an extensive campus consolidation programme from seven to two campuses. This has seen five separate libraries based in Manchester brought on to a single expanded facility at All Saints, and two separate libraries at MMU Cheshire brought together at Crewe. As well as challenges, this consolidation brings opportunities for areas such as consistency in service deliver, more opportunities to access training and the easier facilitation of joined up working.

As shown on the graphic to the left one of the challenges of a consolidated site was a large increase in the volume of students using the Sir Kenneth Green Library and library staff were beginning to raise concerns regarding a rise in the number of incidents relating to difficult student behaviour.

To try and support staff in managing challenging such student behaviour, Library Managers met with Organisation Development and Training to discuss how best to assist them with their concerns.

A five phase approach was taken as outlined below:

**Needs Analysis**
Discussion with Library Managers and online staff survey

**Planning**
Development of three training modules

**Delivery**
16 sessions delivered December 2013 – June 2014

**Evaluation**
Reaction level, online follow up survey and supervisor focus group

**Outcomes**
Including recommendations for the Library Services

*Cheshire’s consolidation took place in 2010 and is not included in these figures.*
Staff were asked for their own input into the support and training they may have, and any future needs, via an online survey which elicited their concerns over the behaviour of some students towards them. The primary driver for this was so that any training organised was focussed more on specific issues raised by the staff themselves. The graphic below shows some of the comments received.

Three themes came out of the needs analysis:

1. **Staff development and training needs**: these focussed primarily on the areas below:
   - **Personal Stress**: Several respondents expressed concern about the stress and worry caused to themselves by dealing with confrontational behaviour by students
   - **Customer Service**: Training around customer service and preventing confrontation was requested by several respondents
   - **Conflict management**: Dealing with extreme confrontational behaviour was identified as an issue staff lack confidence with
   - **Mental health**: Many respondents identified issues and a lack of confidence in dealing with students who have additional support needs or mental health issues

2. **Library Policies and Procedures**: issues were raised around consistency, a lack of robustness or application of certain policies and students criticising the behaviour of other students;

3. **Escalation of issues and incidents**: clarity needed on the internal escalation process and those who had been involved in escalated incidents would like to see consistency and information on the outcome.

In order to meet the development and training needs identified, three separate Modules were organised, focussing on managing challenging situations relating to the training needs outlined above. As training around mental health issues is of a specialist this would be addressed later by Learner Development specialists. Work on addressing the additional challenges posed by the issues around policies and procedures, and the escalation of issues would be undertaken after the training programme; discussion and evaluation from the training would help inform how to best take this forward.
The three planned modules would cover areas of concern highlighted by staff. These would be delivered over the course of several months allowing for reflection and consideration, and in small groups to allow all staff the opportunity to discuss issues freely and openly.

A separate session for managers was arranged before the main training took place. This was for several reasons; lots of free text comments focussed on the importance of managers attending the training offered and having an understanding of the issues that front line staff were facing; it was also an opportunity to discuss the fuller survey with managers and to give an understanding of the training programme and how they could help support their staff through it.

Comments from the survey which led to the planned modules included:

- ‘The skilful handling of some [people] in diffusing things before [they] even get started as a 'situation'. In terms of good practice I think this is recognising trigger points - in the people you’re dealing with and in yourself.’
- ‘Further training in relation to dealing with difficult situations/confrontations, but also ‘influencing people’ type courses which might seems to be about softer skills but might help diffuse situations better.’
- ‘Keeping on top of explanations for the policies we have in place so that reasons can be given for regulations - e.g. zoning, use of mobile phones, food areas.’

The sessions were developed to consist of:

**Module 1: Building resilience**
- Managing our inner chimp
- Resilience: What it is (and isn’t)
- Strengths under pinning resilience
- Developing our own resilience at work

**Module 2: Influencing others**
- The drivers that sit behind the behaviour of yourself and others
- How to reflect on and understand your “transactions” with others
- “The games people play” and how to avoid them

**Module 3: Managing the situation**
- Role plays based on policies:
  - Damaged stock
  - Noise Policy
  - Loan allowances
Staff who attended across the 3 modules
81 individual staff
Front facing staff (75)
Back room staff (6)

Module 1:
Building resilience
5 separate sessions
61 members of staff

Module 2
Influencing Others
5 separate sessions
63 members of staff

Module 3
Managing the situation
5 separate sessions
55 members of staff

Images from 2 of the sessions including the role play and group discussions
In order to get a range of evaluation data and encourage feedback from as many staff as possible, the evaluation of the programme was divided into three strands which took place at different times in the training process:

1. **Reaction level:**
   All attendees were given evaluation forms at the end of each session to fill out straight away to gain their initial feedback.

2. **PLA (supervisors’) Focus group:**
   As the Principal Library Assistants (PLAs) had attended all sessions, a focus group was held at the end of the Summer term to gather their feedback about the behaviour of their teams and any noted changes after the training had taken place. This feedback was gathered from the questions below:
   1. What changes have you seen in your team’s behaviour as an outcome of the programme?
   2. How has the programme affected how you do you support your team in your role as a PLA?
   3. How would you describe the impact of the programme for Library Services?
   4. What have been (are) the barriers to your colleagues putting into practice what they have learnt?

3. **Reflective questionnaire:**
   Four months after the final session all attendees were asked to complete a final online questionnaire about changes to their own confidence and behaviour since the training had taken place.
Evaluation Results: reaction level

Knowledge gained

92% of staff felt the sessions would improve or change their working practice.

I enjoyed the role play and the discussions. It is interesting to hear how other colleagues approach situations.

No changes! Except more sessions like this one and longer!

[I learnt] how to try to move someone into a different state which will hopefully help to resolve conflicting situations.

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PLA Focus Group: main themes

- Spacing the learning out over 3 modules was a good way to learn, allowing for reflection in between sessions.
- The 3rd module looking at policy and procedure was very successful and this model could be used to look at other library policies.
- Although an initial change in behaviour was noted in helpdesk staff this hasn’t necessarily carried on throughout the term.
- The training helped them to offer appropriate support to their teams on the helpdesk.
- The training was not mandatory, they felt it should have been.
- They’d noted issues around consistency both between different campuses and members of staff approaching incidents differently.

Reflective Questionnaire – Training Related Questions

- Module 1: 77% agreed or strongly agreed that the course helped me to support colleagues/ their team when faced with workplace challenges
- Module 2: 91% understood how to manage their own reactions in the workplace
- Module 3: 64% now feel more confident in implementing the three library policies if challenged by a customer
- How would you rate your confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour?
  - Pre – training – 38% rated as 7/10 or above
  - Post-training – 79% rated 7/10 or above

Themes from comments about the training:

1. The behavioural questionnaire showed that although staff found the initial training interesting the behavior change has not been consistent across all sites. For example:
   “[I have] not [applied] at all yet all sites have been quiet and my time on the helpdesk has been limited. However, this survey has caused me to reflect on the sessions and think what I will revise and apply in future.”
   “I have stretched myself as I was covering for a colleague, so I had to step up.”

2. Consistency in policies are key to the level of confidence staff have in applying them
   “The session exposed variations in library policy, as it’s been applied by staff (especially over damaged stock), so although feel more confident in handling difficult situations the policy needs tightening up.”

3. Sharing experiences with colleagues was helpful:
   [Most useful aspect of training] “Just sharing experiences with colleagues and tips of how best to handle them. Because unless you have been in these sort of situations it’s difficult to develop coping strategies, and listening to other front line staff & their advice is the best way.”

4. Concerns expressed over extreme behaviour:
   “Dealt with relatively minor issues, not the at times threatening and nasty situations we find ourselves in. This was great for the day-to-day situations, but not the really challenging behaviours.”
The graph below shows the Agree and Strongly agree staff responses to three questions, listed below, regarding several library policies:
1. I feel confident explaining this policy to service users.
2. I think students are aware of this policy.
3. I think students abide by this policy.

Staff confidence is high in the explanation of most of the Library’s policies but there is clearly work to be done in some areas in terms of students abiding by the rules and regulations. For instance, the staff perception of students’ knowledge of the zoned areas is that they are fully aware of the behaviour expected of them; however, this isn’t being translated into abiding by these rules.

As of Monday the policy is no ID card no entry. Excellent! No grey areas. It's been a long time coming.

[Food & Drink] policy is now too vague and woolly and nobody is confident in applying it.

[zones] This policy changes too often, neither staff or students know where they are up to.

Sometimes staff waive fines that shouldn’t have been waived, as "a gesture of good will", should this be happening?

This was by far the most valuable session as the role play really helped to bring the situations alive where we could analyse what happened in more detail. This element highlighted the lack of consistency with damaged stock policy.
Based on the evaluation of the training, the following outcomes have occurred for library services:

1. Staff generally feel more confident in dealing with difficult situations; this helps to create a stronger and more confident helpdesk team.

2. There is a stronger understanding of the rationale for some policies and procedures, primarily those dealt with in the 3rd module. Feedback was that such an approach could be used with policies where staff are a little more uncertain, such as food and drink, and children in libraries.

3. The Graduate Trainees involved in the role play preparation felt that they had a very strong understanding of the rationale of the chosen policies [see box to right].

4. The PLAs involved in the evaluation reported higher levels of confidence in knowing when and how to intervene to support their teams when managing incidents.

5. The training provided an opportunity for staff from different teams and sites to meet and interact. Although this highlighted areas of inconsistency, it allowed staff involved in the consolidation to work together and exchange ideas and experiences.

6. Staff feel that they have had the opportunity to comment on the training needs of themselves and others and what they feel is needed in terms of supporting staff in difficult circumstances.

7. As an outcome of the sessions and feedback, short “Know your…” sessions on one-off topics have been rolled out on a wider range of topics. This has given staff an opportunity to gain awareness and understanding of several aspects of their role and the wider service.

8. A staff suggestion box scheme has been implemented to encourage staff to provide feedback on ideas and developments to the service. A Library Manager has been given the responsibility to investigate the ideas’ feasibility and feedback as appropriate.

9. The training and final evaluation has provided a platform for a more detailed analysis of policies and procedures and prioritised which of these require revision.

Graduate Trainee’s Perspective

We found it very useful to hear a range of staff (managers, librarians, library assistants and shelvers) from different parts of the library discuss policy from their own perspective. Even though we only role-played three incidents, we realised that by drawing on our colleagues’ experience we could easily apply the same customer service strategies to other situations. We developed a clearer idea of what we should be saying in a given situation and could develop techniques for the future based on these general principles.

We felt relieved that there is no right or wrong way to deal with any situation, and that we are not serving customers incorrectly on a regular basis! Instead, we discovered that there are better or worse ways of handling customer service, and by participating in these role-plays we certainly feel that we gained a deeper understanding of the better ways to handle difficult situations.

Jen Bayjoo
Some recommendations for the library service are listed below:

- The training programme over three modules as staff responded well to shorter and more regular training sessions. Participants got time to reflect between sessions and discuss the learning with colleagues. There were a few issues around the timing of the evaluation and other ways of following up on training would need to be explored should a similar programme be developed again. For instance, there were only 31 respondents to the second, behavioural level questionnaire, despite 70 individual staff attending the training.

- In the initial needs analysis staff had flagged up issues regarding students with mental health problems. Training with specialists from MMU's Learner Development was arranged but feedback from staff was that they would like further training in this area, ideally with more of a library focus.

- Feedback from the initial needs analysis questionnaire and echoed by staff in the PLA focus group showed support and a desire for managers to attend staff training sessions such as this. Where appropriate, managers should be encouraged to attend relevant training alongside their teams.

- There were some comments around the usefulness of the timing of the modules, which had allowed for reflection and discussion with colleagues. To achieve this managers could investigate the possibility of embedding reflective practice, for example running action learning sets with the support of OD&T or facilitating workshops to explore colleagues' experiences of managing workplace challenges.

Future Options for Development of Policies & Procedures

- Examine further policies and procedures using the same evaluation framework, with staff from all grades testing their robustness with a range of counter arguments.

- The following policies and procedures have been identified as in particular need of review from the survey, but it would be beneficial to review all:
  - Zoned areas
  - Food and drink in libraries
  - Children in libraries
  - Part payment of fines

- Relevant staff to work with the Library’s Senior Communications Professional to find innovative ways to publicise policies and manage student expectations ensuring knowledge of their responsibilities.