

# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

## Leo Appleton

Associate Director of Library Services

University of the Arts  
London

[l.m.appleton@arts.ac.uk](mailto:l.m.appleton@arts.ac.uk)

## Jayne Batch

Assistant Learning Resources Manager

Central Saint Martins

[j.batch@csm.arts.ac.uk](mailto:j.batch@csm.arts.ac.uk)

## Tania Olsson

Learning Resources Manager

London College of

Communication

[t.olsson@lcc.arts.ac.uk](mailto:t.olsson@lcc.arts.ac.uk)

## Sandra Reed,

Discovery Librarian (Resources & Communications)

University of the Arts

London

[s.reed@arts.ac.uk](mailto:s.reed@arts.ac.uk)

University of the Arts London (UAL) is a specialist provider of art, design, fashion, communication and performance education from Foundation through to PhD level. It is made up of six colleges: Camberwell College of Arts; Central Saint Martins; Chelsea College of Arts; London College of Communication; London College of Fashion; Wimbledon College of Arts. The student population is approximately 19,000 full-time equivalent, around half being international students. Currently 74% study at undergraduate level, 14% at postgraduate level and 12% at further education level.

Library Services is a university-wide service, with a library in each of the six colleges, as well as two Learning Zones and the University Archives and Special Collections Centre. In addition, the Resources and Systems teams provide systems, resources, infrastructure and process support and innovation for the department. Each of these areas of the service is responsible for the quality of student experience of Library Services. In looking at quality assurance and an approach to continual service improvement, Library Services has always been very proactive in consulting and engaging with its students. Forms of engagement have included regular meetings between managers and student union sabbatical officers, student representation on project teams and employment of students through the university's student recruitment agency. Students work for Library Services as shelveers, student ambassadors and on specific projects. Such engagement allows for the student voice to be represented in specific service developments and for students to play a key role in providing feedback into service improvements. Feedback is also sought and gathered through several other initiatives, including: LibQUAL surveys; 'Tell us what you think' feedback channel; analysis of National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and FE survey data; surveys relating to specific projects, such as one carried out to determine the look and feel of the new library catalogue public interface.

## Student engagement in space planning and design

During 2015, UAL announced several estates and new-build projects, all of which have huge implications for Library Services. These include: a new academic building, including a new library at Camberwell College of Arts; relocation and new campus build, including a new library, for London College of Fashion; new campus build, including a new library, for London College of Communication. This fortunate position of being involved in three new-build projects allowed Library Services the opportunity to consider how best to engage with students in the planning of these developments. In seeking a method for such student engagement it was necessary to consider:

- The long-term nature of some of the projects (five years for London College of Communication and London College of Fashion) means that any students involved now are unlikely still to be students when the new builds are completed. Could student engagement also result in positive actions in the shorter term (i.e. whilst they are still students)?
- Predicting future learning space needs and requirements in the future
- How to approach this from a service-wide perspective and include all our library spaces.

Colleagues from the Library Services Customer Service Group set about the task of finding a method that would achieve the student engagement and consultation that we were looking for, but would also address the concerns and questions raised above. There were some excellent examples in the library sector of techniques that could be applied to the UAL setting. These included examples of student diary mapping for finding out how learning spaces are currently used by students at Edge Hill University (Ramsden & Carey, 2015) and at Liverpool John Moores University (Appleton, 2014) and a small-scale project carried out at Newcastle University, in which students were observed

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

using library learning spaces before discussing their requirements as part of a focus group (Oddy, 2015). The UAL team certainly drew inspiration from these methods and this led them to investigate further the possibility of using a User Experience (UX) methodology.

## User Experience in libraries

---

UX for libraries involves a suite of techniques based around first understanding and then improving the experience that users have when using libraries. One of the fundamental principles of UX is that it uses ethnographic methods to achieve this. In his article for Cilip update, Andy Priestner (2015) describes ethnography as 'a way of studying cultures through observation, participation and other qualitative techniques with a view to better understanding the subject's point of view and experience of the world'. He goes on to say that 'applied to the library sector, it's about user research that chooses to go beyond the default and largely quantitative library survey, with a view to obtaining a more illuminating and complex picture of user need'. Until recently, UX was largely applied by libraries to the design and usability of websites and systems interfaces, but academic libraries have begun to show willingness to apply UX in a broader approach and now increasingly use ethnographic methodologies when exploring the UX experience in their physical spaces (Bryant, Matthews & Walton, 2009).

Rather fortuitously, the inaugural UX in Libraries Conference took place in Cambridge in March 2015; this allowed UAL Customer Service Group colleagues to go and find out more about this new world of UX. The conference was very participatory, practical and informative, as well as being a motivating and inspiring event. There has been much reflection on and many write-ups of the conference; a blog post by Matthew Reidsma provides an excellent overview of the event and effectively synthesises the various activities, interactions and reflections from the conference as well as presenting back on some of the learning that took place (Reidsma, 2015).

From the UAL perspective, the conference proved very successful and the team came back inspired and informed, and ready to apply some of their learning to the UAL learning space design projects and to engage students in the process effectively.

## The UAL UX project

---

The UAL UX project aimed to engage students in the design and planning of the new builds, but also to impact on the learning spaces that they currently occupy. This was regarded as a key objective of the project, in that students would potentially see the benefits of any developments themselves, for as long as they remain at UAL. A recurring theme in all the feedback provided by students through the various UAL feedback channels (see above) is that of space within the libraries and the learning zones. Many comments received are about a perceived lack of space, or a lack of certain types of space in the libraries. Library Services is very conscious of the demands and expectations that students have about the library and learning spaces available to them and every effort has always been made to ensure that space is used effectively and efficiently in the libraries and the learning zones. Decisions on the layout and furnishings of the spaces have always been informed by Library Services staff's general observations and understanding of how the service works and how library users behave in particular spaces. However, until the discovery of the UX methodology, there had never been any dedicated initiative to evaluate student behaviour and usage in the library and learning zone spaces in order to inform such decisions.

## Project aims and objectives

The UX project has allowed Library Services to explore current student learning behaviours in order to effectively develop library and learning spaces both now

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

and in the future. Specific objectives include:

- to use UX techniques to observe existing student behaviours in the libraries and learning zones
- to optimise their current usage by responding to the ways in which students make use of these learning spaces
- to encourage existing students to reflect on their current usage of UAL Library Services, in order to understand better how students use them
- to embed a responsive approach towards developing library services through proactive partnership and discussion with student user groups
- to inform planning projects and future services and facilities involving library space through observation and discussion with students

## UX methodology at UAL

UX as a methodology uses a range of methods and techniques, often described as anthropological and ethnographic in that they encourage objective observation and reflection on user behaviour in a given environment or system. The UAL Library Services UX project used the following specific methods for gathering intelligence within the overall methodology:

### *Observation of student movements in library spaces*

This is achieved by placing observers at vantage points throughout the libraries and learning zones at specific times of day in order to observe and map how students move through given learning spaces. This is a popular way to see if signposting works, whether students use particular preferred routes through the library, and if there are particular physical paths of least resistance within spaces. It is also a good way to ascertain which are the popular or unpopular destinations.

### *Observation of static spaces*

This technique places observers at particular vantage points (i.e. communal areas, silent zones, photocopy areas) to see how the area or space is naturally used. This allows the observer to observe which natural behaviours occur within given areas.

### *Touchstone tours*

Touchstone tours involve walking around the library or learning zone with the user, observing them, questioning them and discussing their experience of the space. This allows for individuals to present their subjective views. Obtaining a critical mass of these within a given learning space can help to establish well-used and under-used areas of the space, as well as common likes and dislikes. It is also a useful channel for getting suggestions for service improvements from users.

These space observations validate each other and provide useful observational intelligence about the set-up and layout of a given learning space.



Fig. 1 Student UX team being taught how to conduct static observations

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

As well as needing to observe students and engage them in Touchstone tours, we also wanted to make use of students in facilitating the project. A team of twelve current UAL students, representative of all the colleges, was recruited to spend two weeks carrying out the observations in all the college libraries and learning zones. The team was trained in the observational techniques and their time was split evenly between the three methods. Library Services advertised for participants for the Touchstone tours, and there was the incentive of an Amazon voucher for all who participated.

Ninety-nine Touchstone tours were conducted across the libraries during the two-week observation period.

Some of the original observation team were then employed in the summer of 2015 to perform the data analysis for the final reporting.



Fig. 2 Student UX team being taught how to conduct movement observations

## Focus groups

Focus groups are a useful method of generating deep and reflective discussion with library users about a given topic or theme. The UX project used this method in each of the libraries; a focus group with up to eight participants in each was conducted during the second phase of the project.

Similarly, the team of twelve observers was also convened for an initial focus group, designed to elicit feedback about the observational techniques (i.e. for future UX activity) and to generate some discussion about their observations of student use of and behaviour in and around the library and learning zone space. The initial focus group allowed the project team an insight into the key themes that had emerged from the observations, which formed the basis of the subsequent focus group discussions.

Users of all libraries were invited to take part in these library-specific focus groups and all were successfully subscribed to:

- Camberwell College of Arts – 7 participants
- Chelsea College of Arts – 7 participants
- Central Saint Martins – 5 participants

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

- London College of Communication – 6 participants
- London College of Fashion – 5 participants
- Wimbledon College of Arts – 7 participants

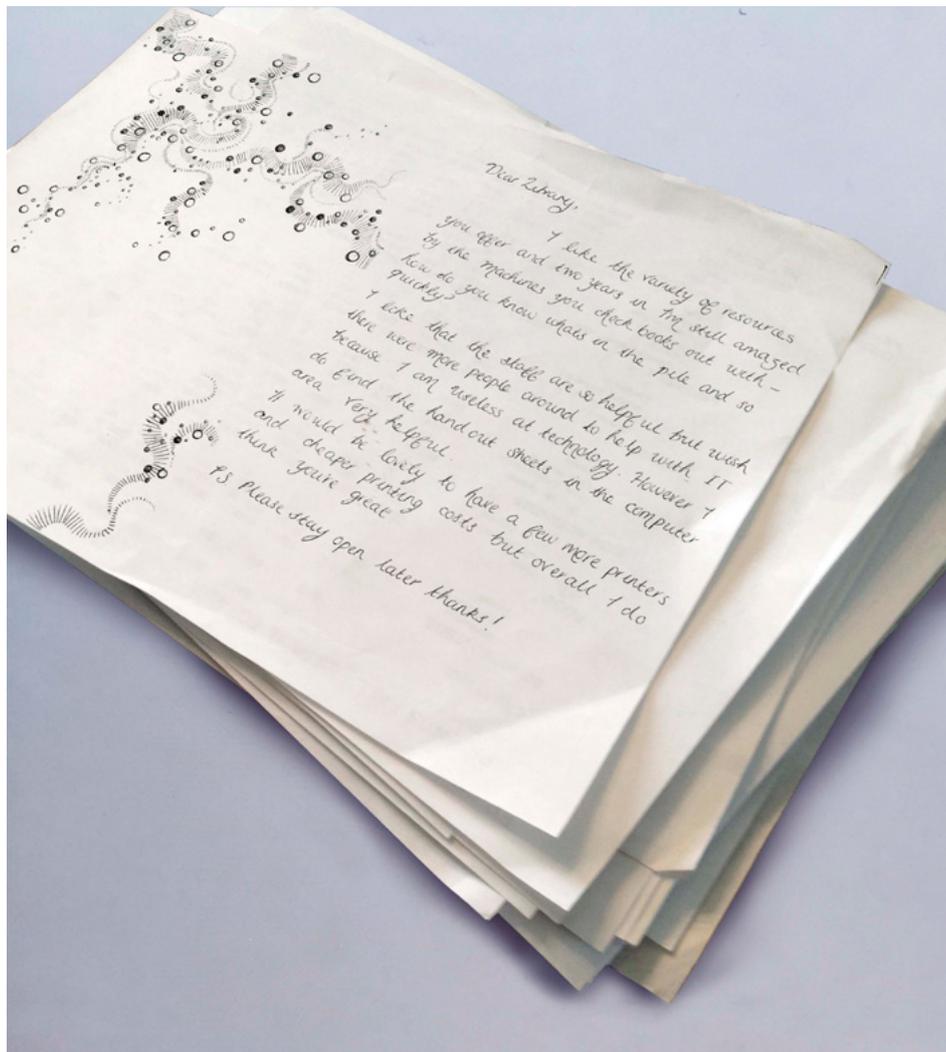


Fig. 3 Example of a student love letter, which students were asked to write during the focus groups (photo: Anne Odling-Smee)

## Reflective journals

All the focus group participants were invited to keep a reflective journal of their learning and studying behaviour over a three-week period in June and July 2015. Reflective logs allow the participants to capture their different behaviours and preferences, and each was asked to particularly consider what made a learning space conducive to study, with a focus on the learning spaces provided in the libraries and learning zones. There was a further incentive (more vouchers) for those who successfully completed and submitted a reflective journal.

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

I have a deadline and am panicking a little about time, so decide to organise my pile of papers and notebooks (that I carry everywhere with me) on the empty seat next to me on the bus. I end up ripping out and separating the pages, making two piles for different projects, one ongoing (so they can be scanned and used), and one completed (to be filed away and stored for a while in case they are useful). I also made a pile for paper recycling, and one of personal projects.

I worry about pulling out a valuable laptop on a bus so it's great to have all of my notes, briefs, and spare paper tucked into one book I can carry around with me.

I am weirdly focused on a busy moving bus, maybe because of the pressure, but I feel more focused than I do at home at my quiet desk surrounded by other things I could/should focus on. Maybe being confined with a 45 minute time limit (bus terminating) and nothing else productive to do is the key to my concentration.



*The contents of my notebook organised into piles, on top of my jacket, on top of a moving bus.*  
05/06/15

I had a project due, and I needed to do some minor edits to some badge designs, print them off and assemble them. I arrived at LCC at about 11am, going straight to the library. I used one of the computers in the learning zone, as what I wanted to do was to be quick and didn't require much thought, so it was fine to be in a busier, brighter space. It's also useful to be in eyesight if meeting someone there.

I opened InDesign and Photoshop and started working on my designs, a friend arrived and I asked him for help with something, he slid his chair over easily (as they are wheeled and there is enough space), and we collaborated on my screen. One problem in the learning zone was that there was a group of about five students making a lot of noise, which was entertaining but distracting.

I noticed a lot of people coming to this section for very short periods of time and then leaving, presumably printing something, leaving off and then collecting their prints using ID cards. The print system is great as it

*Fig. 4 Excerpt from a student reflective log*

## Timeframe

The UAL UX project was carried out in distinct phases, the first three of which involved the ethnographic activity. Phases one to three were therefore intentionally scheduled during term time (April – June) in order to ensure that any observation and fieldwork was carried out whilst the libraries and learning zones were busy and fully occupied.

Phase	Activity	Timeframe
Phase 1	Recruitment of students to observation team	April 2015
	Briefing and training of observation team	April 2015
	Movement observations	April – May 2015
	Static observations	April – May 2015
	Touchstone tours	April – May 2015
Phase 2	Focus groups	May – June 2015
Phase 3	Reflective logs	June – July 2015

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

Phase 4	Recruitment of students to undertake data analysis team	July 2015
	Analysis period	July – August 2015
Phase 5	Reporting and actioning recommendations	September 2015 –

## Project outputs

The outputs from such an extensive project have been numerous. Each of the six college libraries (and Central Saint Martins learning zone) received a report at the beginning of the 2015–16 academic year detailing key themes and suggested short- and long-term recommendations for service and space improvements. This has allowed the library managers at each site to focus on ensuring short-term ‘quick fixes’ as well as recommendations for longer-term planning of the new library spaces. The UX project has also allowed Library Services to think about where space and layout has not been consistent across the libraries and to address this. As well as the reports and recommendations to each library, the UX project has had wider-reaching outputs, such as the ability to inform the department’s student responsiveness policy, processes and initiatives and the development of a method for future UX projects and activity.

## Project outcomes – what has changed?

Each of our six sites has acted upon the improvements suggested in the final UX reports, in terms of enhancements that could be acted upon immediately, and the longer-term objectives that will feed into key decisions and designs for the future.

The sites have responded to the reports individually and there have been significant physical improvements for users.

*Camberwell College of Arts Library* – As a direct result of the UX report, a new quiet study area has been created as this was identified as a priority by the students during the UX project and was strongly evidenced through the observational mapping of spaces. The UX report is also informing the design of the new library. As well as feeding into the architects’ plans, library staff have produced a mood board for the new space that incorporates suggestions from the project.

### *Chelsea College of Arts Library*

The UX project highlighted some of the demands and expectations of the students and provided further evidence of the need for some changes that were already being considered. The computer centre at Chelsea has been enlarged to include extra work stations. The previously silent ‘old college library reading room’ has also been turned into a group study area, with new furniture making it into a more social and better-used space. This has proved very popular with Chelsea students.

### *Central Saint Martins Library and Learning Zone*

Extra MacBooks have been purchased and we are about to introduce self-service laptop lockers. This will be a huge benefit to our 24-hour opening four times a week. The UX report raised some issues about lighting, and additional lighting has now been installed and has improved the environment in the quiet zone. The project also allowed for the CSM library managers to rethink their space layouts, and further workspaces have now been created in the library areas.

### *London College of Fashion Library*

The UX project highlighted access to IT facilities as a main concern of students at London College of Fashion. Subsequently, extra power sockets have been installed and resources budgets have been allocated for the acquisition of additional laptops.

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

## Wimbledon College of Arts Library

The observations and discussions that took place as part of the UX project have resulted in extra IT facilities being dispersed throughout the library spaces.

## London College of Communication Library

The UX project provided lots of intelligence as to how the various spaces at the London College of Communication were perceived. Subsequently, space was redesigned to make the area feel more welcoming and to provide a wider variety of study spaces. This included adding new comfortable seating and soft furnishings to break up the silent space, and moving the journals to a preferred location. Self-service laptop lockers will be added over the summer.

In all instances the UX project has helped the University of the Arts library managers to make decisions about where to deploy and prioritise resources. The project has informed several 'mini space projects' and has assisted in focusing budgets on solutions that allow for short-term gains for students.

The UX project findings became invaluable in terms of intelligence for informing business cases around the student experience. As well as helping to shape learning space improvements, other outcomes include being able to present a portfolio of evidence for making improvements to accessibility. One of the key improvements made across all sites was enabling longer opening hours, which were introduced at all six sites during 2015–16 and included 24-hour opening four times a week, and increasing weekend opening hours. Across sites, we have reviewed and expanded information skills provision, allowing students to attend when they need to, rather than at the start of term. We have also begun to use consistent mapping and colour coding of specific areas, making it easier for our students to find their way around, no matter which site they are in.

## Wider influence

In addition to the above-mentioned outputs and outcomes, the UAL UX project helped to inform a *Library visioning* workshop, which we held as a starting point for discussion around our proposed new buildings and around the 'inspirational environment' theme of the current Library and Academic Support Services strategy. The Library Services UX project has generated a lot of interest across the university, especially amongst our Estates colleagues, who are now considering using UX methodology and adopting it for informing other university space planning and design projects.

A final further, unforeseen outcome, is that of the team of extremely enthusiastic students, who became very engaged with Library Services over the course of the project. They have gone on to become advocates for the UX project and ambassadors for Library Services in general and have subsequently been involved in other projects and activities run by Library Services (e.g. strategic planning workshops, staff development events and Customer Services Excellence assessment)

## Conclusion

---

The UAL UX project has been a huge success for UAL Library Services, and we are very pleased to have been introduced to such a useful, thorough and engaging methodology. Being able to invest in the methodology as a formal channel of student engagement and as an instrument for consultative service improvement has proved invaluable for UAL Library Services. The students who use UAL libraries are now enjoying some very effective learning space redevelopments, and the university is better informed about learning space requirements for its libraries in the future. UX will definitely be a regular fixture of UAL Library Services' improvement planning. After all, as Graham Walton points out, 'Now that the importance of the academic library UX has been

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



# Engaging students through User Experience at the University of the Arts London

recognised, it is difficult to see it reducing in profile. In a world where the user is king / queen, UX can only increase in importance' (Walton, 2015).

## References

---

- Appleton, L. (2014). 'Tell us what you think': engaging with students in library space planning [online] #UKAnthrolib blog. Available at: <https://ukanthrolib.wordpress.com/2014/08/19/tell-us-what-you-think-engaging-with-students-in-library-space-planning/> [accessed 30 May 2016]
- Bryant, J., Matthews, G. & Walton, G. (2009). Academic libraries and social learning space: a case study of Loughborough University Library, UK. *Journal of librarianship and information science*, 41(1), pp. 7–8
- Oddy, E. (2015). Embracing the student voice [online] *SCONUL Focus* 64. Available at: [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/10\\_14.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/10_14.pdf) [accessed 30 May 2016]
- Priestner, A. (2015). UXLibs: a new breed of conference. *Cilip update* (May 2015), pp. 31–33
- Ramsden, M. & Carey, C. (2015). Spaces for learning? Student diary mapping at Edge Hill University [online] *SCONUL Focus* 62. Available at [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/3\\_13.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/3_13.pdf) [accessed 30 May 2016]
- Reidsma, M. (2015). More than usable: library services for humans [online] *Matthew Reidsma blog*. Available at: <https://matthew.reidsrow.com/articles/125> [accessed 30 May 2016]
- Walton, G. (2015). What User Experience (UX) means for academic libraries. *New review of academic librarianship*, 21(1), pp. 1–3 (p.3)

The copyright in items published in *SCONUL Focus* remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.

