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# Developing a user-friendly shelf signposting system at Limerick Institute of Technology Library

Nora Hegarty  
Limerick Institute of Technology Library  
Limerick  
Ireland  
nora.hegarty@lit.ie

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## INTRODUCTION

*'I'm looking for books on sound engineering.'*

*'Can you tell me where the books on event management are shelved?'*

*'Do you have anything on web design?'*

I'm sure you'll agree that some of the most common questions asked at the library desk relate to where books are shelved. This is certainly the case in my experience. So what can we do to help students better navigate their ways around the book stacks? How do we make it easier for them to have a positive browsing experience? What steps do we need to take to take to develop a user-friendly shelf signposting system?

## DEVELOPING A TEMPLATE

These were the kinds of questions we faced here in LIT Library last year. The existing shelving signage had had its day. The design was outdated, and as the books had been moved along the stacks to make room for more over the years, the directional information was inaccurate. Users were confused and frustrated. It was time to go back to the drawing board and draft a new design for the library shelf signage.

In line with Serfass (2012) we began by developing a simple design based on LIT Library's institutional logo and the college colours (red and

white). We created a generic template document in MSWord with consistent header and footer themes and the same typeface, colours, backgrounds and logos. This made for what Serfass (2012, p. 5) describes as 'a unifying theme' that prompts user recognition and usage of signs.

We chose the Myriad Pro font using a mixture of larger (30) and smaller (20) point size for contrast and ease of reading. We printed the signs on good quality 100 g/m<sup>2</sup> white paper and laminated them for reinforcement. Signs were designed for each end of the bay, so that a sign is visible regardless of direction from which it is approached. Bay ends were chosen as ideal display platforms for the signage. They provide a natural break in the shelving and qualify as examples of 'decision points' Serfass (2012, p. 5).

#### **SUBJECT-CENTRED DESIGN**

Based on our knowledge of the student mindset we decided to make the subject headings rather than classification numbers the main focus of the design. Experience shows that while students do not necessarily understand the Dewey Decimal Classification scheme (they are not mini-librarians after all), they are very aware of the subject areas they are studying. A sports science student, for example, knows that s/he has to refer to material across a number of subjects, including:

- recreation and sports (class number 796)
- health promotion (class number 613)
- psychology (class number 616)
- research skills (class number 001.4)

While the classification numbers listed on signs may not mean much to him, the familiar subject headings will strike a chord as he gradually gets to know the sections of the library that are relevant to his coursework.

This realisation meant we opted for a subject-centred design. As in the example below, the classification numbers are noted on an arrow at the top of the sign and the subject headings are the focus of the information down the page. This template aligns with Stempler's (2013, p. 503) description of 'a consistent and comprehensive stack signage system'.



*Banner design by Carol McKie LIT Library*

#### **MARKETING & PROMOTION**

The simplicity of this design makes the task of finding books more straightforward. It also makes it easy for students browsing the shelves to become familiar with the subject coverage bay by bay. The value of this method is reinforced by Lee (2008, p. 214), whose exploration of undergraduates' information-seeking behaviour reveals the popularity of shelf-browsing as a legitimate search strategy for students: 'participants looked around in the book stacks... They were aware that books on similar topics were shelved nearby and browsing after retrieving one book on a specific topic gave them the opportunity to discover other books on the same or closely related topics.'

The potential of effective signage as a marketing and promotional tool is highlighted here in that clear signage may help make students more aware of the range of library books available to them. We would like to think that ease of access to the books also helps to make the library a friendlier and more welcoming place where students can work independently or seek assistance as required. By improving communication and setting a positive tone, we believe good signage goes some way towards helping students to become comfortable confident library users.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while we are uncertain as to whether our redesigned stack signage system has contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of books checked out, as was the case in the library at the College of Staten Island, New York (Stempler, 2013), we have observed that there have been fewer navigational queries at the desk. We have also received several positive comments from students. This reassures us that the new signposting is helping them to navigate the book stacks more efficiently and effectively, and is a further indication of the success of the project. In line with Polger & Stempler's (2014) advice that library signs are 'living documents' that need to be constantly changed and updated, we are, however, very aware that this is an area we cannot afford to get too complacent about.

## REFERENCES

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