Library Orientation Can Be Murder!: An Interactive Training Experience

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Each Fall Semester, before classes begin, the library holds an orientation and training for all library faculty, staff, and student workers. This is typically a time when the captive audience (attendance is mandatory) is treated to a day of lectures and presentations on such riveting topics as library policies and procedures, customer service standards, and emergency preparedness, followed by tours of the different working areas of the library. No one is spared; even long-time, returning employees must attend to be reminded of things they should very well know and to show solidarity and support for the new employees. It is a day to be endured, no matter how much we have tried to make it interesting and educational. But that all changed this fall; not only did we finally connect...we knocked their socks off!

How it began

It all started when Marseille “Marcy” Pride, then Dean of the Jerry Falwell Library, Liberty University, gave me the task of developing a murder mystery for our fall orientation as a pilot to try to gauge the amount of interest and engagement this type of program would have as well as to determine its usefulness in imparting the necessary information. My first challenge, after reviewing the literature and seeing what other academic libraries had done, was to form a committee which consisted of the dean, two associate deans, and librarians and staff – eleven of us in all. Chemistry was vital; we needed a group of people who could work well together and also would have the imagination, sense of humor, and skills to pull it off. Our first meeting was held in mid-May and we met nearly every week throughout the summer.
Exploration

We followed the creative process laid out to us in a workshop by visiting author and Cornerstone University professor Don Perini. First, we fully examined our situation and our task. We determined what our learning objectives would be, what things we wanted to cover and tried to determine how much time we would need. The first thing we decided was that we would keep our meetings and what we were doing strictly confidential. As I also had the dubious honor of being the editor and compiler of our library policies manual, we called our group the “Library Policies Training Planning Committee,” and we were remarkably successful in keeping our secret! We knew that our audience would be all library personnel and our learning objectives were not too complicated because this was an orientation. We determined that we would undertake to familiarize employees with the different areas of the library as well as their purpose and function (in place of the infamous “tours”). While we did not specify team building as a learning objective, in the end this and the formation of strong inter-departmental relationships turned out to be a significant result of our program that far exceeded our expectations. Something that we underestimated was the amount of time we would need for the activity.

Inspiration

Once we had the outline of our goals laid out, our next task was to determine what parts of the library we wanted to include in the orientation. I should mention here, that we had moved into this brand new facility, the Jerry Falwell Library, on January 2nd of this year, so this was to be our first Fall Semester Orientation ever in this building spanning four floors in two
wings and over 170,000 square feet. We finally chose seventeen locations in the library that
would have to be visited by the participants to solve the mystery.

The second and most challenging part of our brainstorming process was to come up
with some kind of story that could cover all of these areas. The key to good brainstorming is to
let your imagination soar – there are no bad ideas. Everything is on the table. Dean Pride
helped to get the ball rolling by helpfully suggesting that she knew where we could get a body;
(which turned out to be a body made of cellophane by an art student.) Because of her heavy
workload across campus, it was the last meeting that she attended for several weeks and in the
interim, the rest of the committee decided to make her the culprit. We did make the decision
not to stage an actual murder for sensitivity’s sake. Our purpose was to make the orientation
fun and engaging as well as informative and instructive. We did not want to offend or distress
anyone. After much lively discussion, we finally came up with a rough draft outlining the story
and the means that we were going to employ to cover all seventeen areas of the library.

**Analyzation**

At this stage in the process, we had a broad idea of what we were going to do; next we
had to determine what was going to work and what would not. An important part of our
program was to use the mystery as a means to show all of the personnel what happens in the
different areas of the library. In order to do this, we hatched the following plot: Dean Pride (an
avid gardener) borrowed a gardening book from the library that contained an amazing
gardening secret. She decided to keep the book and protect the secret by eliminating all trace
of it ever having been in the library. In order to do this, she had to dispose of: 1) the
acquisitions assistant who ordered it; 2) the cataloger who processed it; 3) the collection
development librarian who tracks lost items; 4) the resource sharing librarian who does ILLs and
PODs; 5) the borrowing services supervisor who oversees overdue items; 6) the customer
service leaders who perform circulation and check for missing items; 7) the associate dean of
library technology and collection services who is over all collection issues; and 8) the research
assistance librarian who researched sleeping drugs for the dean, because after all, she didn’t kill
anyone – she just put them to sleep! This covered eight major working areas of the library to
visit, but we had nine others that we had to include.

It became apparent that we would have to include more people at some point. We
came up with the idea that we would have famous detectives in various places within the
library seemingly “working on the case.” This was the most fun of all – casting our unsuspecting
colleagues in the roles of detectives from all generations to cover other areas in the library.
Some of our detectives and “sleepers” as we called them (those knocked out by the mysterious
drug and asleep at their desks) were also members of the committee, but we had to recruit
others to help us. We had the head of cataloging portraying Sherlock Holmes; the scholarly
communications assistant as Maxwell Smart; the curriculum librarian and the systems librarian
as Velma and Shaggy from Scooby Doo; the collection development librarian and a research
assistance librarian as Abby and Ducky from NCIS; an acquisitions assistant as Jessica Fletcher;
the coordinator of undergraduate and online research assistance as Hercule Poirot; three
customer service leaders as Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys; and a customer service leader and
borrowing services assistant supervisor as Gus and Shawn of Psych. Because two of our actors
were also from the areas being visited, we decided that we would have to leave these areas
unmanned and we would indicate that the Collection Development Librarian and the 
Acquisitions Assistant were "missing." The final place to be covered was the Archives, and our 
archivist was going to be out of town at an archives conference at the time of the orientation - 
so she was also going to be “missing.”

The last part of the planning was to determine what the clues would be and how the 
participants would be able to solve the mystery with them. Since our dean’s name is Marseille 
Pride, we did a catalog search and came up with the titles of two books: Hiring of Dock Workers 
and Employment Practices in the Ports of New York, Liverpool, London, Rotterdam, and 
Marseilles and Pride and Prejudice – the essential words in the titles being Marseilles and Pride. 
We broke up the call numbers of these books into 6 pieces each on different colored paper:  
H - D8 - 03 - 9. - L8 - J4 and P - R4 - 03 - 4. - P7 - B6. Twelve of the areas would have one piece of a call 
number; the remaining five areas had a “hint” – a little piece of the story that would help them solve the 
crime. To add a little bit of a challenge to solving the crime, each area had a simple puzzle that had to 
be solved in order to get the clue from that area; these were either word jumbles, riddles, logic puzzles, 
or very short crossword puzzles. We now had all of the pieces, it only remained to set the stage and see 
what would happen.

Implementation

Paradoxically, the summer break at a university library is anything but a break. It is usually a 
time of a myriad of projects that need to be completed in order to get ready for the new school year. It 
was especially busy for us because we had moved into our new building between semesters and had not 
really had a time to adjust to how our library was used and how we fit into the new landscape of our 
rapidly growing school. There was something about this project that united and inspired us. It allowed
us to be creative and silly and very, very clever. It was a monumental undertaking, but it felt almost like recreation. The different committee members shined in using their special talents to add to the creative process. And keeping it a secret from the rest of the library personnel just added to the enthusiasm over the project. Yet as the day of the orientation approached, the details of how we were going to actually make this work kept me awake at night.

We expected approximately 120 people to participate in trying to solve the mystery and we determined to divide them into ten teams. To do this without them being aware that this was being done, we had adhesive nametags prepared with ten different kinds of little stickers - hearts, stars, and different colored smiley faces. All of us involved in staging the event had a different sticker so that we would not be counted into the 10 teams. On the morning of the orientation, committee members used the prepared nametags to write people's first names down as they arrived. It was announced that they needed to make sure that they kept these throughout the day in order to get their free lunch. This was necessary because several staff members were inclined to just wear their official university nametags instead, but we wanted to make sure everyone ended up on one of the ten teams. In addition, we did not want anyone to lose them in the first exercise of the day.

The program was to begin with a review of our Emergency Preparedness Plan and this year, our Facilities Manager had incorporated drills of emergency situations. We could not have asked for a better way to get everyone in the right frame of mind! When the drills were finished they announced a fifteen minute break and required everyone to meet back in front of the media wall. As soon as the crowd dispersed, so did our crew to get into costume and prepare their areas to receive the teams. The detectives changed clothes and slipped into place, others applied a blue mark on their neck (indicating they had been drugged) and went to "sleep" at their desks - they would wake briefly for each team to
say their lines. The three locations that did not have a person were set up earlier that morning with the puzzles which led the teams to their clues. Everything was now in place.

When everyone had gathered again after the break, Dean Pride and Rachel Schwedt, Associate Dean of Research and Customer Services, prepared everyone for a long lecture on library policies. Just as eyes began to glaze over, right on cue, a Customer Service Leader came running out from the service area yelling for everything to stop! He brought a flash drive that he had "just found" and said we had to watch a video on it because something may have happened to a fellow worker. The video was played larger than life on the twenty-four by eleven foot media wall. Another of the Customer Service Leaders created a video in which she laid out the premise of the mystery; she said there was a missing book and strange things were happening in the library - some people were missing and others passed out and they needed to find the book! The systems librarian had edited the video to create quite a spooky effect with a dramatic cutaway at the end.

Maybe it was because we had trouble getting the video to play at first and we could not get the help of the systems librarian because he was in a Shaggy costume in the Curriculum Library (special note - always check your technology on the computer that will be used before you go live...), but the audience did not take our premise seriously at all, nevertheless they were immediately engaged and ready for what came next. What did happen next was that we told everyone to form groups with all those with the same kind of sticker on their nametag. We then distributed ten large manila envelopes to the ten people we designated to be group leaders, chosen because they were also volunteer tour guides of our new library. They were not told ahead of time anything about the event because we wanted them to be able to play along.

Inside the envelopes were the instructions on how to play and solve the mystery (first prize was $5 Starbucks gift cards for each team member), a sign-up sheet for everyone on the team, a sheet where
they could try to identify all of the famous detectives that were in the library (100 Grand candy bars for every team to get them all), a sheet to assemble their clues and hints, and a map of the library with one red question mark on it. Each team's map had the question mark in a different location - that was where they were to begin. When the team reached that first location, they would find another envelope that contained transparencies of the four floors of the library to place over their map with each of the seventeen locations marked that they would have to visit. And off they went!

Case Closed

As I mentioned earlier, our biggest miscalculation was in trying to determine how much time it would take to complete. We couldn't let it go indefinitely because we had ordered pizza to be delivered for lunch and the library would be opening to the public at 1:00. We made an announcement for the teams to return to the atrium to get their lunch and there were a few teams that did not make it to all of the locations. To our surprise, the teams continued to work together through lunch trying to solve the mystery with the clues they had. Finally one of the teams managed to narrow the suspects down and then figured out the correct answer. We finished the program by showing a Power Point presentation that explained the whole story.

As the director of this "policies training presentation," I started to focus on the things that went wrong, didn't work well, should have taken less time or been less complicated, but I was chastised by my Dean for being too critical of myself. The truth is that it was an overwhelmingly popular and successful event. It certainly accomplished what we wanted - to present the operation of the library and its staff to all of its personnel in such a way that they would understand what other departments do. They were able to see how each unit is interrelated and part of a bigger picture. Presented this way, it made sense and was memorable. We wanted to surprise them and have fun and we certainly did that! Later that day and in the days to follow e-mails were sent to the whole library staff thanking the committee for
"the very best orientation ever." Our social media sites went a little nuts with pictures and comments from those that participated and we still get comments from workers about how much fun they had that day.

One of the best things to come out of the experience was the very strong sense of team building that happened. It started with the committee and our desire to work together to create something extraordinary, but it blossomed in the whole library that Saturday morning. The groups were randomly put together with people from all departments, so those who might only know some people by sight were suddenly teammates with them. And because each location had different kinds of puzzles drawing on different strengths and the "famous detectives" spanned all generations, everyone was able to contribute to the goal. It took the involvement of everyone to be successful. And this is by far the craziest part of all: library staff left inspired and actually looking forward to another orientation!

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Pictures from Orientation Day
August 2014

Associate Dean Rachel Schwedt and Dean Marcy Pride

Elisa Rollins and Robert Weaver as Abby and Ducky from NCIS
Follow the Question Marks to find the locations with a clue
Kim Day hands the riddles to team leader Drew Taylor

JoHanna Lowder delivers a desperate message via video on the media wall
Tom Fesmire as Sherlock Holmes waits as a team works to solve the puzzle
Bob Weaver is missing!

Bob works for Collection Management, the department that oversees all the resources of the library – both print and electronic – to make sure they support all the university’s disciplines as well as provide materials that have popular interest and are in keeping with The Liberty Way. If a book is lost... or missing... they determine if it is something that should be replaced... if a book is stolen... deliberately stolen... well. . .

If you can solve the puzzle, you will get a clue to the mystery!

A sign explains about the missing librarian

Team members work to figure out the maps
Ducky and Abby tell a team about the library’s computer “lab”

The “evidence” was laid out in Marcy’s office for those clever enough to find it!
(Victims pictured: Associate Dean Lowell Walters, Bob Weaver, Jessica Daly, Joshua Swiney, Candace Maupin, Janet Fontaine, Kim Sandidge, Kim Day, Tomas Siaulys, Hannah Lowder)
Crazy Cast: Tomas Siaulys, Tom Fesmire, Cooper Pasque, Tim Siegel
Joshua Swiney, David Gilbert Lonnie Kitchens, Shelley Oakley
Rory Patterson, JoHannah Lowder, Elisa Rollins, Robert Weaver, Candace Maupin

Happy Ending: Everyone met back in the atrium for pictures at the end