Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Miscommunication and Employee Power Dynamics May Affect Student Navigation of Library Resources

Almeida, N., & Tidal, J. (2022). Library wayfinding and ESOL students: Communication challenges and empathy-based intervention. portal: Libraries and the Academy, 22(2), 453–474. https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2022.0025

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Citer ce compte rendu

Résumé de l'article

Objective – To map the experiences of students of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) navigating an academic library.

Design – A wayfinding study to evaluate how students navigate a library.

Setting – An urban-based academic library at an institution of higher education.

Subjects – Students of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL).

Methods – A mixed methods study including visual recordings, web screen capture, interviews, and surveys. Subjects were recruited through email. Twelve participants were selected and given an initial screening survey. They were given four tasks to complete: Find a book in the stacks, find a book in the reserves, find a DVD in media, and find a database. They were equipped with a GoPro camera and were given a think-aloud protocol (TAP). They were then given a post-task debriefing interview. Qualitative data were analyzed and coded. Quantitative data like success of task and time to completion were also recorded.

Main Results – Success rate varied among tasks: Finding a book in reserves had the highest rate at 75%, while finding a database had the lowest at 50%. Time also varied from 12 minutes to find a book in the stacks to just under 6 minutes to find a database. Seven of the 12 participants indicated they had prior library experience; however, they still encountered skill gaps. They lacked familiarity with the space, policies, website, and terminology. Participants also struggled with library jargon and inconsistent use of jargon among staff and librarians.

Conclusion – The researchers discovered there were discrepancies between language used in signs, directions provided by staff, and information provided on the website. Signage was important because several participants made remarks on lack a familiarity with the library space. They would get lost and anxious. In addition, the video recordings and subsequent discussions among the staff and librarians showed issues arising from the power dynamics in the library organization. Staff felt pressured to provide reference services when librarians were unavailable due to staffing shortages, which led to miscommunication. These conclusions lead to empathy-based training to address language discrepancies and experiences among staff. It also provided additional rationale for hiring.

E **Evidence Based Library and Information Practice**

Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

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Commentary

This article is a wayfinding study that addressed the role communication plays in the library. Wayfinding is defined as the ability of a person to orient themself in a space and navigate it. A key, though incidental, finding was the impact of the employee power dynamics on communication to students. This negatively affected how the students were aided in performing the study's task. The researchers could have ignored this, as it was not in the original study design but only came to light when they were analyzing the data about the paraprofessionals and librarians.

Since this is a mixed methods study, it was evaluated using "The CAT: A Generic Critical Appraisal Tool" by Perryman and Rathbun-Grubb (2014). The authors of the article are academic librarians with the necessary expertise in the field. The literature review is extensive and provides a suitable background and reasoning for the study. They were transparent in their study design and its limitations, such as its small sample size. Twelve participants are not enough to support generalizable actions, but it can be the seed for further study. The subjects, being ESOL students, were appropriate for the objective. However, based on their findings, the employees at the library could also be considered inadvert subjects. More detail on them would have been beneficial. Demographic information could also aid in understanding the interprofessional power dynamics.

The article takes an empathetic approach by trying to fully encompass the first-person experiences of an individual for whom English is not their primary language. While the intended subjects were the patrons, the revelation of the relationships among the librarians and paraprofessionals was enlightening. The authors discovered they were not familiar with their staff colleagues' professional roles and the language staff used to communicate with students. This resulted in inconsistent communication when helping patrons. The surveyed students were already unfamiliar with library jargon, so any discrepancies in terms added to the confusion. In addition, some employees used different terms to describe the same thing. An example they offer is "call number" and "code number" for finding books. With no context, this can be very confusing and resulted in many mistakes. This also spills over into signage. Regarding terminology in signs, consistency is key (Mandel & Johnston, 2019). This begs the question: How do we get consistency in language to improve wayfinding? It affects not only ESOL students but also English proficient students.

The proposed solution was to review the power dynamics among the employees at the library. Tensions among librarians and paraprofessionals stifled communication. Understanding and resolving these tensions can solve several issues and improve communication and interprofessional understanding (Hill, 2014). According to Anasi (2020), "studies indicate that good work relationships form the foundation for increased productivity in any organization" (p.378). The authors' approach of incorporating an empathy-based workshop led by a professional facilitator is one possible solution. Through these workshops, the library personnel were able to explore causes of communication barriers such as staff shortages, gaps in training, and others. This led to more initiatives such as providing information literacy training for paraprofessional staff and student assistants and developing standardized protocols for referral when the library is understaffed. This goes beyond a typical solution involving signs and giving clearer instructions to employees. It could serve as a model for other libraries that are having similar issues as well as lead to approaching the issue from an interprofessional perspective and standardization of communication. This can be a compelling approach to better assisting not just ESOL students, but everyone involved with the library.

References

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