Improving Library Orientation (and more) based on Graffiti Wall Student Surveys

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/sara-parme/2/
As librarians, we sometimes forget how intimidating college and university libraries can be to students. Daniel A. Reed Library at the State University of New York at Fredonia consists of an enormous open first floor, mezzanine, outdoor garden area, and four-story addition. Even taking into consideration the over 400,000 print volumes and large computer lab, the library is still large enough to accommodate open areas for group work and hidden areas for independent studying. I had been in my current position as Digital Services Librarian over six months, in the library every day, and still parts of the library remained unfamiliar to me.

My impression was that our students have never been shy about approaching any of the service desks for help, but I was unsure. We had little knowledge of what else the students were doing inside the library and if they were struggling. Were they just here for the computers? Why did students choose to study here? What library services were they missing that we could accentuate in our outreach and marketing efforts? A survey of some type was definitely needed.

Inspired by the thoughtful (if occasionally crude), conversational graffiti I found written on the carrel walls in the library, I came up with the idea to establish a series of ‘graffiti wall’ surveys in the library. Graffiti has a negative connotation, especially in a library, but graffiti has an ancient history as a respected and interactive form of communication (Ohlson, 2010). It was with this in mind that I went optimistically forward.

Over the span of two years, I executed four graffiti wall surveys. I placed a large scroll of paper on a wall in a heavily trafficked area of the library and posed a question; dot stickers and pens were also attached to the wall, and the installation was left up for several weeks.

The graffiti wall format appealed to me for many reasons:

- Having never done a focus group or large-scale survey, the graffiti walls would serve as a gentle introduction into data gathering and the results would be easy to tally.
- The time investment would be small and required no recruitment of participants.
- It was a low-cost method that required only a roll of paper and stickers.
- It was very visual format. Sharing the results with campus would not require a formal write-up and passersby could see the results in real time.
- The graffiti wall was unlike any other survey that had been done on campus, and would not contribute to campus survey fatigue.
- A dot sticker and write-in survey is interactive, easily understandable and took very little time to fill in. Students could place a dot sticker next to a preexisting answer, write-in, draw and be inspired by their peers.
- Participation would be easy as long as pens, stickers and the paper was placed low enough on the wall so that any student could participate.
- The walls would be completely anonymous, so students would be free to be honest. The only foreseeable risk to the library was something offensive being written or drawn.

**First Graffiti Wall: What Was Most Difficult For You Last Semester?**  
January 2014

For this first wall survey, I provided some answers for what I anticipated to be the more difficult aspects of using the library: finding quiet study space, finding group study space, asking for/finding help with research, finding books, and finding articles. Not wanting to assume too much, I also provided plenty of blank space under “Other” for additional write-in answers. The survey elicited 108 dot answers and 37 write-in answers.

“Finding quiet study space” evoked the most responses, with a whopping 50 of the dot votes and 14 write-in answers. While the library already provided quiet study space, students were frustrated with how few people followed the rules of the area.

Students did not focus solely on library-specific issues, e.g., research questions, as other problems such as dealing with roommates and the difficulties of group work were brought up. Surprisingly, entire conversations were held on the wall. Students responded, offered suggestions, and asked questions of each other.

The second most popular response, falling in the “Other” category, was “Not a lot of outlets to charge laptops!” which received 14 dots in agreement. (One person, obviously feeling strongly about this, wrote "x319" on their dot). Designed in the late 1960s, the library was obviously not fully prepared for 21st century use and needed to consider revisions that could be made to the building to make the laptop user more welcome.

In third place, with 12 dot votes and one write-in response (“THIS” written very large), was Finding Articles.
With no additional comments to offer clarification about what, exactly, was difficult, we would have to look into this further, to determine what adjustments we might need to make to our web pages and library instruction. But at least we knew this was an area of concern for some students.

Second Graffiti Wall: What Would You Tell A First Year Student About Reed Library?
April 2014

After the success of the previous graffiti wall survey, this survey would not only tell us something about the students who are currently using the library, but could also serve as a basis for marketing and outreach to new students and students who did not use the library.

This graffiti wall had the most potential for a bombardment of negative comments. Out of the 63 responses, only 12 were criticisms, mostly pertaining to crowds and noise. But even the negative comments (“Bring cell phone convos outside”, “Not laptop friendly - not enough outlets for chargers”, “Use it every week but finals week!”) were incredibly helpful. We needed to know what challenges students faced in the library in order to provide solutions.

Most comments pertained to the physical building. Opinions on the best place in the library were wide ranging and included the bathrooms, the study spaces, the reference desk and the addition.

Much of what students wrote in support of the library was better marketing material than anything a librarian could have come up with. The majority of the answers associated the library with making friends, succeeding in school work, and finding help—all of which contribute positively to student retention rates.

Again, students had conversations on the wall: they elaborated on each other’s comments, and encouraged each other to explore new spaces in the library if they found their usual ones too loud or crowded.
(Windows only) in order to stream presentations. Potentially one of the most useful features of this new application from the audience member perspective is the ability to bookmark slides during the presentation. At the conclusion of the event, each participant will receive an email containing all of their bookmarked slides for future reference.

**Conclusion**

Adding interactivity to a presentation, whether in the classroom or at a conference, is a tried and true method for engaging your audience and holding their attention. Welcoming audience questions, inviting feedback, and gauging opinions are all effective methods of achieving these goals. Fortunately, sli.do is an easy-to-use, freely available, online tool that makes adding each of these types of interactive elements to presentations a straightforward and simple process.

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**Third Graffiti Wall:**
**What’s Your Favorite Spot in the Library?**  
**September 2015**

Because our building is tricky to navigate, with limited signage, this wall served dual purposes. The wall would be a study of where students gravitated with no navigational help. Because the building is so large there is no spot that could be called an obviously favorite among students. This wall was also done purposefully at the beginning of the semester. Since it included photos of many areas of the library, it would serve as an advertisement of the different library spaces to new students.

The survey garnered 104 dot answers and 9 write-in answers. The Music section, located on the mezzanine, was the surprising winner. While Music is a large program on campus, students I talked to later who preferred the music area were not music students. What are students finding there that they are not finding in other parts of the library? The Music mezzanine offers easy access to the rest of the library, but is removed from the nosiest and busiest areas. This information can also be used as justification to invest more in this space, such as new furniture and carpeting.

*Applications of Survey Results: Effects on Library Orientation and more*

As with any survey, you want to turn the answers into actions. The results of the graffiti walls assisted in understanding library wayfinding, revision of floor maps, bro-

(Graffiti...Continued on page 10)
chure design, and improving the library for B.Y.O.D. (Bring Your Own Device). Another major effect of the graffiti walls was how it helped shape summer library orientation for new students.

The campus-wide theme for the 2014 summer orientation was *The Hunger Games*, which focuses on survival in a tough environment. The library’s 30-minute presentation, “Survival Wisdom & Know-How: Everything You Need to Know to Subsist in the Library,” was informed, in part, by what the library learned from our first two graffiti walls regarding what current students care about most in the library and what they struggle with, and impart it to incoming students. Considering the overall themes of the survey feedback, the slides were divided into Hunting (finding books and articles), Gathering (the physical items and collections in the library), Navigation (library spaces such as the circulation and reference desks), Shelter (study spaces), and First-Aid (how to contact a librarian).

Peppered in throughout the presentation were “Find your library district” questions. The questions were designed to be used with classroom clickers to make the presentation more interactive for the students and highlight that, no matter what “district” you belong to, the library has something to fit your needs. In many cases, the questions elaborated on the graffiti wall surveys. For example, students were asked if they prefer Mac or PCs, if they have a public library card, whether they preferred to study in groups or alone, and if they considered themselves the type of person that figures it out themselves or asks for help.

In *The Hunger Games* books and films, donations from sponsors can be sent via parachute into the arena to help their favorite competitor survive. From the graffiti walls the library’s presentation had advice to “parachute in” from students to other students—in their own words, in their own handwriting. Not only was this advice relevant (e.g., “The third floor has the best selection of books!” and “Don’t be afraid of interlibrary loan/ILLiad”), but it is particularly useful because the best type of advertising is word of mouth (Alire, 2007).

Overall, the library orientation was a big success and all librarians agreed the graffiti wall information had made a positive impact, and that we would continue to use them in the future.

**Summary and Next Steps**

The graffiti wall surveys have helped the library improve in multiple ways by giving students a voice and incorporating those voices into presentations and materials that have made the library seem approachable and relevant. I plan on doing more walls with my colleagues in the future, along with more detailed follow up, such as focus groups and other types of more in-depth surveys. Knowing that we are doing everything we can to make sure our library truly does offer a unique space to fulfill every student’s needs, we can be more confident in our developments and our orientation & instruction going forward.

**References**


### Figure 4:
**Overall design of Summer Orientation 2014**

![Map of library orientation](image)

### Figure 5:
**Example question**

**Find Your Library District:**

- Do you prefer to ...
  - A. Study alone
  - B. Study in a quiet space
  - C. Study in groups