Producing accessible library guides: Improving access for students on the autistic spectrum

Sam Oakley, Philippa Price and Bernie Williams
Information Services and Systems, Swansea University
email: library@swansea.ac.uk

Our Inspiration
A tweet praising the guides for ‘Visitors on the Autism Spectrum’ to the Royal Collection sites e.g. http://bit.ly/1Y2kMO5
Meeting with the university’s Autistic Spectrum Condition Practitioners (Nigel Mason and Sara Hounsell) to discuss how the library could give more support to their students.

What we wanted to do:-
Create online visual guides for visitors on the autistic spectrum to help them to

• Orient themselves in the library
• Anticipate areas of difficulty
• Understand how it all works
• Find quiet areas to study

The guides would focus on visiting the physical building and face-to-face services rather trying to be an all-encompassing guide to library services.

Why this is important? / Aims
To send a positive message: we have a strong support service on campus for autistic spectrum (ASC) students. We wanted to reinforce the university’s encouragement and support for these students (our guides can be displayed at Open Days!)

To support the library’s commitment to inclusion, widening access and great customer service (evidenced by our Customer Service Excellence Award).

To give timely support: the library service was undergoing many changes, which can be particularly challenging for ASC students.

To benefit everyone: clear, visual guides are useful for any students who experience library anxiety, international students, existing students who may be undiagnosed, etc.

How we did it
Nigel and Sara advised us what to look out for. We then walked round the whole building with all our senses open, taking photos…

We also consulted with colleagues around library to identify challenges for students.

We wrote the guides and added lots of photos.

Nigel, Sara and one of their students gave feedback and suggestions on how we can make our services more ASC-student-friendly.

Our Library Guides
• Park Campus:
  http://bit.ly/1XiIQeZ
• Bay Campus:
  http://bit.ly/1tkBi0w

We were looking out for:

➢ Light contrasts: bright lights and dark areas etc.
➢ Background noise: chatter, beeps, printers, creaky floors, etc.
➢ Busy areas: when is it quieter? Can you avoid queuing?
➢ Security or controlled areas where staff interaction may be necessary.
➢ Staff: Who they are and what can they help with.
➢ Overall layout: floor plans, directions etc.
➢ Smells: anything unusual?
➢ Toilets: reflective surfaces, hand driers – is there a disabled toilet which will be quieter? Show signs on the doors.
➢ Busy areas: state when they are busy.
➢ Literalness: Flag up where things may be different from shown in a photo e.g. different PCs? Photocopiers?

Why this is important?

Published and promotion

Word of mouth by Sara and Nigel as well as contacts within schools/colleges

Library news channels:
http://issnews.swan.ac.uk/?p=2841

What we learnt:-
We are far better informed about autistic spectrum conditions and are more aware of the challenges presented to ASC students in the library. In particular

• Our lighting is quite aggressive
• Some signs are misleading / alarmist
• It’s very hard to navigate the building in a sensible order

What next?
Keep the guides up to date; address issues that we found with the building; ongoing staff training on autistic spectrum conditions; keep talking to Sara and Nigel…

Further resources
Swansea University inclusive library services:
http://www.swansea.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/servicesfordisabledusers/

Support from Swansea University Wellbeing:
http://www.swansea.ac.uk/wellbeing-campuslife/autisticspectrumconditionservice/

SALT guidance on specific learning difficulties: https://salt.swan.ac.uk/sld/

JISC Supporting your autistic learners more effectively:
https://www.jisc.ac.uk/blog/support-your-autistic-learners-more-effectively-04-apr-2016

Guardian article:
http://www.theguardian.com/education/mortarboard/2013/may/07/how-students-with-aspergerscope