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The Innocents Abroad: The experience of two UCD Librarians teaching information literacy in China

Background

In recent years, University College Dublin (UCD) has branded itself as ‘Ireland’s Global University’, with the intention of growing its global reputation for excellence in education, research, innovation and impact (Global Engagement Strategy 2016-2020, p. 5). As part of its global engagement, UCD has developed a range of partnerships and collaboration around the world. With over 400 international university partners and over 5,500 students studying on overseas programmes. UCD currently awards degrees in places such as RCSI & UCD Malaysia Campus (Medicine), University Pantheon-Assas (Law) in Paris and Beijing Dublin International College (BDIC). This globalisation is a trend that other Irish Universities are exploring, with Maynooth University, UCC and AIT in the process of setting up degree programmes abroad (include references). This article looks at how UCD Library developed a relationship with BDIC, initially to support students visiting the main UCD campus and subsequently by sending UCD librarians to Beijing to provide Information Literacy training to students studying there.

Established in 2012, BDIC is a joint international partnership between UCD and Beijing University of Technology (BJUT), located on the BJUT campus. Students of BDIC are registered in UCD and BJUT. They undertake a variety of degrees such as Internet of Things Engineering, Electronic & Information Engineering, Software Engineering and Financial Economics. All core modules are delivered through English by UCD lecturers. When students graduate, they are awarded joint degrees from both UCD and BJUT.

From 2014, as part of their degree, students from BDIC have visited the UCD campus. While there, they received a tour of the James Joyce Library and training on how to access and use UCD Library’s online resources. They could then access these resources when they returned to China.

Following a review of the experience of the first cohort of students to complete their BDIC degrees in 2016 it became apparent to BDIC Staff that one element of the UCD Student Experience was missing, formal library skills instruction delivered in Beijing directly to the students. The Vice Principal for BDIC indicated that for their students to have a seamless UCD experience they should meet their College Liaison Librarian face to face as their Irish counterparts do. It was felt that this would be achieved by having a College Liaison Librarian travel out to Beijing and to deliver this training. It was agreed that James Molloy, College Liaison Librarian for Engineering and Architecture would initially travel to China.

Planning

Meetings with BDIC administration in the months before the trip allowed James to develop a teaching programme for the week-long visit that was tailored to the needs of the students. During this time James also worked on localising online supports. This was necessary as access to many online resources was restricted by the presence of the ‘Great Firewall of China’ which blocks many Western websites including many Google services. This was problematic for us as all of the instructional training videos developed by UCD Library staff were hosted on YouTube, a Google service. To get around this limitation the videos were converted to MP4 video files and uploaded to the BDIC Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). However, a range of interactive tutorials had been developed using Articulate Storyline and hosted on the UCD library website, were not subject to the same limitations. James was also
able to load any presentations that were to be delivered to the students on the VLE along with a range of useful links to content on the UCD Library website. Local BDIC staff tested our online tools and presentations to ensure compatibility. To improve his own online access while he was in China James was advised to install the UCD VPN on all his electronic devices. In addition, based on the advice of BDIC staff, he installed WeChat, as this was how BDIC staff communicated amongst themselves, and Chinese translation apps on his phone.

The first trip took place in mid-February 2017. The aims for the trip were that students would be:

- Shown the UCD Library website and its resources and supports
- Taught how to use OneSearch to find books on their reading lists
- Introduced to techniques on literature searching
- Made aware of plagiarism
- Familiarised with Harvard Referencing

Each Stage 3 group received four 90-minute sessions. The first focused on finding and evaluating information and the second on Endnote Online, Referencing & Academic Writing. The third session was composed of Practical Exercises and a Q&A session. The last session was a chance to recap what had already been covered. Student engagement and learning was informally evaluated using Kahoot game-based learning. Students competitive nature was reinforced by the added element of King crisps as prizes. This initial trip was successful and in December 2017 the College Liaison Librarian for Science, Diarmuid Stokes made a follow-up visit. Once again, the focus was on Stage 4 and Stage 3 students and the same programme of training was delivered.

What challenges did we face?

Technology
This was a challenge we both faced. After a few days, both of our laptops would not work with the BDIC networks and we were forced to use a Chinese language laptop. This made using the laptop problematic as neither of us understood Chinese.

All our sessions were held in a general assembly room called the ‘Shamrock Room’. All the controls for the room were in Chinese and neither of us were able to use the rooms independently. We were forced to regularly leave the room and seek support from BDIC staff, sometimes more than once in a session.

We found that using the UCD VPN gave us quick access to the UCD resources. Students didn’t have the UCD VPN, which resulted in much slower access times. This had a knock-on effect on how much material we could cover during a session. In addition, this increased access time acted as a barrier to the students using them.

Language issues
While the programmes were taught through English and the students were genuinely engaged and responsive when asked questions, it was clear that there were a wide range of language abilities in the room. We couldn’t help but feel that this was an inhibiting factor for the students when it came to them engaging with the workshops. We were very conscious to make sure we spoke clearly “using simple English” (Faiz 2017, p. 217). We did speak more slowly, as we had a programme of activities to get through there was a limit to how slow we could go.

Number of sessions per programme
We both came to see that the number of sessions delivered, i.e. four were too many. We felt that as things stood three sessions would be enough and there was too much repetition during the sessions.
Timing of the workshops
We both felt that perhaps the timing of the sessions wasn’t perfect. We were mainly reaching Stage 3 and 4 students, and we felt that this was too late during the programme cycle to have a meaningful impact. We were also constrained by the time of year we could go out due to our normal workloads and teaching commitments. In practice this means late in semester 1 or in semester 2 are best for us. BDIC on the other hand would have preferred for us to come early in semester 1.

How did we resolve them?
These issues were raised in a report which was circulated to UCD Library management team and to the BDIC administration. Discussion of the report findings then took place between James, Diarmuid and BDIC focusing on how the experience could be improved. The report also examined what was sustainable from a library perspective, as the engagement with BDIC was in addition to all pre-existing college liaison librarian workload and teaching commitments.

The key areas agreed were:

- A reduction in the number of sessions for each programme.
- Introductory library training to be provided at Stage 1 of each programme with more detailed training delivered in Stages 2, 3 and 4.
- Training to be attached to a core module at each stage.
- Library staff to work with relevant module coordinators to ensure that any library training delivered would be directly applicable to their module outcomes and any assignments.
- BDIC to ensure all students had access to UCD VPN software so the students can access UCD network.

After agreeing to these changes BDIC requested library support for two weeks in March 2019. This time Diarmuid and James agreed to go over in successive weeks to provide the library training. We took a scaffolded approach to the delivery of the teaching, Diarmuid providing an introductory level for Stage 1 students and James gave a slightly more advanced level for the higher stages, with Stages 3 and 4 students also receiving Endnote bibliographic reference manager training. We covered all the core components of Information Literacy, getting students familiar with UCD Library resources, knowing where to find relevant information and then how to evaluate the information. We discussed good practice in academic integrity, how to reference and avoid plagiarism. We also directed students on where to find additional online support from UCD Library.

The teaching was enhanced by BDIC facilitating us with a variety of teaching rooms many of which were BJUT owned rooms. This made a big difference as the technology in the rooms was more intuitive and made us more independent. We were able to see the improvements straight away. By aligning library teaching more closely with individual modules, we saw greater engagement from the students as they could see a direct immediate benefit to attending the library sessions.

VPN
Thanks to BDIC, students now had access to the UCD VPN. This would allow them to bypass the Great Chinese Firewall and to access UCD resources much more quickly. In practice not all the students had installed the software on the devices, despite being asked to do so in advance. This resulted in delays during lectures as students tried to download and install the software.
This time, things were complicated by the Annual National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China. This resulted in a restriction of internet controls, even with the UCD VPN. Given that the Congress take place at the same time every year, this could be an issue that we will have to learn to live with unless we change the dates we visit Beijing.

Students were asked to evaluate the sessions and overall the feedback was good.

A. Positives
Students said that Library staff were clear, easy to understand and took time to make sure the student understood what was being taught. Students also said that they hadn’t been aware of the resources available from UCD Library and that they would start to use them. They were also remarkably understanding about the slow access to the library website and resources. This suggested that it was a regular occurrence for them. They were also very positive about the use of Game Based Learning via Kahoot and prizes of King crisps. They also appreciated the UCD library pens and postcards which we brought over for them.

B. Negatives
The main negative comments related to the speed of accessing library resources. While as we mentioned earlier, they were understanding about it, they still expressed their frustration. The other comments related to how fast we spoke. Even though we both consciously slowed down our speech, it was still too fast for some of the students.

Final Thoughts
While it was a fantastic opportunity and very rewarding personally and professionally, working in Beijing didn’t come without its challenges. Technology, as we stated above, was the main one. We have worked with BDIC to overcome this, but it is still a work in progress. There were also cultural differences, there is a common perception regarding the Chinese view of plagiarism. We took the viewpoint that teaching and reinforcing the message about avoiding plagiarism is important to students anywhere in the world. Students also hold academic staff in very high regard which did take time to get used to, especially being referred to as Professor. In addition, there were the language comprehension issues we mentioned earlier. BDIC is aware of these issues and is working to improve students English reading and writing skills. In the short time that we have been going to Beijing we have already noticed a distinct improvement. Unlike in Ireland, students regularly use mobile phones in class, instead of a laptop or tablet to take notes and access resources. This also took some time for us to get used to.

One important outcome was that we got an invaluable insight into the pressures and restrictions that these students face. Being there and witnessing this at first hand really put things into perspective.

We both really enjoyed the experience teaching on a campus in a different country. Your time is very much split between your teaching schedule which starts from when you arrive and then taking time to explore Beijing itself. Beijing although a mega city, is very safe and easy to get around, mainly due to an incredibly efficient subway system and the people are very friendly and understanding of the Gweilou “Westerners”.

We have found that working with BDIC is an iterative process, with each visit leading in turn to future improvements in the teaching programme. While the library is happy to continue supporting the students in BDIC, we know from working in the academic world is that nothing ever stays the same. Changes in personnel or priorities could have a significant impact on any future requests for teaching. For example, the option to run an online class via the VLE
is always an option. For now, however we are both glad to have had this experience, what happens in the future remains to be seen.

These are our top tips to any librarians traveling overseas to teach:

- Prepare as much as you can. If possible, speak to staff who have already spent some time working on the campus.
- Have a backup contingency plan if technology lets you down, network speeds may vary compared to home.
- Be prepared to adapt your teaching style and be conscious of how fast you may speak, especially to a non-native ear.
- Bring multiple backups of everything you need and maybe paper ones as well.
- Try not to start teaching as soon as you get there. There will always be last minute things to be sorted out, so try to avoid putting yourself under pressure.
- Learn a few words of the local language. You may not be fluent, but the effort will be appreciated.
- Let your bank and the Department of Foreign Affairs know that you are travelling.
- Get a good travel guidebook for your down time.
- Travel insurance always have travel insurance.
- Use HEANet media hosting to host your video files. The files are available worldwide and this bypasses the Google issue.
- Bring some gifts from your library.
- Get comfortable with haggling if you go to any of the local markets.
- Bring additional toilet paper when travelling away from your hotel most Chinese toilets do not provide toilet paper.
- Find where the European Supermarkets are so you can get a taste of home when you need it.
- Make sure you install a VPN on your all your devices, if you want to access Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and most of the Google selection.