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Building the Deck

Creating a Library Card Game for Outreach to Transfer Students

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Abstract

University librarians and staff drew upon previous experience with game-based learning to develop an orientation activity for transfer students. A card game was selected due to the large number of students expected and lack of computers in the available space. *Apples to Apples*-style cards were created using a free online card generator. Multiple decks were printed to accommodate up to 150 players. The game exposed transfer students to information about the campus library system in a low-key way that allowed players with different knowledge levels to socialize and compete against one another on an equal basis.

Background

Every August, James Madison University (JMU) provides a three-day orientation for transfer students. JMU Libraries participates in this event by offering an introduction to the campus library system as one of the concurrent sessions held during back-to-back 45-minute time slots. Past library orientations had consisted of a librarian giving a short talk and answering questions from students, but JMU Libraries has been exploring game-based learning (see McCabe & Wise, 2009; Giles, 2015) and it was hoped that a game could cover the same basic content in a more interactive and engaging manner. A game would also give transfer students an opportunity to get to know one another and build personal connections at their new school. Above all, this event was intended to help transfer students feel comfortable using the library.

About 50 students were expected for each session, although the Orientation Office had recommended preparing for up to 150 students. A game that involved exploring the library building (as in Giles, 2015) would be difficult with such a large group. Libraries at other institutions have used online games as part of their outreach efforts (Kearns, Kirsch, & Vidas, 2014; Martin & Martin, 2015), but there were no computers in the study area where the JMU Libraries orientation sessions were to be held. The most suitable activity for this event would be a tabletop game that required minimal set-up, was easy to explain, and could be played in small groups. Game materials would also need to be relatively inexpensive, as the budget was limited and multiple sets would be required to accommodate a large number of players.

Luckily, there was already a game of this nature in use at JMU Libraries, although it had not previously

been used for outreach. In 2014 a staff member created a card game for use at a student employee training event. This game, adapted from the popular party game *Apples to Apples*, involves selecting an answer card in response to question cards such as "What kinds of payments does the library accept for fines?" Some answer cards have factual information about JMU Libraries, while others reference popular culture and campus life. Players take turns judging which of the proposed answers they think is best. On a survey distributed at the end of the 2014 training event, a plurality (45%) of respondents said the game was the most helpful part of the evening (Evans & Giles, 2015).

Development

The working group for this project consisted of two librarians and two staff members, including the creator of the 2014 card game. As the game had originally been intended for library employees, the wording of many cards needed to be changed to reflect the perspective of library users. This earlier version also emphasized policies and had few questions about finding things in the library. Content was added to reflect the needs of transfer students, such as information about source types, plagiarism, subject specialist librarians, and how to connect to databases from off campus.

Cards were created using the online Fruit to Fruit Card Generator (http://a2a.browndogcomputing.com) and printed by the campus copy shop. After printing a "beta deck" the project team met to play through the game and make final revisions. An issue that quickly became apparent was the lack of any in-game mechanism for revealing the correct answer. There would not be sufficient staff available to serve as moderators for each group of players, as had been done at the 2014 training event. Ultimately it was decided that the correct answers would be printed on the backs of the question cards. The player serving as judge would keep the answer hidden. After the winner of the round was chosen, the correct answer could be revealed to the group.

Implementation

On orientation day, transfer students were greeted by employees as they entered the library and directed to sit at study tables in groups of four to six. Each group was provided with a sheet of instructions. After quick introductions and an explanation of the game from the session facilitators, the students began to play. The facilitators circulated around the room during the game to answer any questions that arose.

Students seemed to enjoy the activity, with lively conversation and laughter during the game. Some students asked facilitators detailed questions about the library that were inspired by the cards. Librarians and staff were able to conduct impromptu consultations for students curious about library services and resources. At the end of the session, each attendee received a handout of the questions from the game with the correct answers, a JMU Libraries bookmark, and a promotional Mason jar style water bottle.

Discussion

A card game was well suited to the time, space, and budget limitations for this project. Creating the cards was relatively inexpensive and did not require special technology skills. The popularity of *Apples to Apples* meant that little time had to be spent explaining the rules and students were able to help each other with questions about gameplay. This promoted conversation and allowed the game to continue with minimal interruption. The *Apples to Apples* format worked well for a short session where different

groups might be playing at different paces. If a group did not have time to play through the entire deck, a winner could still be declared based on who had been awarded the most answer cards.

The subjective nature of the judging and random selection of answer cards also meant that students with different knowledge levels could compete against one another. A player could win a round, or the entire game, without knowing the correct answers, as the judge might choose an incorrect but funny or plausible-sounding answer as the best one. In other instructional settings a game that rewarded the most knowledgeable player might be more appropriate, but a game where already knowing the right answer wasn't required to win seemed a better way to welcome transfer students and help them to overcome library anxiety.

While further assessment of this game is needed to establish its effectiveness, the transfer students seemed engaged and entertained enough for the working group to consider this project a success. JMU Libraries plans to use the card game again for 2016 transfer student orientation, and one librarian has already used this game as an icebreaker activity in the classroom. Future projects may involve creating expansion packs for different subject areas with cards about discipline-specific library resources.

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