Bridging the gap

Using ethnography to understand history students expectations of library services

Introductions

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The rest of the team:

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Introducing Newman University

- 50 years old this year
- Heritage in teacher education
- Arts, humanities and social science focus
- 2,500 students
- Based in South-West Birmingham
- Library
  - 18.6 fte staff,
  - non-staffing budget: £370k

The issue – libraries

- Libraries need to understand their users

- University libraries get most of their information about user needs from teaching staff or formal channels

- Most of these channels are only rarely and narrowly interested in Library issues

- We also need to hear the 'authentic' and unmediated voice of the student in order to fully understand their needs and requirements

- There is a growing trend within the university library community in using the techniques of ethnography to investigate students as a user population

The issue – historians and libraries

- In the National Students Survey, Newman's History students consistently rated their course and their university highly, but both the score they give and the comments they make express dissatisfaction with the Library

- In 2014, History students expressed greater dissatisfaction with the Library than any other subject area at Newman

- Our History students are ardent library users, they have loooooong reading lists, and rarely more than one copy of any text

- They are our most enthusiastic users of interlibrary loans and Sconul Access

- This is pretty typical of History students around the country

NSS Question 16 - The library resources and services are good enough for my needs

[old version of the NSS question]:

All students	Just History students
Newman 2014: 79%	Newman 2014: 65%

- The difference between the 'all students' and 'just History students' scores at Newman is **29 places** on the national league tables

NSS Question 16 - The library resources and services are good enough for my needs:

All students	Just History students
Satisfaction range: 68% to 97%	Satisfaction range: 41% to 97%
Mean satisfaction: 87%	Mean satisfaction: 79%
93% of HEIs with satisfaction over 80%	53% of HEIs with satisfaction over 80%

- The difference between 'all students' and 'just History students' nationally was **36 places** on the national league tables *(2014)*

Getting to know the history students

- Very little correlation between **comments** in the NSS and scores

- Very few comments in Staff Student Consultative Committees – other than: "we need more books"

Our question:

- What is it about History students – and what is it about **Newman** History students in particular – that makes them so disappointed with university libraries?

- Is there anything we can do which will give our History students a better experience – and make them feel more satisfied with what we offer?

- There appears to be a cultural issue with history students and libraries – a classic case for ethnographic investigation

- Could a tiny institution like Newman run such a project?

Library ethnography – can it work for us?

- Donna Lanclos, key influencer in library ethnography, has the job title: *Associate Professor for Anthropological Research* at the Atkins Library at UNC Charlotte

- She is part of a 3 person team engaged in 'assessment', including a user experience coordinator

- Atkins Library has 90 staff positions on their organisation chart, including 10 subject librarians and 4 staff dedicated to teaching

- This is five times the amount of staff we have …

# Riding the rollercoaster

The Project

- Read up on ethnography in libraries
- Came up with initial ideas
- Wanted to include both students and academic staff
- No budget
- On top of our day jobs
- We were wildly over-ambitious!

The Project

- 'Students as Academic Partners' projects gave the necessary incentive

- Funds up to 100 hours of student effort

- These are student-led projects with a fixed timeframe

The long trip to the top …
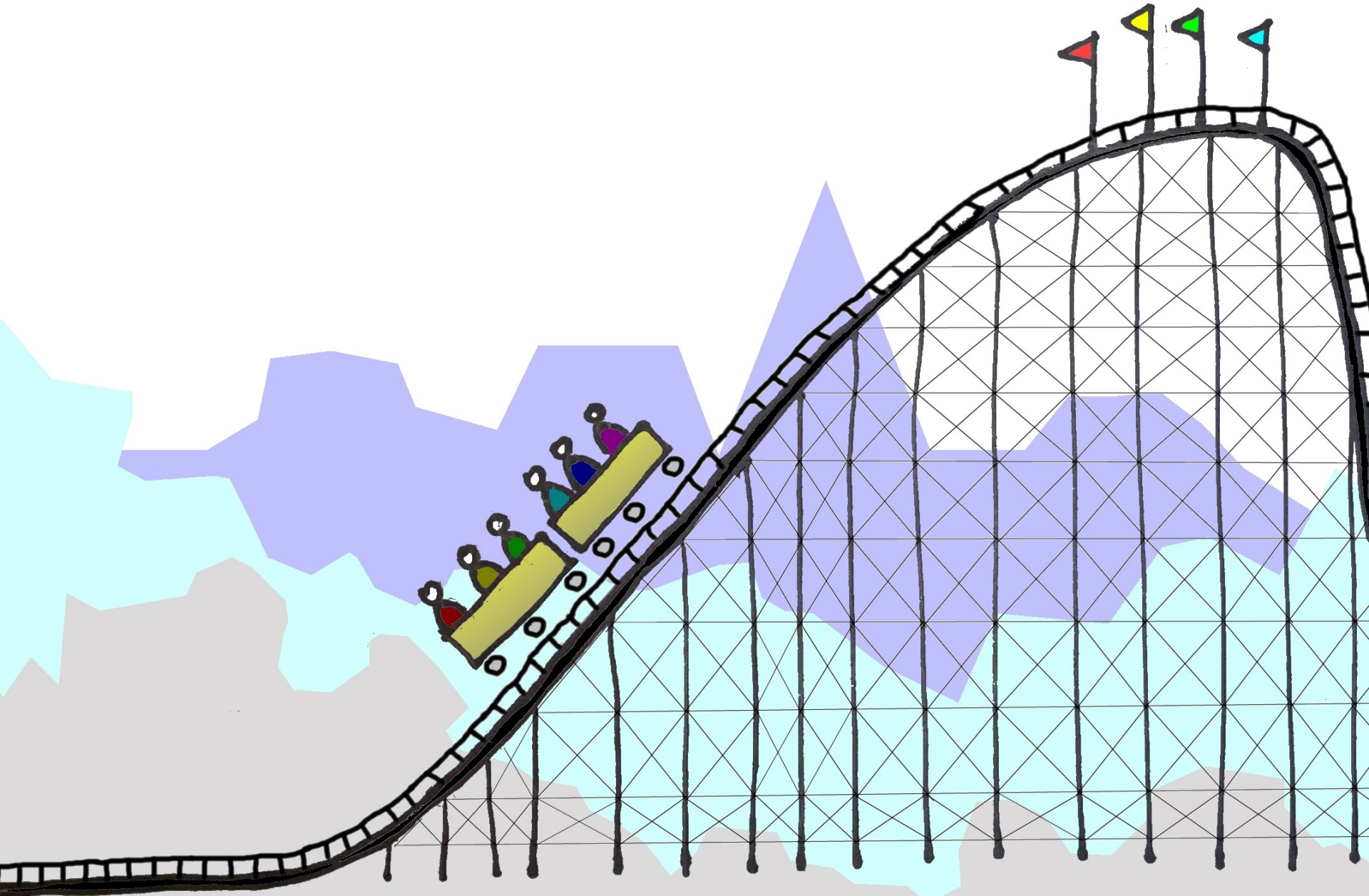
Starting strong

- Recent History graduate on library staff as mediator – recruited our student partners
- Good strong theoretical underpinning, informed by wide reading
- Well thought through research instruments, informed by our reading and covering all aspects of the project
- Good team discussions leading to clear roles and responsibilities
- Genuine partnership

The Project

- Overall project: **Bridging the gap** – including **Picturing your studies** and **Reflecting on your research**

- Including staff and students from the Library and from the History department

- Reproducible survey instruments to allow future comparability

- Hoped for a large broad involvement with limited number of interviews for greater depth

Photos

- Take a number of photos of specific topics (such as: 'All the stuff I take to class' or 'My favourite place to study')

- Take an 'arty' photo of the Library

- Upload your photos to a Facebook group

- Be prepared to discuss your photos in an individual interview *(this last stage will be optional and only for a limited number of people)*

- Project ran in the academic year 2014/15
- Submission in by November 2014
- By the time we had recruited researchers and scoped the project it was the end of semester 1
- Ethics approval secured: 23 April 2015
  - *Developing the research instruments and methodology*
- Most work carried out in the latter part of Semester 2 *[Ends: end of May]*
- Had to drop one of the elements because time was too tight
- Report submitted: July 2015
- Actions implementing the report: Summer 2015

Enjoying the ride…
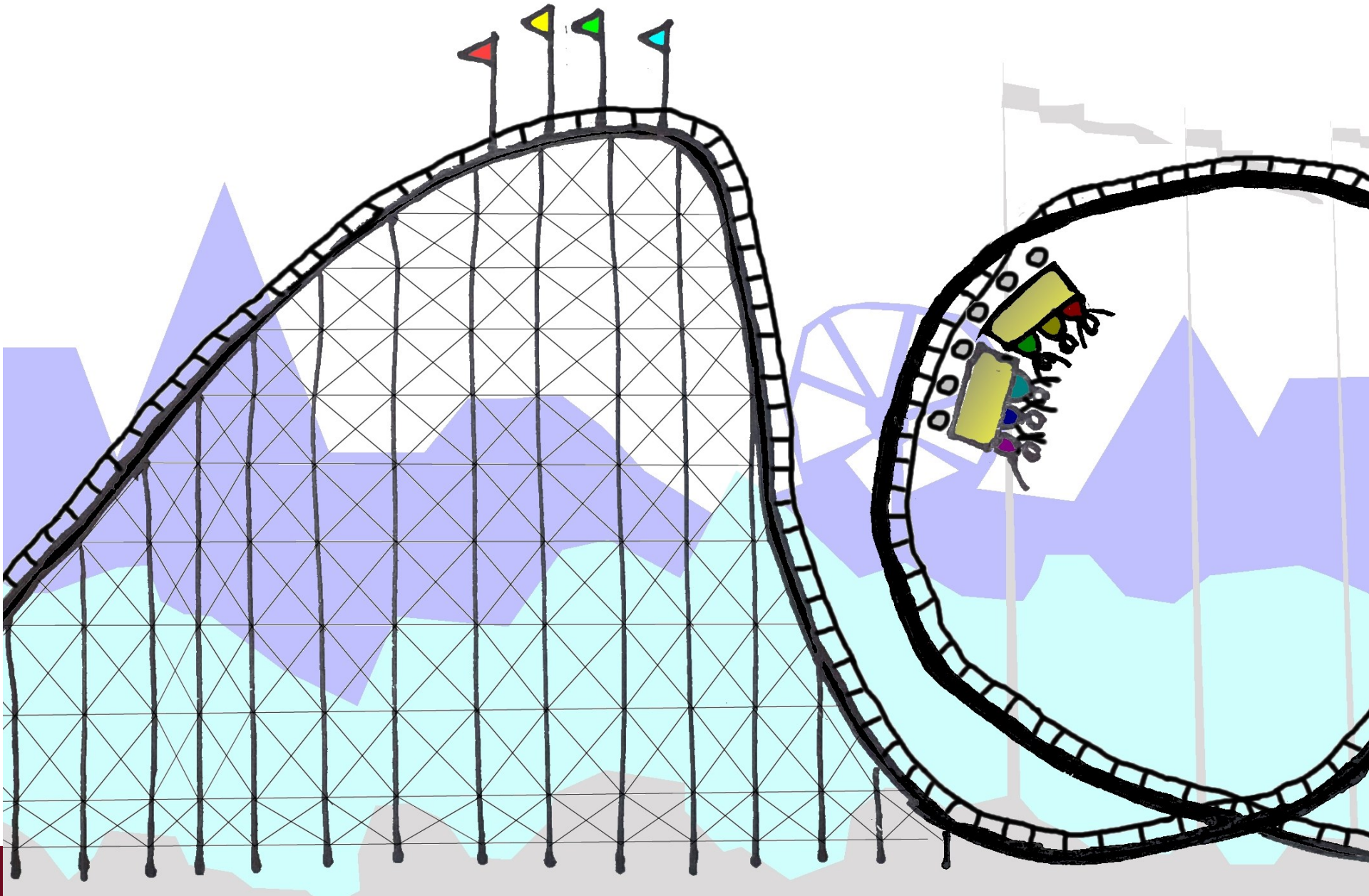
What went well?

- The student researchers put in a tremendous amount of work –
  - Worked with us to understand the library, its services and what we needed to know
  - Recruited participants
  - Conducted, transcribed and anonymised all the interviews
  - Wrote a final report with recommendations

What went well?

- Photos acted as helpful reference points to prompt conversation

- Semi-structured interview style created a relaxed conversational setting

- Familiar students undertaking the interviews and providing a face for the study

- Subjective and honest thoughts and opinions on the library and methods of study

Disappointments

- Not all participants able to fully participate:
  - Sickness / personal circs (staff and student)
  - Changes in role (staff)
  - Gaps in coverage (staff and student)
  - Uncertainty and duplication of effort
- Involvement with Facebook didn't really work
  - Participants preferred to send their photos directly

Disappointments

- Smaller sample size than envisaged:
  – Lack of time to implement the research project
  – Second semester workloads put greater pressure on both participants and researchers
  – Participants eager to engage at first, but had to default entirely or to a much later date
  – Diary entries were particularly affected
- Not sufficient time to properly analyse results:
  – Priority to write up the project report
  – No coding or proper analysis
  – End of the academic year and annual leave
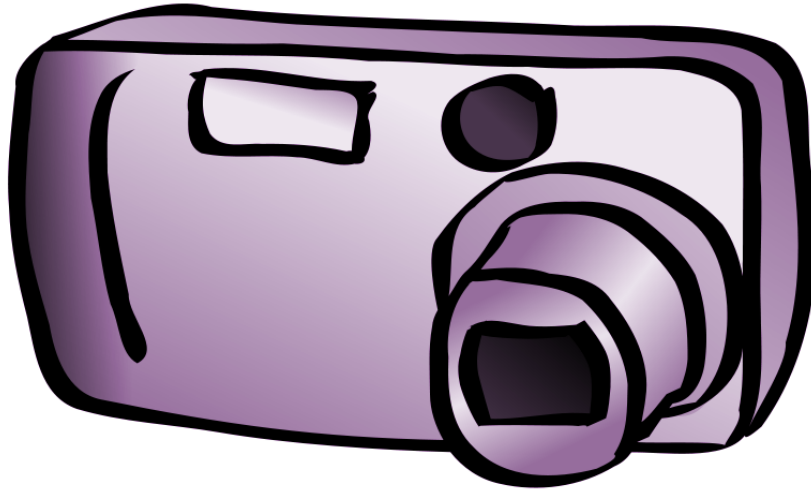
WHAT DID WE FIND?

These were not 'typical' students …

- All of them answered the question 'Where I start when I am looking for resources' with a photo of the Library catalogue …
- All the photos of 'My favourite place on Campus' were of the Library …

But they gave us many insights …

- Terminology we would never use:
  - "[Lecturer B] was very open about how much **invisible resources** there are in the library" [Subject C]
  - "he … directed you towards **secret areas** you could say?" [Researcher 1]
- Their feelings about laptops and wifi

Question 13:
What I like best about the Library

the view and its openness I like to see the reservoir on a nice day

Researcher: unfortunately there aren't any blinds so you can be blinded
that is one of the problems when it's nice and sunny you can't sit facing the sun.

Subject: D

I like it it's light it's bright, modern …

Q: is there anything about the structures of the library that you would change or that you find inconvenient?

I know some of our group don't like the fact that the history stuff is in the silent area … I know that they have been saying that that's a bit of an issue … they don't like the fact that it is in the silent section

Subject: A

I like … the meeting rooms … so like working in groups and like …collaborating I also like how open it is with the big windows like If you go to the University of Birmingham library it's like very sort of dark and not very open sort of claustrophobic almost but here it's a lot more open.
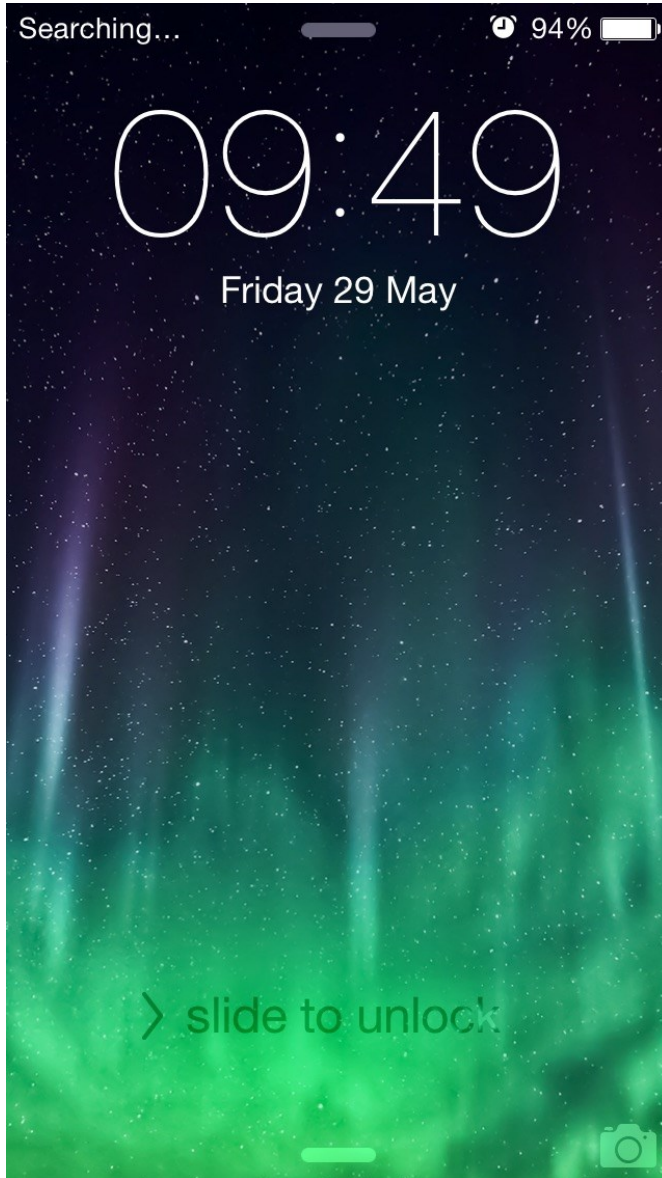
Subject: E

... that's basically just me saying the environment of the library like how clean it is ... how spacious it feels. That's basically me just saying that I really like how clean and spacious it is

Subject: C

Question 15:
What annoys me about studying

"it shows my phone but it doesn't have a signal … I'm meant to be connected to Wifi right now. Wifi is a issue on phones on computers "

not the library itself but I suppose what annoys me most about studying is the time it takes away from me and the time I don't have to do it …

sometimes it's aggravating when you can't find a specific source to back up what you are saying. ... you have a really good idea but you can't put it down on paper until you know someone else has suggested it or suggested something against it that you can argue with it.

you can't really study in the library anymore because it's really busy and there's not many silent areas and it's really bubbly around here. It's difficult to concentre so I have to go home and work in my personal space

There's a wide range of books but at the same time there's some ... like my dissertation was on [a topic] but there there isn't ... many books focusing specifically in [the topic] its always [a broader topic]

Subject: D

Finishing the journey …

Again! Again!

I want to be sick!

That was great!
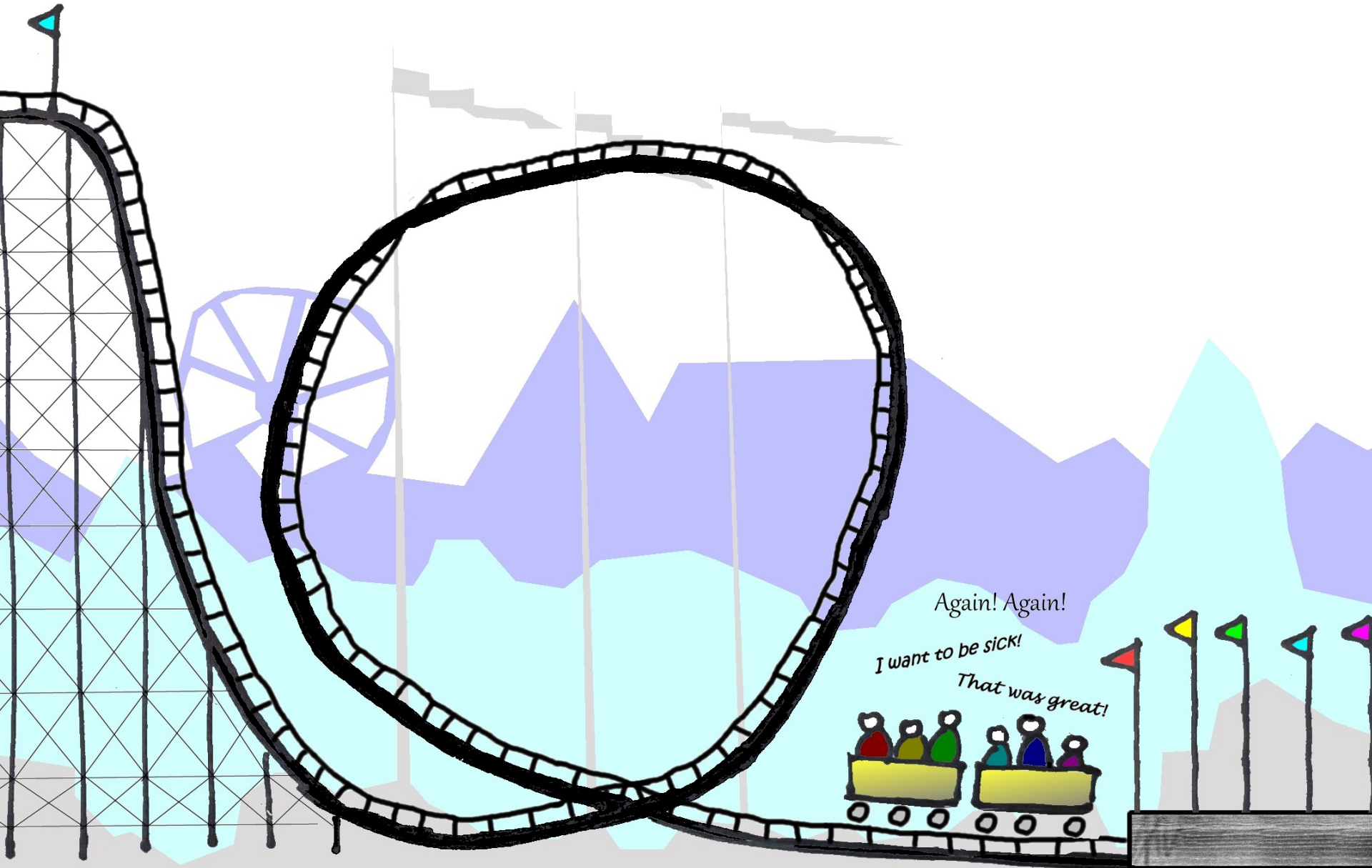
Student researchers' recommendations:

- More books on seven day loan rather than 'standard' loan

- More monographs – more research books for certain dissertation topics

- More access to e-resources and E-books to on primary source material of modern and early modern history

- Sort out the Wi-Fi

Student researchers' recommendations:

- More information about e-resources

  eg. regular emails or monthly bulletins detailing what resources students have access to and clearer links to these resources.

- More systematic intervention by library staff to tackle noise issues

- Clearer distinction between learning zones and quiet zones as students don't recognize the difference

- More closed off discussions areas

What changes have we made?

- The Wi-Fi has been improved – *now moved to Eduroam*

- More History books moved to week loan

- Library staff have been more active in enforcing noise zones

- Signage and 'messages' around noise have been made simpler

- Greater clarity on availability of usable rooms on campus, including computer rooms – position clarified, and posters put up around campus

So, did it work?

NSS Question 16 - The library resources and services are good enough for my needs:

All students	Just History students
Newman 2014: 79%	Newman 2014: 65%
Newman 2015: 83%	**Newman 2015: 80%**

On the face of it, this was a very successful project with clearly beneficial outcomes

What did the whole team gain from the project?

- Engaging with and using ethnographic approaches to research

- Developing a workable and reproducible project that can be reused in other courses and areas

- Learning and working together

- A better understanding of how History students tick

What did our student partners gain from the project:

- Greater understanding of the library and how it is run

- That understanding helped them use the service more effectively

- Developed a greater and closer relationship between first and third year students in History

What did the library partners gain from the project?

- Greater understanding of how history students use the Library

- Heard the 'authentic' voice of students

- Ideas for enhancing the service

- Good 'PR'

- Like all rollercoasters, the research rollercoaster can just show a snapshot …

Moving on …

- The project ran from December 2014 to July 2015

- The 2015 NSS results came out in August, just after the final report was accepted and acted on

- The 2015 NSS was completed in Jan to April 2015, **before** we started the data gathering

- What happened in 2016, after we made the changes?

Moving on …

NSS Question 16 - The library resources and services are good enough for my needs:
[Now: Q.19: The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well.]

All students	Just History students
Newman 2014: 79%	History 2014: 65%
Newman 2015: 83%	History 2015: 80%
Newman 2016: 81%	**History 2016: 64%**

What did we **really** learn?

- Doing the project gave a great insight into the practicalities of running a research project:
  - Ethics approval
  - Time taken on reading / planning / communicating / transcribing
  - Balancing project work with the day to day
- The depth and quality of responses was the best we have ever had
- Participating in a University initiative added impact, but lost control
- The actual proposals were the least relevant and least helpful part of the project

It wasn't what we **did**, it was the fact that we were **talking**

Learning from the journey ...

Learning from the journey

- You **can** do ethnographic research in a small institution, but it is **very** resource intensive

- Allows a rich discussion that gives useful understanding, but don't expect radical insights

- It can be a revelation to go through the whole research process alongside students

Learning from the journey

- Useful to reflect on where 'practitioner research' becomes 'research' requiring ethics clearance

- How fine is the boundary between a quick survey and a full-blown research project?

- Taking your practitioner research through the ethics committee can raise profile just as much as taking part in a university-wide scheme

Better engagement

- If it is the **engagement** – rather than the **content** of the engagement – that makes students feel valued, how do we make students feel engaged?
  - Students Union?
  - Staff-Student Consultative Committees?
  - A Library Committee?
- We need our **own** partners …

Better engagement

- Library Engagement Partners
  - Recruited during Welcome Week 2017
  - Fluid brief: opportunities to do project work, visit department, talk with staff, conduct research, undertake work experience
  - Had the role endorsed to appear on the students' HEAR
  - Launched during Welcome Week 2017

Better engagement

- Library Engagement Partners
  - 3 volunteers – all keen as mustard
  - After the initial briefing meeting, they didn't manage to meet even once *(Snow stopped play!)*
  - Didn't manage to do any actions or projects

Better engagement?

NSS Question 16 - The library resources and services are good enough for my needs:
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Newman 2015: 83%	History 2015: 80%
Newman 2016: 81%	History 2016: 64%
Newman 2017: 83%	History 2017: 70%
Newman 2018: 90%	**History 2018: 81%**

What did we **really** learn 2?

It wasn't what we **did**, it was the fact that we were **talking**

Would we do ethnography again?

- It is a **lot** of work

- It was very interesting and felt meaningful

- Joining the students in practitioner research was a really stimulating experience

- The official results were the least useful element

- Great for making contact; not great for making policy

What do we take away?

It isn't what we **do**, it was the fact that we are **talking**

We need to work more at the talking!

So ... lets talk ...!

References

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