

# Engaging with Psychology Students to Find New Ways of Improving Behaviour in Libraries

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*Using Evidence in Practice*

**Engaging with Psychology Students to Find New Ways of Improving Behaviour in Libraries**

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**Setting**

In the period following the pandemic, we observed that poor student behaviour was increasingly becoming a problem in our library. We decided to take a novel approach to try and discover new ways of encouraging positive use of the university library using existing resources and ensuring the inclusion of student voices to gather rich critically evaluated feedback to inform our service improvements.

The University of Bradford is a medium-sized university in Yorkshire, United Kingdom. It is serviced by the JB Priestley Library, which is located centrally on campus. The library facilities offer a range of study spaces from silent study to group collaborative spaces. The library lacks a distinct separate entrance, as it is not in a separate building.

## **Problem**

Following the full reopening of the library to normal service after the end of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, staff noticed a significant deterioration in student behaviour compared to pre-pandemic. Problems ranged from disruptive and confrontational behaviour to vandalism of the building and contents. This had a significant negative impact on the student experience for legitimate library users and was unsustainable in terms of damage to facilities and on the wellbeing of students and staff. Conversations with colleagues in other institutions confirmed that these problems were not Bradford-specific.

Existing ways of dealing with poor behaviour using signage about specific behaviours and policies (e.g., food and drink, vandalism, and alcohol) had little impact. A student behaviour group formed of library staff was created to consider solutions. One suggestion was taking the problem to psychology students within the university to gain a new perspective on understanding and addressing the roots of these behaviours. This combined student perspectives with a critically evaluated psychological grounding.

We wanted to find new ways of improving the experience of students using the library for legitimate study purposes in ways that could be implemented by staff and without the need for expensive improvements, furniture replacement, or building work. We also wanted to ensure that the student voice and perspective was included in a constructive and novel way.

## **Evidence**

We approached an Associate Professor of Social Psychology, about the possibility of involving students from the psychology department. The professor suggested that the problem be introduced as a case study as part of an established team-based learning session for a class of 25 master's degree psychology students. Team-based learning is an active learning method in which classroom sessions are devoted to team problem-solving rather than lectures (Tweddell, 2020). Both authors were then invited to attend the session to introduce the problem and assess the ideas presented.

We provided the following information and evidence to students:

- A brief presentation with an overview of our issues in the library
- A spreadsheet of anonymous data detailing recent behavioural issues, including the date, time, location, number of people involved, and description of instances of poor behaviour, gathered over a month
- Some recent comments from student users of the library from feedback volunteered by students through mechanisms such as meetings between academic librarians and student representatives from the departments they support
- Some recent photographs of library vandalism
- Copies of posters currently displayed in the library
- Information on behaviour displayed on our website: <https://www.bradford.ac.uk/library/contact-and-about-us/regulations-and-policies/>

We asked the students to address these questions:

1. How can we encourage better use of our facilities?
2. How can we better provide group working space without it becoming a social area?

The students were given three hours to consider the evidence and questions before presenting their work to the class. The students’ presentations included suggested actions as well as explanations from psychology theories that supported these actions. This allowed students to work on a real-world problem and enabled library staff to engage with students who may not have provided voluntary feedback otherwise. As this was part of students’ class module, their participation was marked and contributed to their qualification.

**Implementation**

We compiled the suggestions from the students with their supporting psychological theories. This information was gathered from our notes in conjunction with the slides from the student presentations that were provided after the session. These were then analyzed to find those that were already in place or were not implementable and those that could be taken forward and used to make improvements to library services.

The library behaviour group discussed the findings and helped plan and execute the implementation of student suggestions. All of this is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1  
Student Suggestions and Actions Taken

Student Suggestions From Presentations	Supporting Psychology Theories	Actions Taken by the Library Staff
Creating a library identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social identity theory</li> <li>• Social learning theory</li> <li>• Psychological frailty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We created a library mural depicting desirable library behaviour at the library entrance that was designed and executed by library staff. Unfortunately, students were not able to take part as initially hoped due to health and safety reasons.</li> <li>• We continued work on inclusive library initiatives that cut across subject, study level, and staff and student divides, such as a library book club and promotion of existing initiatives including the book exchange, calm space, and upcoming family space.</li> </ul>
Recruiting student representatives to help with basic library tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social learning theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This had already been identified as a need by the library and recruitment was in progress. Two Student Champions roles helped extend available help beyond the library’s core staffed hours.</li> </ul>

Modelling desired behaviours in specific areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social learning theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We created the library mural at the entrance and created study zone banners that were placed throughout the library.</li> </ul>
Creating distinct and easily recognizable study areas for different purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social learning theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The library banners include distinct colours, icons, inclusive language, and images modelling expected behaviour in each zone.</li> </ul>
Use of inclusive and positive language in communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social identity theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive, positive language was already in use across all communication mediums.</li> </ul>
Increasing surveillance and security presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive and negative reinforcement</li> <li>• The 4 Es</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The library now has two designated security guards stationed at the information desk and roving throughout the library. Each guard has been provided with bodycams.</li> </ul>
Use punitive measures (e.g., loss of privileges for poor behaviour) and use of rewards for positive use of the library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive and negative reinforcement</li> <li>• The 4 Es</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The library staff undertook an update existing policies with regards to expected behaviour and potential consequences. These are currently being finalized by senior university staff.</li> <li>• We discussed rewarding good behaviour but decided that there were many problems with implementing this in a fair and meaningful way.</li> </ul>
Reintroducing the anonymous text service used by students to report problem behaviour in the library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social learning theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The anonymous text service had already been replaced with the Safezone app (<a href="https://safezoneapp.com/">https://safezoneapp.com/</a>) available university wide instead.</li> </ul>

Note: For more information on the psychological theories mentioned in the table above, see the Appendix.

### *Feasible Changes to Library Service*

Of the actions we took in response the Master's students' suggestions (as detailed in Table 1), the two that were most novel and impactful were the library mural and the banners for each study zone.

#### *Library Mural*

The student suggestions covered by implementing the library mural include:

- Creating a library identity
- Modelling desired behaviours in specific areas

We discussed the library identity with the student behaviour group. We came up with the idea of a mural (see Figures 1 and 2) on the glass wall by the library entrance, as this is an area of high footfall. We required only a small budget for art supplies, and library staff undertook the creation of the artwork, led by Aicha Bahij, a professional artist who is also a staff member. The mural incorporated images of study activities in the library, modelling expected behaviour.

Also depicted were iconic stages of the academic year, facilities offered by the library; books written by university staff; books on equality, diversity, and inclusion; and a welcoming skeleton near the entry gates to add a sense of whimsy and reflect that library users can borrow plastic skeletons.



Figure 1  
Library mural with artists (left to right) Aicha Bahij (lead), Louise Dawson, Emily Cowler, and Sean Temple.



Figure 2  
Library mural.

### *Banners in Each Study Zone*

Student suggestions covered by implementing the banners include:

- Modelling desired behaviours in specific areas
- Creating distinct and easily recognizable study areas for different purposes
- Use of inclusive and positive language in communications

To clearly demark the silent, quiet, and group study areas and to make them easily recognizable, tall banners were put prominently in each study zone (see Figure 3). Each zone had a distinct colour, an image modelling the expected behaviour in that zone, information about the number that could study together, and acceptable noise levels in written and icon format. Additional text listed other zones available and the consequences for not abiding by zone expectation. All text was written in positive and plain language.



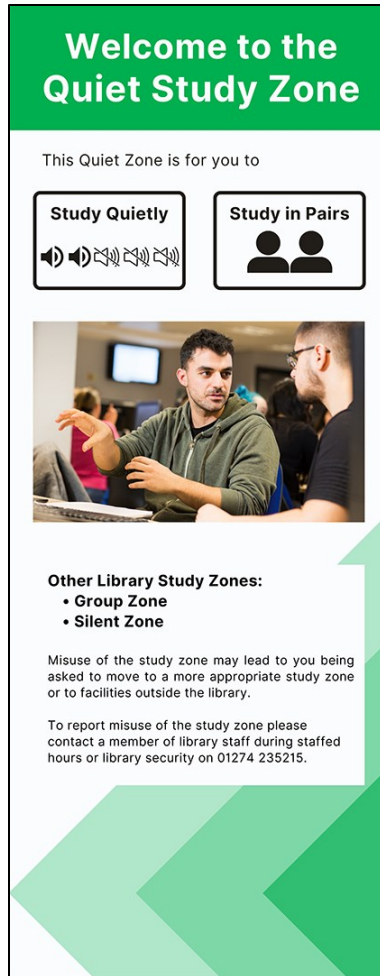


Figure 3  
A quiet study zone banner.

### *Unfeasible Changes to Library Services*

The use of punitive measures (e.g., loss of privileges for poor behaviour) and use of rewards for positive use of the library were discussed by the behaviour group and found to be unworkable within the library regulations. Whilst the students were keen for punishment to be meaningful and act as a deterrent, the library has limited powers. However, updated policies and a new process for dealing with poor behaviour were already in progress. This will give a greater consistency to the management of student behaviour not just in the library but across the university, allowing the university to see and act upon patterns of poor behaviour. Rewarding good behaviour was discussed, and whilst positive, the idea was impractical as it could not be implemented in a fair and consistent way.

### **Outcome**

Behaviour in the library has improved. Collaborating with students for suggestions for improvements has brought about tangible implementable ideas that would not have been gained otherwise. The mural in particular has led to greater student engagement as a unique feature on campus and made the entrance



of the library a distinctive space. Visiting international students have been keen to have it as the backdrop to their photographs with staff. The collaboration had many positive benefits such as strengthening relationships between the library and students as well as the library and an academic department. It brings ideas submitted in a classroom into real world existence, enabling students and staff to see their positive and tangible impact on a university service.

### Reflection

This project has provided a fascinating new perspective on tackling the perennial challenge of improving student experience and tackling poor behaviour. There are several advantages to this innovative way of gaining student feedback, which could encourage others to try something similar. The costs are few. The requirements were simply library staff time and a member of academic teaching staff willing to timetable a team-based learning session for us to present our problem to. The students produced rich feedback that was critically evaluated and, rather than being subjective or reactionary, was backed up by established psychological theories. It was also a unique opportunity to collaborate with an academic department in the university.

Limitations to the project were that we consulted only one set of students in one course, so some student voices are missing. Additionally, master's degree students are often mature or may be international students so their perspectives may differ from other students. Overall, however, this is a high impact, low cost, repeatable, and innovative way of gathering student input on improving student experience and managing poor behaviour.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Peter Branney without whom this research would not have been possible, Aicha Bahij for her original art and for being lead artist on the library mural, Emily Cowler and Sean Temple for their original art contribution to the library mural, Sarah George for being an encouraging and guiding (tor)mentor on our first publication, the Library Customer Services team for their collective contribution to the library mural and Alison Lahlaf for enabling us to undertake this research and feed into service improvements.

### Author Contributions

**Louise Dawson:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing **Louise Phelan:** Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review and editing

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## Appendix

### Psychology Theories

- **Social identity theory.** This revolves around the creation of in-groups, characterised common expected behaviour, positive and favourable beliefs about the in-group and negative beliefs and opinions about those not part of the in-group (Tajfel, 1982).
- **Social learning theory.** This posits that people learn how to behave in any given situation or environment, based on observing and then mimicking behaviour in others that appears to be acceptable. This can be good or bad behaviour (Bandura, 1977).
- **Positive and negative reinforcement.** Under this theory, behaviour is controlled or changed using the mechanism of offering reward and inflicting punishments (Skinner, 1974).
- **The 4 Es (engage, explain, encourage, enforce).** This is a framework for engaging with people behaving unacceptably and escalating if required. This is often employed by services such as the police (Aitkenhead et al., 2022).
- **Psychological frailty (post pandemic).** This theory posits that people have lost or did not gain key social skills that enable them to engage positively in different environments. This may also include high levels of mental ill-health in people (Stufano et al., 2022).