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# ESCAPE ROOMS AT BUXTON AND LEEK COLLEGE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

## Introduction

The Academic Librarian team at the University of Derby has found it difficult to develop innovative induction activities which engage students but do not cause information overload. The University's portfolio of programmes is wide ranging; in addition to undergraduate, post graduate and online study, its Buxton and Leek College offers FE courses and various articulated progression routes into higher education such as Access to HE and Foundation Degrees.

Usually, library induction consists of a twenty/thirty minute physical tour where groups of ten to fifteen students are led round the facilities by a librarian or other member of library staff. Not only is this a very labour-intensive method of delivering information but student engagement tends to be poor. The concept of educational escape rooms provided an excellent opportunity to review and reinvigorate the normally 'boring' induction experience.

When I started as Assistant Academic Librarian in late 2016 one of my first tasks was to design a new induction session for Level 3 Year 1 students alongside our Facilitator team. After discussing a few ideas, a Crystal Maze style was the favourite which morphed into an escape room format.

The Internet has many examples of escape room puzzles with helpful websites that provide instructions on how design your own. We set about adapting some of these to fit a library setting and to ensure that they were appropriate for the level and message we wanted to get across. The challenge was not providing explicit instructions, while still including enough information to allow students to work out what they must do.

The session was planned so that, following an introduction to the Library website and how to search the catalogue, each class was split into up to five groups, assigned a colour and sent to start on a different puzzle.

While solving the puzzles, we wanted students to be able to find a book's shelf mark on the Library Catalogue, learn how to access the printer, borrow a book using self-service, learn how to borrow a laptop and become familiar with the books in the study skills section as well as acknowledge and understand the Code of Conduct. To match these, we came up with five puzzles:

- ❖ The team must decode a sentence (using a spinning decoder) which reveals how to borrow a laptop. There are hints around them to tell them how to set the decoder.
- ❖ A briefcase must be opened – the combination lock codes are the shelf marks of two books, details of which are stuck to the briefcase. The team must use the Library catalogue to find the two sets of numbers. Once open, they can remove a jigsaw piece in their team's colour from inside the briefcase.





- ❖ The team must borrow a book using self-service and request a receipt. They record the time printed on the receipt before returning the book.

- ❖ The study skills bookshelf conceals parts of a sentence within six books – the team needs to find them! A photograph shows the shelf with those six books missing and the team needs to work out which they are. Once they find the book, there's a card with a part of a sentence in their team's colour. They must find all six and unscramble the sentence.
- ❖ Next to the printer is an iPad which has a recorded message. The students listen to the message and pick out the information given to answer a question.

Once all the puzzles are complete, students return to the start and are issued with a jigsaw piece in their team's colour for each correct response. The first team to complete their jigsaw wins the challenge. The jigsaw is of a map of the library, but there's a spare piece with each team. Once students realise that they need to work with the other teams, the jigsaw displays the Code of Conduct.

Completing the escape room puzzles enables students to experience and demonstrate teamwork, become familiar with the layout of the Library and develop the library skills and behaviours that will support their learning and studies. The feedback for the 2019 induction season told us that 95% of students found the session useful, 95% enjoyed it and 98% felt more confident at using the library following the induction. Despite this positive feedback we shall be evaluating the session and tweaking it to keep it as fresh as possible for next year's intake.

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**Library Lockdown: Zombie Attack** originated from a scheme at the university called the 'Vice-Chancellor's ideas forum' which provides individuals with the opportunity to ask for financial support to develop innovative teaching initiatives. In 2017, the head of the library service and a professor in forensic science jointly applied to the forum for funding to employ two student researchers with the aim of developing a new student resource for library orientation based around the escape room concept.

A project group was formed, and I was invited to participate along with a colleague. As librarians, we were tasked with identifying the learning objectives—or skills—that we wanted the students to develop. The student researchers then built the clues and the game around the objectives.

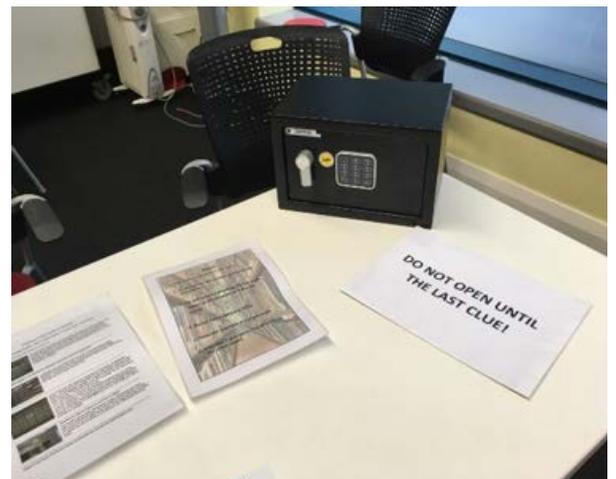
These included:

- ❖ Using the library catalogue to search for a book
- ❖ Finding a book on the shelves using its Dewey decimal number
- ❖ Finding and accessing an e-book
- ❖ Using the reservations system
- ❖ Using the self-service machines
- ❖ Using our online guides (LibGuides)
- ❖ Using our E-Journals Finder resource to locate and access a specific e-journal and article.

The project was a collaborative effort between us and the students and presented us with challenges as well as benefits. Having the student researchers' input whilst developing the learning objectives was extremely valuable. We approached the objectives from a librarian mindset i.e. what we felt the students needed to know in their induction. However, the students, having experienced a library induction in their first year and having gone through almost three years of study at the university, highlighted things that we hadn't considered as being important - such as knowing how the print system worked for example. The students also had experience playing escape rooms and were very good at coming up with ingenious riddles and clues that met the objectives of the Escape Room. Unfortunately, regular communication from the students waned as their end of year exams and dissertation due dates approached. Due to these competing demands the students were unable to finish the game and I was asked to bring it to completion.

The result was Library Lockdown: Zombie Attack! The game was piloted in November 2018 with a group of criminology students and was well received; the group liked the interactive aspect compared to a walking tour of the library. Since then it has been delivered for various undergraduate groups, for staff as a development activity, and for the general public at our University Community Day. I also offer the session to school groups, in conjunction with our Widening Access team, as part of our University Experience Days.

The aim of the game is to open a locked safe which contains an anti-zombie formula enabling the students to escape the zombie apocalypse! Participants are **shown a short video introduction** after which they use the library resources to solve different puzzles and clues which ultimately gives them the code to the safe. The game can be delivered for up to twenty-five contestants at a time (five per group). There is a thirty minute and hour-long version. Each group uses the same resources e.g. the library catalogue to solve the puzzles.



However, there are variations built into the puzzles to discourage cheating and to maintain a level of competition. Once the students complete the last clue and open the safe, they find a potion bottle filled with anti-zombie formula. Each participant receives a badge and the winning team usually gets chocolate or sweets. I **end the game with another video** showing students successfully escaping the library.

Feedback has been mainly qualitative in nature - at the end of each game students are asked to write on a post-it note what they learnt, what they enjoyed and how we could improve the game. Comments have been overwhelmingly positive, and I have also received some valuable constructive criticism which has helped me to evaluate and amend the game for future sessions. Although I wanted the game to develop basic library skills, I have also found it develops soft skills such as teamwork, problem-solving and communication.

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Hazel and Liz would be delighted to answer any questions you may have. Just drop them an email and please share any of your experiences or lessons learned from this article with the CoLRiC Impact team.

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