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The University of Lanarkshire: Revealed

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There was a moment at the conference, during the Team Challenge heats, where I had to try and keep a studious-listening-face on while my heart soared. Fellow judge Anna Kågedal and I were listening to the teams diagnose the problems with the Library at UoL, and suggest a way forward. The first team to present were ‘Clom’ and they came up with a detailed plan of both short- and long-term ideas to make the user experience better, part of which included moving the entrance/exit gates forward. They wanted to take them out of the Walter Scott Library itself and situate them in the Rutherglen Building Atrium instead, near *thezone*. I *loved* this idea. It had never occurred to me before, but you could see instantly that this small change would alleviate several issues the fieldwork had identified, to do with noise, and cold, and people feeling overly scrutinised while they worked near the entrance. It was brilliant. Plus it meant the Team Challenge was actually working.

Time and time again in the Team Challenge people found innovative solutions like this to the problems that existed in our fictional University Library. I can’t emphasise enough how we the committee did not have specific fixes in mind. We didn’t have answers and then work backwards to the questions, we didn’t ‘break’ the library and ask the delegates to work out how to repair it. We just pulled together the fieldwork and hoped people could come up with a way forward. And they could.

All the teams proposed brilliant next steps, and my favourite parts were when they diagnosed problems we’d not even knowingly put into the ethnography, but which clearly WERE there. Towards the end of their presentation, Team Karn finished talking about the specific issues and told us they worried about a much deeper problem. I’m paraphrasing here but they said something along the lines of ‘... actually we think you have a much wider issue than just space and services. Communication is *terrible* at the University of Lanarkshire. It’s clear you don’t talk

to each other, OR your users successfully. Not one student mentioned the twitter account in the fieldwork! No wonder it only has 20 followers. You need a total overhaul of your communications.’ And I thought, you know what, they’re right. This is more than a UX problem at UoL, there are wider cultural issues to be addressed...

A unique partnership

The Team Challenge has always been an absolutely key part of UXLibs. At the risk of being reductive the idea is essentially that the keynotes inspire, that the delegate papers mean you get to hear ideas and updates from your peers, that the workshops mean you get hands-on time with proper experts, and that the team challenge allows you to learn by *doing*.¹ To work with other people, to hear completely different perspectives as well as bringing your own, and take all the knowledge you’re accruing and apply it in context.

Each year we try to move the conference in sync with the UX community. In 2015 the challenge was about ethnographic fieldwork and design; at UXLibs² the challenge was about advocating for UX work. For UXLibs³ the conference expanded in size and we had more new delegates than returning ones, so we didn’t want to leave these people behind and miss out on the ethnographic stage entirely. As a result we wanted to partner with an institution so there was the potential for either conducting, or analysing, some proper ethnographic fieldwork.

We got quite far down the road of doing this with a nearby University Library but ultimately when our contact took the collaboration idea to their bosses, those senior figures became wary of the idea of 170 librarians from all over the world spending two days scrutinising everything imperfect about their library... This was perfectly understandable, so the committee set about Plan B.

We agreed more or less right away that the answer was real ethnography, amalgamated and remixed for a fictional institution. Creating a Uni and its library would mean there would be no issues around politics and causing potential offence, and it meant that because we were creating the fieldwork we could guarantee there’d be enough of it, and with enough variety. There were a lot of positives. In fact, we got giddy with excitement as we began to realise the full possibilities of partnering with a library of our own creation.

¹ At UXLibs² as I introduced the Team Challenge to the delegates I found, to my horror, that my mouth was saying ‘soon we’ll be *doing* doing’ – which Andy mercilessly then quoted in a tweet.

We needed a name that was a) local, b) plausible sounding and c) not already in existence. So the University of Lanarkshire was born, Lanarkshire being a historic county in the Scottish lowlands. We got in there just in time: the University of the West of Scotland will open their own rival Lanarkshire campus in 2018.

Creating the university

We divided up the duties and began the process of fashioning a believable Higher Education Institution. It was never our intention to deceive people into thinking UoL was real: what we wanted was for people to be not quite sure it was fake for as long as possible. We didn't like the idea of anyone feeling duped, but we were excited at the idea of doing the fakery so well that people might not guess right away.

The general potted overview we had of the institution came from a late-night conversation, fleshed out into fairly extensive notes by Andy. He also later created the floor-plans for the Library itself, and the Atrium of the Rutherglen Building – the Ruther, as we knew it – in which the Library sits. The floorplans were absolutely essential in adapting the fieldwork which came later, and indeed the first piece of ethnography produced for UoL was the behavioural mapping showing how users moved through the space (again, done by Andy, based on sitting in an actual Scottish Uni library and observing the students).

The morning I spent creating the University of Lanarkshire campus map was one of the happiest professional experiences I can remember. I loved every minute of it for reasons I can't even really articulate. The map was created in good old-fashioned PowerPoint, using *Insert > Shapes* over and over again. In Figure 1 you can see how the map actually extends beyond the printable edge of the slide.

I looked at a lot of campus maps for inspiration, and I think one thing which separates UoL from most Unis is there is actually adequate parking.² There are some nice green spaces, which no doubt the Uni would colonise for buildings as it expanded over time if it were real. The Daines Fisheries Research Institute is named after my wife (her maiden name is Daines), and the Sturgeon Lake is so called because it contains the eponymous fish, *not* because of Nicola Sturgeon as is often assumed to be the case.³ Together the committee created a detailed history

2 This high level of convenience was offset by the fact the Walter Scott Library itself contained not a single toilet, something we only realised the day before the conference when it was too late to correct.

3 The UoL's fictional VC is forever having to explain that to other, also fictional, people.

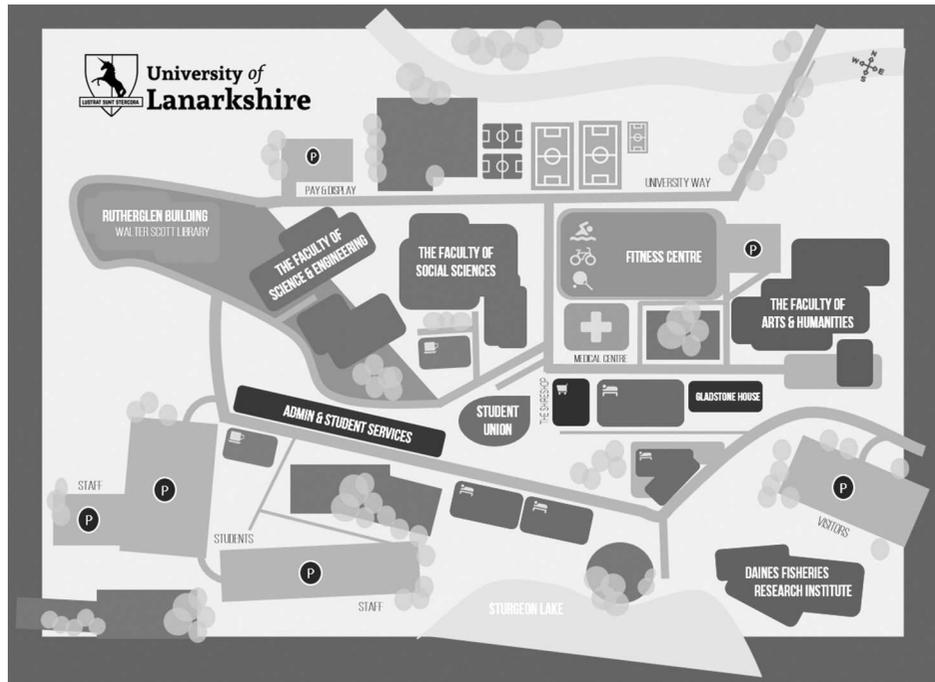


Figure 1 Creating the University of Lanarkshire map.

of the campus – intricate details of Gladstone House, which had been around for a couple of hundred years longer than the University had, and where the students like to work when they can because it feels old and scholarly. This chronicle of the University was just for us, we didn't put any of it into the public-facing packs we gave the delegates. But we modified a lot of the ethnographic fieldwork based on the map and what we knew of the back-story.

Matt created the library website (see Figure 2). This went through a couple of drafts as the first thing he produced wasn't believable – it looked too nice and worked too well to be a realistic library website. The finished version was a thing of beauty (the Subject Guides section is particularly delightful), flawed to reflect the usability report included in the ethnography. It contained some nice stats about what the library held (courtesy of Matthew Reidsma), amended by Matt to include the 199 floppy disks still held in UoL's collections.

Embedded on the website was the *Welcome, to Lanarkshire* video which I created in GoPro Studio – a free editing tool which is powerful but relatively

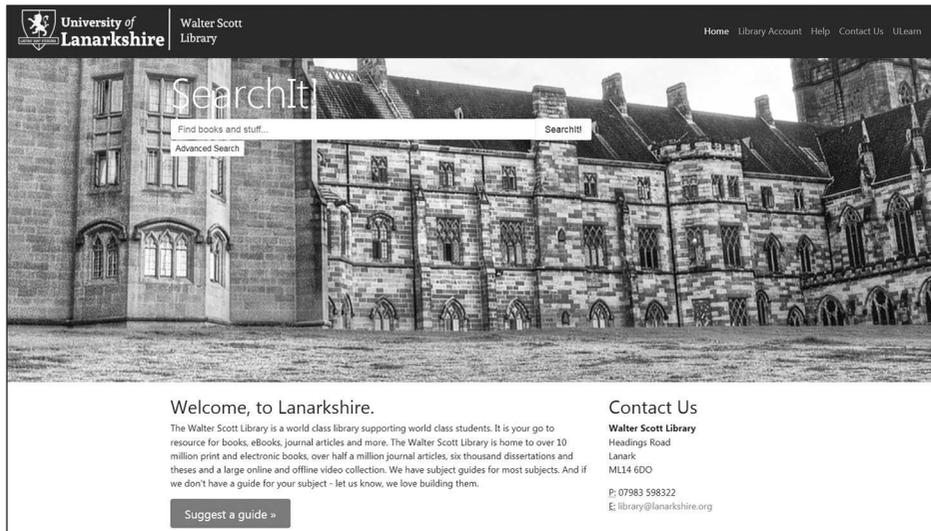


Figure 2 The University of Lanarkshire library website.

straightforward to use. The vid was made entirely with CC0 (public domain) stock video footage, courtesy of video.pexels.com and was the second funnest thing I've ever done professionally after the campus map. I asked Lisa Clark to record the narration for the video as she has an excellent (and to my English ears at least!) very Scottish voice. I sent her a script and she emailed me a few versions recorded on her phone.

Lisa did brilliantly and this whole aspect worked really well – unlike the background music, which was so melancholy it caused some people to laugh out loud when I played the video at the conference.⁴ It's hard to find appropriate CC0 music, that's all I can say. If you don't want 'cheesy infomercial' or indie-pop like in a phone advert, melancholic piano is one of the few paths left open to creators of pretend library videos...

Creating the ethnography

Whilst we could let our imaginations run wild with creating the University, the ethnography had to be firmly rooted in reality. As far as possible we based everything

⁴ My line-manager was at the conference and she told me afterwards that as soon as she heard the music she thought 'this is obviously something Ned made.'

on existing fieldwork with which we were familiar, but with details amended and added to better reflect life at UoL.

Each of us created semi-structured interviews in both short and long form, and in my case the words of the fictional UoL students were all adapted directly from interviews I've conducted as part of the UX work at my own institution. Donna used her in-depth knowledge of Sleep Studies to create one for Lanarkshire; Andy drew several process-based cognitive maps and I drew a location-based one. (It's tricky to know how accurately to draw a cognitive map of the library when it's supposed to be from memory, and you don't technically have any memory of the library, what with it not being real.) Spouses were drafted in to vary up the handwriting and drawing styles. Matt fashioned a Web Usability Report which, because it came from UoL's IT Department, looked a bit more professional than most of the documentation the library had produced, with its fancy headed paper and correct use of the UoL logo.

Because we didn't want to put an agenda into the ethnography – in other words we didn't want to point delegates towards any particular set of problems and potential solutions – we all created our fieldwork independently, and at the end we looked through it all to make sure there was a certain amount of cohesion. We brought it all together into a Google Drive folder and arranged for each team to have a printed pack with everything in, and we were ready.

UoL at the conference

With the exception of the committee and the Challenge judges, and Lisa our video voiceover expert who was in attendance as a delegate, no one at the conference knew about UoL's origins. This led to some interesting moments.

Two members of staff from UoL who'd done the majority of the ethnography were, we decided, going to attend the conference. We put them on the delegates list and created badges for them for people to see on the big Welcome Table when they first arrived at *thestudio*. Housekeeping with Ange (Fitzpatrick) involved a slide that featured an explanation of how the timetable badges worked, and it showed Philippa's badge – Ange said, 'Is Philippa here?' because she didn't know we'd created UoL and, indeed, Philippa... There was of course an awkward silence where Philippa failed to identify herself. Similarly, the other Lanarkshire delegate, Oliver, didn't let out any audible signs of relief when Ange passed on the message from home that his dog, who'd been at the vet's that day, was okay.

Generally speaking we were delighted with how people interpreted UoL at the conference. Some people clearly knew from the start that it was fictitious, but entered fully into the spirit of the challenge and analysed the ethnography superbly. Other people genuinely didn't know until we revealed the truth just before announcing the winning team. As we wandered around we overheard snippets of conversation, including one team saying 'this UoL twitter account they've listed only has 20 followers...' at which point we thought we were busted, only for the sentence to continue: '... so the question is, why haven't they given us access to the real one?'

All that stuff was fun, but what really mattered was the engagement with the challenge. People came up with brilliant, brilliant ideas. They did brilliant presentations about those ideas. They worked together with people they'd never met before, in intense and time-constrained circumstances. They, you, made it work.

Next steps

It's very hard to give up on the University of Lanarkshire entirely, having put so much work into creating it. Will the institution make a return at future UXLibs conferences? Well, we'll all just have to wait and see.

The Team Challenge wasn't like an exam question with a right answer. It wasn't a conundrum with a solution. It was just a set of circumstances, created from real ethnographic fieldwork from several different institutions, with no obvious idea of where to go next. But like always, you the UXLibs delegates stepped up. By the end I *wished* UoL existed so we could take the ideas to the Library managers and see how they do with implementing them. So: thank you, UXLibbers.

We created a fictional library, but you made it real.