

A mid-size academic library's experience in introducing virtual reality (VR) headsets into instruction and circulation

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Abstract: This article covers the implementation of virtual reality headsets in both instruction and circulation at a mid-size academic library. The article details the experience from both the Instruction and Circulation department, including necessary correlations in the service. It covers the successes and failures of the adoption of the lending program, what was learned, and thoughts moving forward.

Keywords: *vr headsets, google cardboard, virtual reality*



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Background

In the spring semester of 2016, Collier Library at the University of North Alabama (UNA) endeavored into unfamiliar territory with the purchase of virtual reality (VR) cardboard headsets for use as both instructional pieces and circulating materials. The instructional purpose intended was a deeper information literacy for the user in understanding real physical spaces and experiences that could not be traveled to or typically obtained, while using the headset. For example, students could effectively view the streets of Paris for a better understanding of the city. In addition to the cardboard headsets that are used in Instruction and Circulation, the library has cardboard and plastic headsets in its ThinkSpace (makerspace). These aren't associated with any formal instruction with the exception of workshops and aren't available for borrowing outside of the ThinkSpace walls. Eight total headsets were purchased for the circulation and instruction pilot. Each headset purchased is intentionally "name-brand" Google Cardboard; half are the standard cardboard light brown color and half are aqua. The headsets are split with four in the Instruction classroom and four at the Circulation/Help Desk.

Instruction

The headsets in the classroom were introduced to all Spring 2016 English 112 (or EN 112, second half of first-year English) courses. EN 112 visits Collier Library for two separate instruction sessions that both focus on information literacy. The first instruction session discusses information literacy techniques applicable to the real world, while the second session discusses academic material usage. The headsets were presented as an information option in the discovery and understanding of physical spaces. Students were encouraged to navigate through various 360° image applications while using the headsets and discuss how they could possibly use them in their research or in the future.

Additional instruction has been conducted in the ThinkSpace as workshops. In addition to the cardboard headsets used in the classroom, ThinkSpace includes plastic headsets and "off-brand" cardboard headsets. In any instruction session, whether it's in the library classroom or ThinkSpace, the presenter discusses with the class that you can borrow headsets at the Circulation/Help Desk and take them outside of the library.

Circulation

At the Circulation/Help Desk, each borrowed headset is sent with an information page containing instructions for using the headsets for 360° photo and video viewing and using applications to create 360° images. Library staff have created 360° images as an example to the user of what can be done with the software and posted them on different social media outlets. These images have been shared and viewed in workshops, as well.

The headsets were advertised outside of the instructional scenarios discussed earlier, also. They have been part of the rolling advertisements on the library website multiple times and featured in numerous Facebook posts. Lastly, Collier Library has a television which greets patrons with timely news and updates — virtual reality headsets have made multiple appearances there.

Discoveries and Feedback

Awareness is a key issue with the headsets. They were initially located in a spot with low visibility on the reserve shelves. If users do not know about their presence, they obviously will never ask for them. This correlates with the data observed from checkouts. When the headsets are not being advertised, they are not getting borrowed at all. Additionally, circulation skewed much higher when the headsets were advertised and used in the classroom (for workshops and EN 112). Nearly 100% of circulation occurred during active instruction periods for EN 112.

Two headsets were lost in this initial pilot. One instruction headset was destroyed due to extreme usage. It was typically the first one sent throughout a room during instruction, therefore it had more exposure to hands, opening and closing, and different sized phones. One circulating headset has never been returned, has since been marked as lost and the patron has been billed. The headset with the most circulations is also in poor condition.

Finally, the data was presented as a poster session SELA/Georgia COMO Joint Conference in Athens, Ga. The attendees were very interested in the headsets and enjoyed watching 360° videos with them. Several of the attendees expressed interest in obtaining headsets for their libraries and adding projects to their instruction classes.

In retrospect, this was a satisfactory trial. All headsets circulated and the feedback and excitement in the classroom were positive. Students seemed to genuinely enjoy the process of using the headsets to explore new things. This was a relatively low financial risk for this experiment. Good

headsets can be purchased at low prices that are continuously decreasing (Collier Library purchased headsets for \$22 apiece; the same are now \$15). The imaginative exploration and thoughtful creativity that comes from exploring, using, and creating projects intended for the headsets has been well worth that price.