

# “Zap our App!”

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Coleg Sir Gâr

“Zap our App!” shouts our poster. Our new library app gives mobile access to our catalogue, ebooks, e-mails, college files and even “ask a librarian”.

Coleg Sir Gâr is a College of Further Education based in South West Wales offering a comprehensive range of academic and vocational programmes that includes 14–19, Further Education (FE), Work Based Learning, Adult and Community Learning and Higher Education (HE). Annually it enrolls in excess of 10,000 learners. The college has five main campuses located at Llanelli, Carmarthen (Pibwrlwyd and Jobs Well), Ammanford and Gelli Aur, and primarily serves the unitary authority area of Carmarthenshire. The College has four libraries which cater for the needs of learners and lecturers across a wide range of curriculum areas, from entry level to higher education. Carmarthenshire is a rural area with 43.9% of the population being Welsh-speaking.

We are continually striving to increase awareness of our resources and improve our users’ information literacy skills, so developing a library app seemed to be the perfect way to bring our resources closer to our audience.

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## App development

During the summer of 2013 we carried out our initial investigations by looking at other FE academic library apps and we discovered that very few institutions had developed an app, let alone a specific library app. The main aim of an app was to take the library closer to our users, with the objective being to provide a broad range of information relating to the library, in particular quick and easy access to our ebooks and Jisc Collections resources.

At a library team brainstorming session, we established a structure for the app. As our library web-page had been redesigned in 2012 it could be used as a template for the information that would be made available, and we wanted it to support the college's Welsh-language policy, so all information on the app had to be bilingual.

The next step was to investigate app creator software; our requirements were that it should be compatible with both Apple and Android devices, free of initial outlay or follow-on fees, user-friendly, available to download freely via QR code, and be customer-focused software – making it easy for our users to get in touch via email or phone and most importantly enable easy downloading of ebooks from the library catalogue. We worked closely with several college departments to achieve our goal. We discussed the idea of a library app with the college's ILT co-ordinator, and Appshed<sup>1</sup> was suggested, as it had been recommended to the library by another college. We agreed that it was the most suitable free software available and was the way forward.

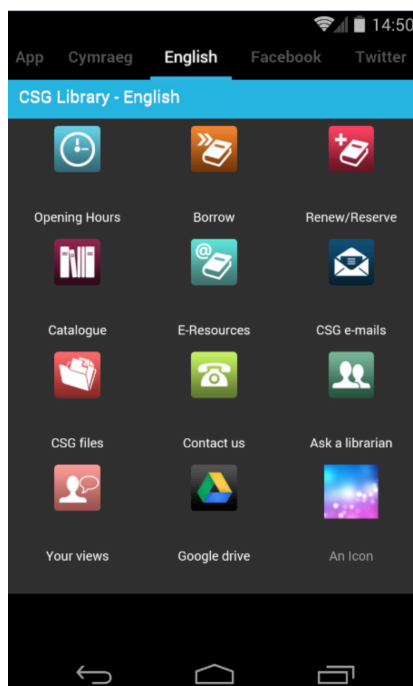
Two members of the library team then delivered a training session on how to start building it. Once the framework of the app was set up, we were left to our own devices to input all the information and links. We took only one afternoon to create it. Once it was developed, the college web graphic designer created the icons which identified the different pages, and our translators worked on the Welsh version. We spent a week testing the links to ensure that there were no glitches once the app went live (**Figure 1**).

The college's marketing department designed promotional "Zap our App" posters and bookmarks and, to keep costs to a minimum, they were printed in-house using the reprographics department. College senior management were consulted for final approval prior to the launch, and the marketing department wrote and distributed a press release, greatly adding to the sense of achievement!

The app development provided an opportunity to work closely with other departments within the college and these links can be further developed in future.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://appshed.com>



**Figure 1:** App layout.

## Launch and promotion

We were ready to launch it at the beginning of the autumn term; all new and many returning learners were introduced to the app during their library induction. This has been an ongoing process for all new courses starting throughout the year. As our two ebooks suppliers, Dawsonera and ebrary, had produced instructions on how to download their books to mobile devices, we printed these and added them to our collection of library helpsheets. At inductions many of these were collected.

The library services manager was asked to give a presentation to the college's senior management team who gave very positive feedback. Other sessions were then delivered to various curriculum areas in order to increase awareness across the college.

The library holds an annual library open week in October, which gives learners who missed their inductions or were late starting college the opportunity of visiting the library to be informed of what resources are available and what services are provided.

To further promote the app and reach an even wider audience it was decided to run a library app roadshow to coincide with the library open week, thereby



**Figure 2:** Marketing poster.

taking the app to the users instead of waiting for users to come to us. A team of library staff and a member of the IT department visited each of our campuses and set up a stall displaying our posters (**Figure 2**) and bookmarks, including in the refectories, to make the most of the opportunity and engage with as many learners and academic staff as possible. We demonstrated the app in action and promoted the advantages of downloading it to mobile devices; learners and staff were encouraged to “Zap our App” using the QR code. All users were asked to create a shortcut to the app on their phone or tablet home-screen for the chance to be entered into a prize draw with the opportunity of winning one of four £20 Amazon vouchers (**Figure 3**).

It was a fun event for all involved and the response from all those who downloaded it was really positive, providing easy access to our catalogue, opening times and emails. It proved to be a great talking point and staff and learners were keen to give it a go! However, the downloading via a QR code proved to be a barrier as many people didn't have a pre-installed QR code reader on their mobile devices. Once this problem was identified the URL link for the app was added to all promotional material.



**Figure 3:** One of our competition winners.

Meanwhile, we were very busy delivering our autumn term digital literacy sessions, and our second-year PGCE learners in particular were thrilled to discover the app, downloading the ebooks on to their tablets and phones during the session. They were delighted to find how user-friendly the app was and to have digital access to library resources. All Library staff were also instructed on how to download the app, so that they could promote “Zap our App” in the library not only during the open week but throughout the year.

All four libraries produced eye-catching promotional displays using posters, flyers and bookmarks, and the roadshow was posted to the library web pages as well as the library, college and librarywales.org Facebook pages to further increase awareness (**Figure 4**). Notices encouraging participation were placed on the College Gateway message board seen by learners and staff. Generic and targeted emails were also sent to academic staff encouraging them to bring their tutor groups in to “Zap our App”.



**Figure 4:** Our Facebook posting.

All this activity justified participation in the Wales Libraries Marketing Innovation Awards for which we received a highly commended in the FE category. Marketing the app has to be an on-going process. Most recently, at a college apprenticeship event, library staff could show the app to all attendees and several more of our academic staff downloaded it.

To continue to raise awareness, to extend the functionality of the app and to learn more about how it could support connection to ebooks on different devices, we are now experimenting with “on the spot” morning break sessions. Here, two of us offer help with downloading our app and with the unfamiliar navigation through to our ebooks. These encounters allow us to meet learners on their own ground and to show them that valuable library resources are accessible to them anywhere.

### Supporting our users

We can observe how owners of smartphones and tablets use their devices. We have spoken to office staff, learner support workers, learners and tutors. Their phones are often so new to them that there is often uncertainty. We prevent potential mistakes, calm impatience and reassure. Users of phones

touch links at speed and have very little patience if the desired outcome is not instant.

To help us with this flexible style of support, we purchased a library iPad on which to train and demonstrate. This has proved invaluable during our fortnightly drop-in sessions at our Jobs Well campus, which does not have a library on site. It has been, therefore, the perfect setting for promoting and demonstrating the advantages of the app. Our iPad was set up by the IT department so that wi-fi access to the internet is continuous (unlike personal phones and tablets which "drop out" when the device goes in to sleep mode). This has allowed us to demonstrate the app and all its features whilst using it to support users with all manner of library enquiries. However, the Safari default browser on the iPad was causing us download problems; being new to Apple computers, we asked our Apple Mac expert, who had a top tip: use Puffin!

We are a very rural college and at three of our four campuses there is not a reliable 3G connection; mobile access can be slower than a PC, and our wi-fi connection is not always reliable. Taking on this case study has pushed access to the top of our agenda. We know where there are problems and where some of the best hotspots are, such as a certain window ledge in our very rural Gelli Aur campus!

There are several processes to go through to download our ebooks, processes that create extra barriers to taking the first steps:

- Creating an Adobe account
- Signing in to Google Play or the iTunes store
- Downloading Bluefire or ebrary reader
- Signing in with Shibboleth

These requirements cannot all be set up for an individual during an "on the spot" or "drop-in" session, so we encourage learners to have a go at starting a process that they can complete independently by following the help sheets or by contacting us in the library. Also, ebrary and Dawsonera use different ebook apps for downloads, and have different loan periods, interfaces and functions. We have to be careful to prioritise a book that will make a difference to the user so that confidence is built.

Such intensive testing has brought to light refinements we need to make:

- To bring closer together the labels and the icons on the app as it is a little confusing at the moment
- To move ebooks to the top of our "media type" list in the OPAC
- Possibly change the links to ebooks so that it is clear which provider the title sits with

We are also now more aware that learners have multiple misapprehensions, for instance, if they do not have an internet contract on their phone they may not know how to turn on the college free wi-fi access.

## Conclusion

The software was free of charge and does not contain reporting functionality, so it has not been possible to track the number of users who have downloaded the app. In an attempt to capture data, the library will ask for a question about it in learner exit surveys.

We expect the app access to ebooks to drive ebook usage in the future. It provides an alternative way of accessing our services and resources that is already well-received and likely to grow. The app to ebook study has invigorated our testing of the app as well as of our own phones and tablets! It has extended library staff understanding of the barriers and challenges of mobile access, informing us for future refinements so that we can continue to improve our app to ebook functionality.