
Departure from the library desk! One undergraduate programme's story of its subject librarian's evolving role



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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed significant change in the working practices of 'subject librarians' in universities. This role is also known as 'subject specialist', 'information adviser' or 'faculty liaison librarian' and has been more recently referred to as 'effective learning advisor' (ELA).¹ Changes in job title reflect significant developments and changes in a post's responsibilities and working practices.² We aim to highlight the impact of the subject librarian's change of role through telling the story of one academic undergraduate programme, the BA in education studies at the University of Plymouth (UoP).

It was once the role of subject librarians to work within a library environment providing enquiry services and acquiring and cataloguing publications and library resources for subject areas through liaison with academic colleagues. Over the last ten years this role has evolved significantly and it is now common practice to observe subject librarians in a teaching capacity, working

closely with academic subject teams and university students.

These developments are the result of government and local initiatives and of policies in higher education promoting and resulting in the role's expansion. We might consider for example 'widening participation' and 'graduate attributes and skills', with related practices such as personal development planning (PDP) and the development of information literacy skills. These initiatives have had significant impact on the structure and content of undergraduate degree programmes. Ensuring that contemporary students are provided with effective and meaningful input and support when developing their information literacy skills, as well as reflecting on their development through PDP, are now integral parts of university learning. This aspect of the student learning experience needs to be managed effectively, integrated into and thus complementing their academic learning, as opposed to being seen as a bolt-on and as separate.

Our story is an attempt to unpack and make clear the changes in the subject librarian's working practice that took place at UoP in our BA in education studies degree from 2001 to 2007. Our work shows how, when managed effectively, these changes can have far-reaching and positive results for students, the academic degree programme and library team members.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INFORMATION LITERACY CURRICULUM

Our undergraduate programme began in 2001 and one two-hour library session was embedded in a first-year core academic module. Its purpose was to introduce students to the library and to online research. In particular the session covered the identification and accessing of academic sources for the purposes of delivering on a group task set prior to the subject librarian's input. The key aim of this library session was to ensure that all first-years were supported in getting up to a certain level of ability when making use of information sources for their academic work.

In order to assess the effectiveness and impact of the library session, students were further required to submit a related assignment consisting of a reflective essay and bibliography. This work was then assessed by the subject librarian and returned with feedback. In our first three years the degree programme followed this input with a subsequent and related session in year 3. The focus this time was on supporting students and

addressing any information literacy issues they had, particularly in relation to undertaking their final-year research dissertation.

In 2004, as a result of academic tutor feedback on student needs at programme-level meetings and input from our subject librarian on the national scene regarding subject librarian roles, we decided to review our library sessions. Our team's major concerns at this time were that students seemed to be more reliant on the internet as a source and were engaging less with critical texts. This – alongside the fact that our subject librarian was feeding back concerns that final-year students appeared to have little or no memory of the input they had received in the first year – led us to make additions, in particular, 'referencing skills' and 'plagiarism awareness'. These issues would appear to be generic across higher education in the UK, as has been explored more fully by Brabazon.³

Related to these developments, national policy in 2005 introduced a new approach to developing and evaluating the development of graduate skills through PDP. It was very apparent from team discussions with subject librarians that there was a connection between PDP aims and the information literacy skills already being developed in years 1 and 3. The response of the programme team's discussions and subsequent work by our subject librarian was to develop an information literacy curriculum across *all* years of the programme. This would provide the opportunity for students to acquire and develop these skills on a yearly basis, with annual evaluation of their application in related academic work through academic-tutor feedback.

We introduced a second follow-up session in the first year, which enabled our librarian to make use of students' assignments and tutor feedback from term 1 to assess their skills and pick up on any specific information literacy needs. Students were then supported as they addressed these needs in relation to their developing PDP, specifically noting points for action and review.

A third session was introduced in the students' second year for further follow-up and PDP work. Although similar themes are addressed year on year, there is flexibility in the sessions to enable students to bring along for discussion particular problems or issues.

The addition of extra sessions allowed the subject librarian to rethink content and develop a more responsive approach, slowing the pace of the orig-

inal content and also allowing the development of other themes such as mind-mapping and critical thinking. The emphasis shifted from 'accessing' sources through technology to developing an understanding of appropriate academic sources for the education studies degree programme. Further developments occurred in subsequent years, including introducing one-to-one tutorial time for students undertaking independent study and group tutorials held jointly with members of academic staff.

CHANGING ROLE OF SUBJECT LIBRARIANS

Although the development of an 'information literacy curriculum' within the programme is interesting in itself, something integral to that process – and responsible for the success of it – is the changing role of the subject librarian, particularly in relation to the programme, academic staff and students. Subtle changes took place to transform the relationship of the subject librarian with the programme team from that of external support to equal partner. Specific developments that enabled this to happen were:

- subject librarian introduced as part of the academic team to students on their first day
- subject librarian becoming an integral part of the team by attending team meetings, away days and module planning sessions
- subject librarian developing a deeper understanding of the content of modules and the underlying aims and philosophy of the programme
- subject librarian providing input into programme development, in particular how his/her support can help achieve and enhance the quality of the student experience
- change in academic staff's perception of the subject librarian's role from that of a 'separate persona' to an 'equal and essential partner' vital to the student learning experience and programme effectiveness.

Our integral approach to information literacy helps students understand better the role of the subject librarian and allows them to see the role as an important part of their academic learning. Students come to tutorials knowing what they can expect, which helps them prepare for and make the most of these sessions. The development of a tutor relationship, formerly impossible due to there being little contact time, helps the subject librarian gain a better understanding of 'where the students are' in terms of their information lit-

eracy needs. This in turn helps inform approaches to teaching and service development.

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

Evaluation by the subject librarian indicates that student attendance at library sessions increases over the term of the programme. Evaluation by programme leader and feedback from academic tutors indicates that over the course of the programme students are increasingly making effective use of academic texts and show better understanding of research tools. Feedback from student representatives at annual programme-review meetings and from national student survey reports further strengthens our programme team's view that input from our subject librarian is a much-valued and appreciated component of student learning and programme success.

The following citation is from our external examiner's report in 2007: 'I was impressed by the provision for students across all levels for Learning and Research support, for information relating to what constitutes plagiarism, and for guidance on essay writing and referencing.'

CONCLUSION

Going through the process of writing about our journey has resulted in many questions emerging, questions which we aim to follow up. In particular we feel there is a need for universities to evaluate and address the changing role of subject librarians and to do so in a way that supports both their professional development and the growth and success of related academic programmes.

We have found ourselves linking to significant academic literature and theory, particularly finding strong connections in the work of Dewey on 'education and democracy'⁴ and of Gibson and Blandford on 'democratic models of education management'.⁵ We feel that the changing role of our subject librarian, the empowering of her voice and practices, along with significant student and programme results, all provide a case for a more holistic team approach in managing an academic programme. In particular, our experiences and subsequent reflection have highlighted to us that connections and effective working practices between traditionally divided sectors of the university – library management and academic subject management – can result in significant practices in student and academic programme development and growth.

Our work has highlighted the need for universities in general to consider and evaluate changes in subject librarians' working practices in ways that support them in working with academic tutors. Our experiences make clear to us the need for subject librarians to be enabled to act as integral components, and thus valued members, of degree programme teams. We could not have achieved the programme set out above without ensuring that the subject librarian's voice was included in our academic programme meetings and that her skills and resources were seen not as just an 'add-on' to the students' academic learning but as a fundamental (and thus integral and valued) component of their learning and therefore of our degree-programme offer. Recent academic research publications in this field concur with our thinking. In particular Reed, Kinder and Farnham, writing about collaborative processes in teaching information literacy, suggest that:

*'... collaboration will work best if it is planned at a curricular level, if the librarians are truly integrated ... if the librarians provide input on assignments and help with student feedback, and if targeted information literacy knowledge is tested. ... This planning takes time, but the librarians offer unique contributions and insight into issues surrounding information literacy that may not be obvious to faculty instructors. ... Integration of Subject Librarians into university courses has benefits in terms of increases in student information literacy and increases in Subject Librarian knowledge of faculty expectations.'*⁶

We aim to continue developing our subject librarian role and evaluating our information literacy offer through a collaborative process. As we know, the practices and expectations of undergraduate degrees are changing. It is important that the voices of all members of a degree-programme team are heard and enabled to feed into programme change and development. For us this kind of collaborative practice has been a success for all involved.

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