
The evolving information professional: the changing role of the Open University subject librarian



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In this article we examine the way in which the Open University (OU) has changed over the last couple of decades, and what that has meant for the OU library and its impact on the subject librarian role. We will reflect on some of the external influences which have led to change, and draw on the experiences of staff to analyse the skills required then and now. We end with a look to the future.

At its inception the OU was doing something quite revolutionary by offering a university education to those who had missed out on this opportunity. For many years, students were sent everything they needed for their course 'in the box', with no requirement to read beyond course materials; indeed this was actively discouraged. There were of course also the famous night-time television broadcasts and – to give students a taste of campus life – residential schools. At this time library services were offered only to the relatively small community of campus and regional-office-

based academic staff responsible for writing OU courses.

The great leap forward came in the mid-1990s. Widening internet access and new leadership at the OU library resulted in a service being offered to students for the first time. In 2000 the OU library's website, providing access to online collections, was launched. Alongside these developments in technology and management came changes in approaches to learning and teaching, with moves in UK higher education towards more independent and resource-based learning. Now at the OU new course models are being developed. Students are increasingly expected to research outside their course materials and to develop key skills – including information literacy – for life and work. All courses now have a course website on the virtual learning environment (VLE).

In order to understand how working practices have changed over the last couple of decades, we compared the pre-1995 role with the current situation. We have illustrated this with two case studies of library staff.

CASE STUDY 1 – LEARNING AND TEACHING LIBRARIAN TEAM LEADER, EXPERIENCED MEMBER OF STAFF

In order to understand the journey travelled by OU library subject librarians, we talked to a long-standing member of OU staff, who has worked at the OU library for over 25 years, first as a subject specialist and more recently managing a team of library staff supporting two faculties.

There have been a number of changes in that time. When our interviewee joined, subject librarians, known as liaison librarians, worked with faculties and course teams based at the OU's headquarters in Milton Keynes and with regional-office staff, but not with students or their tutors, now known as associate lecturers. The main role of librarians was to help individual academics find relevant material to support course-writing and also their own writing, but research was not supported. Librarians would attend course-team meetings, read drafts of course material and comment on them. They would also write detailed printed library guides for students to explain how to search for and find information using other – mainly public – libraries.

Other key duties were picture research and current awareness. Picture research required librarians to track down illustrations and clear rights for them to be used in courses, as well as liaising

with the design studio on behalf of academic staff wanting new illustrations. Current awareness involved scanning printed sources for subject information relevant to each faculty, followed by a large amount of copying, cutting and sticking on the part of the library assistants. Librarians would become highly specialised in their subject areas, building up an in-depth knowledge of the relevant information sources. Electronic searches for information using dial-up sources were mediated by library experts.

Initially everything – both information sources and information management systems – was print-based (although some databases were available on CD-ROM) and procedures were decidedly manual. The workplace was structured hierarchically, with a clear divide between professional and non-professional staff. Until the arrival of word processors, it would be unthinkable for professional staff to do their own typing; instead, secretaries would type letters.

Compared to now, there was far more face-to-face and telephone contact with library users, although the community served by the library was mainly local and very much smaller. One-to-one inductions for new academic staff were carried out, but not group training sessions for staff or students. Overall, it is probably true to say that there were fewer external pressures driving the work of subject librarians at the OU library.

Necessary competencies included subject knowledge and expertise, searching skills (for printed and later CD-ROM sources), negotiation and influencing skills and the ability to communicate well verbally and in writing. Nowadays – as well as management responsibilities – presentation skills, IT fluency and a knowledge of the latest technology have been added to this portfolio of skills. Our case-study subject is one of the library champions for Digilab, the OU library's creative space for exploring the potential of new technologies in learning and teaching, and works extensively with Moodle, the OU's VLE.

CASE STUDY 2 – LEARNING AND TEACHING LIBRARIAN, NEW MEMBER OF STAFF

The following thoughts have been provided by a member of staff in his first professional post who has been working at the OU library for just two years. He has a dual role: working with courses and programmes for the faculties supported by his team and liaising with suppliers of online sub-

scription resources. This includes troubleshooting when there are access problems. Other minor roles include taking a turn on the OU library helpdesk to answer queries from students and staff, delivering training and helping to implement new library systems.

It took this interviewee at least 18 months to feel confident in his position. This was due to there being a lot to learn, working across two different, but closely related, teams within the library. He has become a jack of many trades, but also an expert at a few and this has meant learning several new skills.

He has to understand different perspectives in relation to those he liaises with: for example, being able to see from the perspective of students, academics and resource suppliers in order to represent the other two, depending on who he is communicating with.

He has had to learn to teach effectively in order to deliver sessions to various user groups and has both drawn on his experiences as a student and learned from colleagues in order to do this.

He has built up knowledge of the nuts and bolts of various IT-based library tools, such as IP authentication, Athens, Shibboleth, an OpenURL resolver and a federated search engine. He thinks it will become increasingly important for librarians to understand the technologies underpinning our services in order to assist users effectively.

Flexibility and adaptability have been important: 'It is almost as if, as a librarian, being a highly competent generalist, able to turn your hand to a multiplicity of tasks, is more important than having considerable knowledge relating to any particular discipline.'

Finally, he feels it is essential that librarians are confident with all aspects of the online environment, from Academic Search Complete to Wikipedia, and from the extant tools of Web 2.0 to the potentials of Web 3.0, because in future the lines between these resources and tools are only going to become more blurred, to the extent that students of the now will just consider them all to be synonymous with 'the internet'. He is hopeful, though, that all students (be they under 16 or over 60) will, through the efforts of librarians and other educators, understand some of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the tools and resources available to them.

He does not believe in the homogeneity of the 'net generation' but, as somebody born outside it who shares many of its characteristics, he does believe that it is a movement which education needs to take into consideration. To this effect he thinks librarians need to enable themselves to be seen, by academics and students alike, as being 'savvy travellers' in the technological world,¹ but not by contributing to the moral panic of jumping on the 'digital native' bandwagon.²

What are the differences between then and now? One key change highlighted in the case studies is the shift in role from subject specialist to generalist, from keeper and controller of information to information manager and facilitator of access.

Nowadays, the internet makes information available to anyone who cares to use it, and the emphasis in libraries is on the development of information literacy skills: helping our users to do things for themselves rather than doing it for them. This is both an opportunity for the OU, which has always enthusiastically embraced the latest technology, and also a threat if we find that our users are bypassing library resources completely in favour of Google. One key aspect of our work, therefore, is to build online resources and skills into OU courses; another strategy is to ensure that our resources can be found and linked to via Google Scholar.

We still need good communication, negotiating and influencing skills. Promotion and advocacy are critical: there is no room for complacency in assuming that people will understand the value of our services and come to us. The experience of librarians at Bangor and other institutions has acted as a warning to library managers across the land.³ Web 2.0 tools offer an opportunity to go out to users and to meet them where they are. The OU library has a growing Facebook community, and social networking tools such as Twitter and Ning are also being embraced.

With the amount of information available increasing all the time, librarians still need searching skills but these days it is impossible to know everything. Instead, the emphasis is on a more generalist set of skills and we rely on colleagues to help us out. There is an ever-present requirement for us to keep up to date with the digital environment.

Regarding OU course-writing, we need to be aware of course learning outcomes, but may be less involved with the detailed content. The

timescale for producing courses has become much tighter, and will become faster still in order for the OU to stay ahead in the current political and financial climate. One strategy is to produce generic resources and learning objects that can easily be adapted to particular course contexts. In our case, these will focus on information literacy (IL) as a key skill. We will use any means possible – online or face-to-face – to convey IL skills to our users. In the last year or so the library has started using web conferencing software to deliver training sessions to remote users, and this is proving popular.

Nowadays, we type our own e-mail messages, arrange meetings and write up notes ourselves. One consequence of this is that we talk less on the phone with people and have less face-to-face contact. However, Web 2.0 has led to an interesting shift in workplace communication. Alongside the blurring of boundaries between roles (with technical know-how often being as important as a librarianship qualification) has come a subtle challenge to traditional hierarchical structures. The informal conversations on Twitter and Facebook can bypass the organisational structure by allowing like-minded individuals to share information quickly on topics of current interest. We are also aware of the way in which the 'social knowing'⁴ of collaborative tools such as wikis and social bookmarking can enable learners to construct knowledge collectively as well as individually.

Compared to our faculty colleagues, we are highly skilled and confident in the digital environment. Duncan's hybrid role as subject librarian and resource troubleshooter illustrates the fact that our understanding of publishers, licensing and the business of information is of key significance. This is starting to be more widely known and valued by academic colleagues. Relationships with faculty academic staff are still important, but liaison also now extends to technical, media and rights colleagues. New models of course-production are starting to involve successful collaboration between a number of key players, including the library.

These days we are highly aware of the political environment, and the national student survey has raised the stakes when it comes to student satisfaction with our services. The quality of the student experience has to be at the heart of what we do. In the future the OU is likely to be dealing with more first-time younger students – those categorised as the 'net generation'. They will most likely have expectations of finding things fast, and

may well be used to creating their own systems of categorising information.

How will our skills stand up in the future? A quick scan of the literature suggests that, although some studies have been done in the US, there is more investigation to be done in this area for the UK. Corrall and Hardy draw the rather cautious conclusion from their research into the roles, relationships and competencies of subject librarians that 'The findings suggest that subject librarians are still fulfilling a useful role in the web-based environment, but further research is needed to substantiate such claims and refute counter arguments'.⁵

We would go further and say that subject librarians at the OU have a vital link with library users, acting as the human face of the digital library and also as a key marketing tool which should be fully exploited. We are used to working in an environment of constant change and are well placed to adapt to new roles. Today we are called 'learning and teaching librarians' but in future our titles may differ to reflect newer roles. Workforce development plans are in place to ensure future-proofing of our skills and competencies.

In a recent article on how the younger generation are changing the way we work, Don Tapscott writes: 'The net generation possess the skills to win in this world. Look at how they work, and you'll see what it takes to succeed in these challenging times.'⁶ It is our contention that librarians at the OU also possess these skills and are well placed to take a leading role as the Open University embraces the challenges and opportunities of education in the 21st century.

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