
Reflecting roles: being a successful subject liaison librarian in a changing environment



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In this article we have compared the experiences and views of a new entrant into the profession, who has experienced relatively little change, with those of somebody who is more well-established and involved in moving the library forward. This is in acknowledgement that academic liaison can take place at a local departmental level but that it is equally important at a more strategic level, such as with a whole faculty. The resulting article also addresses the question not just from the point of view of what skills are required but asking 'How can we measure the success of our liaison activity?'

DAVID STACEY: TRAINEE LIAISON LIBRARIAN

I began work as a trainee liaison librarian at the University of Reading in September 2006, having just completed an MA in librarianship. Lectures had addressed the different job titles used in universities and the responsibilities and skills typically involved in subject liaison work. The variety of supporting case studies and breadth of theoretical and practical preparation throughout

the course also reinforced my early impression of the role as essentially generalist.

During my induction at Reading, I was expected to learn quickly, actively developing practical liaison skills, meeting my departmental library representative and head of department and picking up tips from my predecessor's notes. Beginning the chartership process and its planning stages early on in post helped me draw together the different aspects of my day-to-day work. I then matched these against my previous expectations to identify my development areas and address these in my personal and professional development plan (PPDP) as follows:

- Develop my liaison role and subject expertise. Develop my supervisory skills (particularly for • planning/managing shelving operations).
- Improve my web design and maintenance skills for my role as assistant to the library web manager.
- Develop my writing style for university materials (in print and online) – adopting appropriate university branding and style.
- Develop practical collection-management skills.
- Develop my teaching skills for more effective user education, including e-learning – using the Blackboard VLE and completing the teaching and learning support programme (TLSP), accredited by the Higher Education Academy.

My skills for success

After the end of my chartership year, I reflected on what I had learnt from most and what could be measured as successful. These can be summarised into eight overlapping areas:

- 1 Communication and cooperation skills – I networked with course leaders to arrange student inductions and also built rapport with my library representative whilst arranging procedures to save time when ordering books and editing stock. We also agreed to exchange information regularly about budgets and potential item orders and to cooperate over development of collection policies.
- 2 Marketing skills – I learnt to justify (and promote) my own role and raise awareness of services and facilities. This ranged from maintaining a physical presence by visiting my department to reporting on student feedback from training sessions, as well as promoting new library services such as online ordering of inter-library loans.
- 3 Subject knowledge and current awareness skills – these were developed by cataloguing experience, enquiry handling and attending key lectures. I also explored subject resources online, joined relevant mailing lists and set up publisher and database alerts.
- 4 Technological expertise – I attended courses, set up database trials and gathered online user feedback. Web-design skills allowed me to promote e-resource tips and update my subject information pages. Similarly, I used the university's virtual learning environment to disseminate teaching materials.
- 5 Financial and collection-management skills – I updated a collection-development policy, learnt how to balance stock editing with new acquisitions and developed budgeting skills to assist the department with choosing new books and serials.
- 6 Information literacy, teaching and training skills – I found the TLSP course really boosted my confidence and increased my value to the department. It helped me market myself and course leaders then recommended me to their colleagues! I now use learning technologies and interactivity as much as possible. I have learnt to base lesson plans and learning outcomes on student needs, not on what I think they should know; for inspiration and context, I also attend a lecture or two and read the module descriptions.
- 7 Cross-over skills: such as projects and management – I use what I've learnt from my other internal roles (e.g. web management, assisting our marketing manager with promotional work, supervisory and committee work), and apply this to my liaison roles where possible, for example updating subject internet resource pages or managing large-group training.
- 8 Continuing professional development skills – preparation, organisation and reflection on what I have done really helps me to identify what to do and what not to do. Building my CPD portfolio helped unite my disparate duties and plan my skills development in a focussed way.

How do you know you have been successful?

With increasing emphasis on evidence-based practice it can be tempting to focus on collection of quantitative information; however, qualitative and anecdotal evidence are also useful, particularly when using positive feedback in a marketing context. In practice, I've found qualitative evidence is the easiest to acquire – especially unsolicited praise or comments from staff and students I have helped – but a mix of both types is ideal. Statistics can be collected for contact and enquiry time with users. Student feedback can be quantified to an extent by using opinion scales, giving a score for a range of attitudes from negative to positive. Qualitative comments gathered at the same time help to explain the results and often offer solutions to any problems that may arise. Traffic-light feedback (what to start, stop and continue doing) is my current favourite, as it is better at pointing out specific things to change or keep than a set of numbers. Focus groups and online feedback questionnaires are also excellent tools, particularly for library-wide project work.

It is hard to gain output-based evidence for the impact of liaison work, but the relationships built with departmental staff will be a good indicator. I have found that success is very much about how much the academic department trusts me to be its advocate within the library.

A lot of these positive outcomes emerge through the beneficial process of reflection, especially through the chartership process, which enables a new subject librarian to tie all the different roles together and monitor progress. I found achieving professional recognition to be a good measure of success in itself, but I know I now need to follow up my chartership action plans, as well as those set out in organisational staff reviews.

Ultimately, the variety of roles, and the challenge to master them, is what makes subject liaison work so interesting and rewarding. Professional-development planning and reflection provide a springboard for identifying and measuring how successful you are at each aspect. Such skills are crucial to growing into the role and for ensuring that you are able to adapt to changing circumstances and continue to provide a successful service.

CHRISTOPHER CIPKIN: FACULTY TEAM MANAGER (ARTS AND HUMANITIES) AND COURSE SUPPORT CO-ORDINATOR

I work as manager of a small academic liaison team at the University of Reading. The team,

which comprises six liaison librarians, including myself, communicates with the arts and humanities faculty; I serve as the faculty's primary contact point and represent the library at several faculty boards and committees. As with most professional posts at Reading, my role fits into a matrix structure. My other 'hat' is a course support co-ordinator role. This involves driving forward the library's activity to enhance its provision for taught courses. Invariably this means working across all faculty liaison teams, not just my own.

A glance through my (recently updated) job specification reveals that the post requires a wide range of leadership, managerial and professional skills:

- ability to link local activity with wider organisational aims
- communication – with all library staff and library stakeholders
- generic and specific information technology skills (e.g. Microsoft Office vs the library management system)
- collection-development experience (printed and electronic)
- project management skills
- negotiation and advocacy skills
- ability to assess the impact of course-support activities across library teams.

My job specification puts it succinctly. As part of our work towards 'Investors in People' re-accreditation, we also recently undertook a survey of all library staff to find out what *qualities* they think library managers, including those involved in academic liaison, should possess (many, but not all, might be subsumed in the skills list above):

- flexibility
- breadth of vision
- ability to lead by example
- willingness to muck in
- organisational skills
- time management
- expertise in your field
- coaching skills
- respect for staff
- successful/effective delegation
- accepting challenge
- ability to promote positive attitudes
- approachability
- two-way trust – you care
- co-operative approach to working with other teams
- awareness of individual skills and aptitudes
- diplomacy – tact
- gossip awareness

- professionalism
- decision-making – firm and clear.

In terms of the changing role and skills required, much of the way my role is changing is driven by the way the library responds to wider developments in the organisation. For example, the university library is responding to a university senior management drive to centralise academic activity on one site in order to achieve efficiency savings and standardisation of support services. This will involve the amalgamation of site libraries into a single central service. Planning the impact of the rationalisation and relocation of major collections in order to achieve this amalgamation is one of the main challenges facing all liaison librarians and faculty team managers at Reading. It is also part of the strategic drive to move away from printed to electronic collections, as appropriate, and to provide a physical library space that better meets the needs of current and future users. Promoting collection changes to our stakeholders, communicating the vision for our collections convincingly and ensuring that the collections project functions smoothly within my team will require me to employ communication, advocacy and project management skills.

At Reading, academic departments are now being encouraged to plan both their research and their teaching more strategically. This is providing the library with an opportunity to work alongside departments to consider how collections are developed in order to support academic activity in the right direction. A key skill in this area is the ability to negotiate funding and prioritise information needs across a whole faculty.

In terms of my cross-faculty course support co-ordinator role, again external drivers have changed the nature of the role. Initially, my focus was on improving existing procedures and services, especially our high-demand, printed course collections. In more recent times, the introduction of the Copyright Licencing Agency's Higher Education scanning licence and opportunities to acquire more ebooks for course support have given rise to new projects requiring an ability to engage closely with other central service and support departments outside the library, such as our centre for the development of teaching and learning, as well as the ability to co-ordinate work across faculty teams and motivate liaison librarians to become involved in projects. Some skills, such as project management and communication, continue to be essential. Other skills, such as better awareness of copyright law and also

familiarity with specific technology, especially the VLE, have had to be developed to meet the changing course support climate.

The role of a faculty team manager will always be changing, largely in response to shifting strategic agendas at university, faculty and library levels. Currently, the role is changing to tackle the challenge of moving from providing print/hybrid library collections towards providing a predominantly electronic 'without walls' collection. Dealing with the print legacy and developing new kinds of virtual collections will require old skills to be utilised in new ways.

Measuring how successfully skills have been utilised is more problematic. Being able to assess success requires, in itself, a whole set of analytical and reflective skills! But here are a few thoughts on ways I am currently involved in assessing levels of success:

- quantitative data – levels of demand for core reading, accesses to online services, feedback gathered from user surveys
- qualitative feedback from faculty and school committees, as well as individual user comments
- benchmarking where the library stands against other higher education institutions – do our collections compare with other libraries supporting the same subject areas?
- assessing how far we have progressed towards meeting our team/library aims and objectives (which are, in turn, are set to reflect the wider university objective); this process is reviewed annually within my team and is also discussed in individual staff-development reviews and progress meetings
- checking how well the team members feel they are being managed – 360 degree feedback, staff-development review discussions and evaluation of training needs.

A library manager's lot may not be an easy one, but, with the right skills, it can still be an enjoyable one. There are challenges aplenty to be met by adapting existing skills and aptitudes, as well as by honing new ones.

CONCLUSION

Although we operate at different levels within the organisation, we conclude that success depends, in large part, on reflective practice and recognition that subject liaison skills also interface with a host of other generic skills, including managerial and

technological abilities. The ability to be innovative – developing new services or ways of liaison, for example – is crucial, but so too is being able to measure the ‘success’ of such initiative in a range of different ways. Only with this ability can we know we are helping to move our library forward in the right direction and that we have both developed and adapted all our skills appropriately.