

Blending librarianship with research and pedagogy



Karen E. McAulay
Performing Arts Librarian
Whittaker Library
Department of Library and
Information Services
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
k.mcaulay@rcs.ac.uk

Whilst vocational postgraduate qualifications have been the norm in librarianship for many years, postgraduate study has become increasingly common for many career choices over the past decade or two, and it is not particularly unusual for librarians to possess further taught or research postgraduate degrees. However, at least in the United Kingdom, librarians simultaneously engaged in postdoctoral research are perhaps a little thinner on the ground. I contend that the combination of librarianship with research is beneficial both on a personal level and to the library and institution, but that the addition of a third element – pedagogy – brings even stronger benefits.

Lifelong learning as a librarian

Over the past decade and a half, I've combined various working roles. As a full-time music librarian at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, I funded myself through a part-time PhD over five years, studying in my own time. I was allowed four weeks of paid leave towards the end of my studies, which were spent working on the final stages of writing up. Rather than registering for a PhD in my own institution, the nature of my research made the University of Glasgow a logical choice. I chose a local university for convenience, and a subject that would not only benefit me as a conservatoire librarian, but where the research materials would almost all be within a day's return travel: Scottish song-collecting.

My expanded thesis was eventually published as an Ashgate monograph in 2013: *Our ancient national airs: Scottish song collecting from the Enlightenment to the Romantic era*.

By this stage, the opportunity had arisen to be seconded for two days a week as postdoctoral researcher to the Bass Culture project – an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded three-year project with the University of Glasgow, partnered with the University of Cambridge (2012–15). My own institution employed an early-career librarian to provide cover during my absence, an arrangement which proved thoroughly satisfactory to all concerned, allowing me to flex my research muscles on a new project (still late 18th- and early 19th-century Scottish music, but this time fiddle music rather than songs), whilst my younger colleague gained experience and also brought fresh ideas to the library. For me, having two days a week in which to pursue research now seemed a real privilege, having spent five years getting a PhD the hard way! There were also benefits in terms of having the time to network with special collections librarians and with other researchers; to develop an awareness of the emerging field of the digital humanities; to engage in more conferences and other events; and to write both formal and informal pieces about the research itself.

The AHRC project finished in October 2015, and the major outcome of our research – the www.hms.scot database (Historical Music of Scotland) – was launched a few months later, providing indexed access to 22 fully digitised Scottish fiddle music collections, not to mention historical commentary, bibliographic and location data for another two hundred collections, all of which we had inspected in at least one and sometimes more than one library. An invitation to attend an event based on historical music in the special collections at the University of St Andrews library led me to my present postdoctoral researches into historical music legal deposit collections, for which I'm currently seconded to the Conservatoire's research department for one day a week. Since St Andrews was one of nine (and later eleven) historical legal deposit libraries, I'm seeking grant funding to extend my research to the music received by the other libraries too.

Meanwhile, I'm also currently completing a distance-learning postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching in higher arts education – ironically, at my own institution, so not exactly distant! My research project – the final

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component of the certificate – is looking at students' experience of library induction and introduction to electronic resources. Again, I've chosen a subject that will benefit me in my work. An unexpected learning experience has been discovering the substantial contrast between historical musicological research and small-scale research in the social sciences, but over and above this, I've come to understand the significant demands on part-time students registered on taught courses. The independent researcher can work in bursts, but keeping up with taught course deadlines is actually quite challenging.

Forget the stereotype

In earlier times, it was not uncommon to encounter descriptions of someone as a 'scholar librarian'. Stereotypes are always dangerous, but the term does suggest an earnest scholar in a quiet study, surrounded by books and engrossed in lofty thoughts! The reality of being a research-active librarian is very far from this, for the present author at any rate. In the library, I work in a busy, bustling environment, whilst my research day is spent either in the research base (doing research-related activity or grant-writing), or travelling to other libraries or research events. With one day a week as a postdoctoral researcher, I can generally do one of these activities, but seldom more than one!

Librarianship advantages to the researcher – and research advantages to the librarian

Being a librarian, particularly in higher education, does bring substantial advantages when it comes to research. There is no excuse for not being aware either of recent publications or of ongoing scholarship, for a start. Literature searches and use of electronic resources come as second nature, and bibliographic citation practices hardly fill us with the terror that many students experience.

Conversely, being a researcher brings significant benefits to my role as a librarian. Whilst I did also engage in research some decades ago, long before I started my Glasgow PhD, there is no doubt that having current experience in research practice is invaluable, both in terms of credibility, and in understanding the various capabilities that research students are expected to acquire. Having in-depth experience of using the electronic resources available to staff and students is also a distinct advantage.

I've given occasional lectures on my doctoral and postdoctoral research topics both to undergraduate students on the Traditional Music course, and to postgraduate research students, and have spoken widely in a variety of settings and contexts outwith the Conservatoire. However, my transferable skills are in demand at least as much as, if not more than my musicology expertise when I'm on home territory, partly because I'm a historical musicologist in an institution that tends to focus on practice-based research. Experience combined with understanding is a winning combination, particularly when it comes to talking about research methodology. Exploiting electronic resources is more meaningful if one has already made extensive use of them oneself, and can encourage students to determine which resources will be relevant to their enquiry, rather than viewing e-resources en masse as a general panacea for all ills.

When it comes to referencing and citation, it is surprising how much students do appreciate advice. Research-active librarians, experienced in literature searches, maintaining bibliographies, using referencing software, and with a librarian's cataloguing background, are well placed to provide assistance. Other transferable skills evidence themselves less obviously; for example, the experience that comes with over a decade of using social media for research networking and public engagement can be shared in conversation with students, and certainly helps with maintaining a library blog! Similarly, producing written and spoken outputs of various kinds leads not only to writing

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fluency, but also to an organised approach to keeping curriculum vitae and social media profiles up to date. Now that I am experienced in a variety of presentation opportunities, any apprehension about public speaking vanished years ago. Meanwhile, time-management skills are honed by balancing study and work over a number of years.

Most notably, research experience offers any librarian the opportunity to experience other libraries as a *researcher*, and an awareness of what may, or may not enhance the user experience!

Multi-faceted

Whilst librarianship helps me as a researcher, and research helps me as a librarian, the glue that ties the two together is my developing understanding of current pedagogy through my postgraduate certificate studies in learning and teaching. These have imbued me with an appreciation of the ways in which best practice has changed since my undergraduate days, and enable me to talk about the 'flipped classroom', a constructivist teaching approach, or collaborative learning, with an informed understanding of what this actually means. Whilst our efforts at arranging student instruction with faculty course leaders are increasingly successful, it is becoming clear that providing effective training will always be challenging where librarians are parachuted into lecture rooms for one-off sessions with students who would probably prefer to be elsewhere – and with whom we lack the tutor–student relationship enjoyed by our faculty colleagues. Nonetheless, an appreciation of the best circumstances for effective teaching and learning does underline the desirability of small-group sessions with hands-on access to e-resources, where such can be arranged. This is an element of my role in which pedagogical training enables me to maximise the effectiveness of both my librarianship and my research skills.

Aren't three roles confusing?>

There are genuinely few disadvantages to the balancing act that I've embarked upon. Despite 'out of office' notifications, there will always be occasional emails requiring a librarian response on research days, or vice versa, but these can be managed. Offset against such interruptions are the pleasant surprises of an eagerly awaited response, or an unexpected invitation. Or, in a different context, a run-of-the-mill query or user education session may suddenly spark an idea about either research or, indeed, a new pedagogical approach that might work better than present practice. I certainly do feel more part of both the research community and the pedagogical team, even if my input into the latter is more in offering library, research and educational support than as a teacher of music history or theory.

Most importantly – to me at least – I feel I am making a contribution to the research profile of the institution, despite being based in the library for 80% of my working week. My current dedicated day as a researcher is possibly more than some university teachers are allowed, and for that, I am very grateful. As a librarian wearing several 'hats' simultaneously, I like to think that they all suit me.

Weblinks [all accessed 27 February 2017]

Bass Culture in Scottish Musical Traditions [AHRC project research blog] <http://bassculture.info/>

Historical Music of Scotland [AHRC project research output] www.hms.scot

Karen McAulay. Teaching Artist blog <https://karenmcaulay.wordpress.com/>

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland <http://rcs.ac.uk>

Whittaker Live [library performing arts blog] <http://Whittakerlive.blogspot.com>

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