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Researching my own practice: doing a professional doctorate as a librarian

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I started working in academic libraries in 2001, qualified as a librarian in 2003, and have been in the role of academic liaison librarian since 2008. In that time there has been a lot of opportunity for learning, especially when I decided to do the PostGraduate Certificate in Academic Practice at my workplace, which gave me Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy as well as a taste for research. Half of the final mark was decided by a short research project (5,000 words) on my practice, and I decided to look at how academics and librarians could work collaboratively to further embed information literacy (IL) in the curriculum. Actually, it turned out to be an investigation into the academics' perceptions of my role and what I could do to promote our working in partnership (McCluskey, 2011). That was in 2010, and is something that has informed my practice ever since.

I carried on doing small bits of research, and was invited to join practitioner research groups based in the education subject area at work (I was their liaison librarian). Gradually I was included in more and more research projects. In addition, I was appointed a designated librarian for postgraduate research students across the university, a role I fulfilled while still carrying out my subject area liaison duties. Academic colleagues began to ask if I might be interested in studying for a PhD. My initial reaction was that it was too big a commitment and not something I'd be able to integrate into my life, but the idea kept returning.

The thing I enjoy most is working with staff and students from across the university, but as I reached my sixth year as an academic liaison librarian I felt I needed a new challenge. I had begun to re-discover my political outlook (my first degree is in politics) and wanted to do something that may make a difference beyond my immediate workplace. I did not want to become complacent, and wanted to challenge my own view of my role and information literacy in universities and beyond.

This led me to investigate options for further study. I still was not sure about a PhD, but I came across the distance learning Professional Doctorate in Information Science (DInfSc) at Robert Gordon University whilst researching my options. It appealed because it had a taught element, so I would be accruing credits while I was studying, and I could choose topics to study that had changed significantly since I had done my MSc, or were not included in it. Two research methods modules were compulsory for all those doing PhDs and professional doctorates, and I had to choose four other modules from the distance-learning provision across all subjects. This had enabled me to study the areas of data curation and records management, both of which have evolved significantly since I first trained.

My thesis centres on my practice at York St John University. It is my belief, from my experience and previous research (McCluskey 2013, 2012 and 2011), that there are shared concerns linked to IL across the different academic areas in the institution. However, no one has investigated this community of practice in order to develop the understanding of IL amongst academic staff and, in turn, to influence the curriculum via this route. My research has four objectives linked to this:

- To explore the terminology, meanings and values assigned to IL in different academic subject areas in year 1 (level 4) of undergraduate programmes at York St John University and how academics experience and evaluate these in their teaching practices
- To establish whether there is already evidence of the emerging forms of IL (social construction of IL [Lloyd 2010] and critical IL [Elmborg 2012]) in the practice of academics at York St John University, or whether the foundations for their growth can be established

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- To examine how academics experience and evaluate IL in their teaching practices and to ascertain whether there is common ground in IL provision already embedded in the curriculum in these programmes
- To examine whether there is a Community of Practice (Wenger 1998) at YSJ in terms of IL provision. To implement and evaluate a platform for IL dialogue amongst staff at York St John University, to promote the evolution of collaborative IL provision in line with emerging theories, to improve the researcher's own practice and inform the practice of other academic librarians in relation to a collaborative approach (between librarians and academics) to the development of students' IL via curriculum development

Just over two years in and I have learned a lot. My understanding of research methodologies and ethical concerns in particular has improved. When students and staff bring me queries linked to literature searching for their research, I am able to connect all the threads much more easily than previously. Furthermore, my research into the different forms of IL evident in the literature has changed the way I approach it, especially when it comes to students being given agency for their research experience and making it appropriate to their own experiences and expertise.

When it came to the literature review, working at one university and studying at another proved very beneficial. I had access to the specialist databases and collections of two universities (there was a crossover, but both had key resources not found at the other) and I found myself using interlibrary loans very rarely. Undoubtedly my background as an academic librarian made this process much smoother than it was for some of my fellow researchers; I had a RefWorks account up and running with lots of references already in it and was very familiar with its use, which saved time as I produced the review; I have been active on Twitter for many years and find my network invaluable for discovering conference papers and other reports; part of my job involves advocating for open access, so looking for alternative pre- and post-print versions of research was already part of my search process. I am also in a position to be critical when issues such as metrics are introduced as evaluative tools in the taught sessions. (Impact factor seems to be raised regularly.)

Overall I am using an action research approach (Herr and Anderson 2015) with mixed methods for data collection and analysis. I am currently carrying out interviews with members of academic staff, using the critical incident technique (a method rooted in organisational research), which allows the interviewee to recall their experiences (Flanagan 1954). In this case I have asked them to describe their experiences of delivering modules that have learning outcomes linked to IL. This is proving effective at uncovering innovative practice in terms of active and social learning linked to IL. As part of the action research approach, I am also incorporating reflection into my research and linked practice using a model designed by Sen and Ford (2009). This has made me much more aware of linking my practice to research more generally.

Being a member of two universities also has its practical downsides. Rightly there are rules in place about where and how my research data is stored. However, I am unable to download the remote access software for my study institution to my computer at work. I have spent many hours waiting for large audio files containing my interview data to transfer to the remote, secure, research drive via my personal laptop, only for the process to fail. This eats into very valuable study time.

My workplace has been great at ensuring I have the time to carry out the data collection aspect of the research, as it is obviously linked to my role. However, study days are taken up with the compulsory study weeks when I have to visit Aberdeen for face-to-face lectures and tutorials. So I end up using annual leave, flexi-time and my weekends to get analysis and writing done. I have a

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rule that at least one day of the weekend should be free for 'normal' life, so wasting time I have set aside for study just trying to get technology to work is particularly frustrating. I now have more empathy when students report such issues to me.

On balance, working at one institution and studying at another has been the best choice for me. I considered applying for a PhD where I work, but given that the study is based there too, an external view in terms of ethics and checks and balances on the research is valuable. The specialism of IL linked to education in my supervisory team at Robert Gordon University is also something I would miss. Working with my supervisor and doing the DInfSc have made me interrogate my understanding of IL and how it links to my practice in a way I would never have done otherwise.

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