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Beyond the library: reflections from a librarian in an academic faculty

This feature focuses upon information literacy in health courses in Higher Education. In particular, it places emphasis on the importance of faculty-library cooperation in promoting and teaching information skills and reflects upon the time the author spent carrying out roles in each area.

I spent a year carrying out two job roles at York St John University. Half of my time was spent as Academic Support Librarian for the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, based in the library and responsible for promoting its information literacy strategy in the faculty to which I was linked. The other half of my time was spent in the faculty itself as Assistant Health Information Specialist, working with the Lecturer in Research and Evidence Based Practice and supporting her in her information skills teaching and carrying out literature searches for researchers in the faculty. By having a foot in both camps, I came to better understand the need for effective collaboration between the two.

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Within the decade previous to my appointment in the roles, information literacy had come to the fore in the health professions, in the main due to the Darzi report [1] which promotes evidence-based practice (EBP) in the NHS. As a result, clinical librarians in health services have had to promote information literacy in the workplace. In turn, health-related degree programmes need to adopt and incorporate EBP methods in their curricula, to prepare practitioners in training for their future professional roles and responsibilities.

Librarians in higher education have been investigating the need for information literacy instruction for many years, especially since the SCONUL seven pillars were introduced[2]. Ensuring students receive this instruction relies on librarians and academics collaborating effectively, otherwise it can be disjointed and not as relevant as it could be.

There is evidence of librarian and academic collaboration in health programmes from the USA. Schulte [3] describes how information literacy was embedded in a new nursing degree, linking to EBP, with the librarian involved right through from the initial consideration of the degree programme to the end delivery of it, via a health informatics module. It is noted that,

> Becoming fully integrated into the curriculum of information literacy and evidence-based practice is a goal for many health sciences librarians…this librarian…progressed from…providing traditional value added services to an actual peer in the teaching arena. (p.168)

It is concluded that this sort of collaboration is a valuable asset in preparing health students to become evidence-based practitioners (p.170).

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[1] Darzi, L. *High Quality Care for All: NHS Next Stage Review Final Report.* London: Department of Health, 2008.
[2] SCONUL Advisory Committee on Information Literacy. *Briefing paper: Information Skills in Higher Education.* London: SCONUL, 1999.
[3] Schulte, S. Integrating information literacy into an online undergraduate nursing informatics course: the librarian's role in the design and teaching of the course. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 2008, 37, 158-172.

A later study by Schulte and Sherwill-Navarro[4] reveals how perceptions and attitudes need to change with regard to information literacy collaborations in the teaching of health programmes. The conclusions of the study reveal that the librarian role was still very much seen as that of reference assistance and resource help. The professional expertise of the librarian in the area of information and evidence was recognised, but this did not transfer to using them in instruction (pp.59-60).

This evidence from the USA is echoed in literature from the UK. Haines and Horrocks[5] assert that, "early NHS information skills training generally emphasised IT skills" (p.10), steering staff down the route of ECDL, rather than addressing information skills. This has since changed, with EBP highlighting the need for searching, evaluation and retrieval skills. As a result, King's College London, for example, have developed information literacy training programmes for their health courses, with curriculum-based courses delivered by both librarians and academics (with librarians providing training to academics). Appleton[6] has also shown the advantages of information skills training for students of midwifery, with the academics and librarian creating a module together with delivery and assessment carries out by the librarian and second marked by the programme leader.

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There has been a shift in pedagogical practice evident in some parts of higher education towards enquiry-based learning (EBL). Its main characteristics are outlined by Khan and O'Rourke[7](p.2) as being

- Engagement – with a complex problem or scenario – that is sufficiently open-ended to allow a variety of responses or solutions.
- Students direct the lines of enquiry and the methods employed.
- The enquiry requires students to draw on existing knowledge and to identify their required learning needs.
- Tasks stimulate curiosity in the students, encouraging them to actively explore and seek out new evidence.
- Responsibility falls to the student for analysing and presenting that evidence in appropriate ways and in support of their own response to the problem.

Examples of this can be found at York St John University, the University of Sheffield and the University of Manchester, where projects to encourage undergraduate research have been funded. For example, CILASS[8] at the University of Sheffield has EBL projects across various health programmes, such as critical appraisal in Psychology and a dental outreach scheme in the School of Clinical Dentistry. If undergraduates are to be encouraged to take charge of their learning in this way, it is essential that they have the accompanying information literacy skills to aid them. This has

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[4] Schulte, S. and Sherwill-Navarro, P. Nursing educators' perceptions of collaboration with librarians. *Journal Medical Library Association* 2009, 97, 57-60.

[5] Haines, M. and Horrocks, G. Health information literacy and higher education: the King's College London approach. *Library Review* 2006, 55, 8-19.

[6] Appleton, L. Examination of the impact of information skills training on the academic work of health-studies students: a single case study. *Health Information &Libraries Journal* 2005, 22, 164-172.

[7] Khan, P. and O'Rourke, K. *Guide to Curriculum Design: Enquiry-Based Learning.* York: Higher Education Academy, 2005.

[8] CILASS. *CILASS Funded Projects.*Accessible at: http://www.shef.ac.uk/cilass/projects [accessed 8 April 2010].

been shown at York St John University with the introduction of students as co-researchers at the level 3 dissertation stage. Ongoing projects are taken up each year by groups of students, whereby they are afforded the opportunity to work with academics and contribute to the evidence base. Students can also be employed as research assistants, in projects such as those outlined by Bannigan and Good[9].

Such projects are impossible without the students acquiring research skills, especially information skills. Often, the role of the research assistant is to carry out literature searches to form part of the project and identify the evidence already published. As a librarian, I was often called upon to support these novice researchers and show them effective techniques. This then, in turn, allows the students to become more effective enquiry-based practitioners once they enter the profession they have chosen.

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Most literature published on faculty/librarian collaboration focuses on two main considerations. Firstly, there is the area of online training and delivery of materials by information professionals and academics in joint projects. Studies such as that by Hightower et al[10] show that the rise of virtual learning environments afford librarians the opportunity to get involved with web-based information literacy collaboration. This allows the promotion of the library and information skills in a different medium. Morris[11] shows how e-learning can be effective in health subject areas, encouraging students to use a range of tools (such as an electronic discussion forum) to work in inter-professional groups once face-to-face teaching has ceased.

Secondly, there are examples of research into the embedding of information literacy, or collaboration between library and academics for particular projects/programmes, such as that outlined by Hardy and Corrall[12]. They focus on the developing role of the librarian in academic programmes in the areas of English, Law and Chemistry, revealing increased commitments to promoting and teaching information literacy.

It seems that the model of a librarian working within a faculty as well as in the library environment is not one that has been well documented thus far. Even in collaborative activities, the librarian remains rooted in the library. There is, however, evidence of librarians involved from day 1 in devising modules incorporating information literacy, such as with Gibson and Luxton[13].

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[9] Bannigan, K. and Good, S. *Enquiry Based Learning in Action: involving Students in Developing the Evidence Base.* Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Enquiry Based Learning Symposium, York St John University, 4 March 2009.

[10] Hightower, B., Rawl, C. and Schutt, M. Collaborations for delivering the library to students through WebCT. *Reference Services Review* 2008, 35, 541-551.

[11] Morris, D. E-learning in the common learning curriculum for health and social care professionals: information literacy and the library. *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 2005, 22, 66-88.

[12] Hardy, G. and Corrall, S. Revisiting the subject librarian: a study of English, Law and Chemistry. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 2007, 39, 79-91.

[13] Gibson, S. and Luxton, J. Departure from the library desk: one undergraduate programme's story of its subject librarian's evolving role. *SCONUL Focus* 2009, 45, 41-44.

It cannot be underestimated just how far miscommunication can occur when trying to get cross-faculty or department projects off the ground. McGuinness[14] highlights how attitudes within faculty and in the library can lead to barriers in information literacy programme development. Policies, suggestions for change, even a wish to simply talk to someone, can take time to get through committees and can be misunderstood along the way. By working in the faculty, it was possible to talk directly to academics, albeit informally, and we were able to understand each other's needs. It also provided the opportunity for observing the interactions between academics; to better appreciate how they approached the projects they needed to undertake together; to understand more the work that goes into programme and module development. Working in 'isolation' in the library means that workers there are not easily able to appreciate what the work of an academic entails and it became clearer to me how library and information literacy concerns can be forgotten when so many other competing ones need consideration too. Therefore, working within the faculty not only enabled me to understand more effectively the roles of academics and to explore in more depth how my knowledge about information resources could benefit their work, it also showed me the importance of promoting this to them at appropriate times and showing how initiatives such as embedded information skill sessions could work in the context of specific modules.

This is something that has been possible to carry forward into a new, non-health role: I endeavour to work in partnership with academics working within a faculty, rather than imposing information literacy strategies from afar. This also worked in reverse: by seeing my work, day to day, the academics could better appreciate the work a librarian does and see what the role could offer their courses (offering expertise in literature searching and enabling the students to take control of their research in this respect).

My understanding increased the most with regard to what was expected of me. It must be remembered that in health services, a key experience practitioners have of librarians is of information providers – searches are often carried out for them. There is therefore a shift if these practitioners move to lecturing in higher education, where the onus is upon teaching the students to become effective searchers themselves and librarians endeavour to teach them these skills. It became clear that it was necessary to show more effectively the type of instruction that could be provided in this area and what I expected of the students. Working in the faculty afforded the opportunity to demonstrate this.

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This experience brought home the importance of partnerships in the work of academic liaison librarians, especially in the health sector. Given the importance of EBP in the health service, and the shift in focus of health courses to this way of thinking, it is vital that the ability to search for evidence is included as part of the academic programme, not as an add on. By working in the faculty, it was possible to become a more integral part of module building, as it afforded myself and academic colleagues the chance to develop a deeper understanding of each other's roles.

It is this understanding of roles as a key to partnership that I judge to be the most important lesson from the year long experience. It may not always be possible to work in a faculty, however, there

[14] McGuinness, C. What faculty think: exploring the barriers to information literacy developments in undergraduate education. *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 2006, 32, 573-582.

are always opportunities to foster partnerships by understanding the work of the academics one works with and by working to show what a professional librarian can offer. The literature mentioned in this paper shows that embedding information literacy is an effective way of ensuring students acquire the skills they need to find evidence. However, there is little to elaborate upon how one gets to the stage where embedding is possible. Research is now being undertaken at York St John University into the best ways of promoting librarians as partners in higher education, with a view to getting more information literacy embedded on programmes and this experience provides the foundation for this.