

The Politics of Embedding: Library as Partner not Support Service

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Abstract

The Library that considers itself to have the best services in the world may still find itself under-appreciated or – worse still – isolated, unless it delivers those services to its customers in a pro-active manner. Moreover, unless it actively engages with the strategic directions of both the over-arching institution and its individual units – the University and its academic Departments – it risks being ignored and marginalised from the core business of the institution. For too long libraries have, with a degree of modesty and satisfaction, considered themselves as ‘support services’ but now is the time to launch ourselves from the shadows and into the spotlight to take equal billing with academic staff.

This paper outlines steps taken and success achieved by the University of Sheffield Library since taking a more collaborative approach to working with academic departments in 2003. Under the banner of a ‘New Partnership’, buy-in is being achieved at a departmental level, from the Head of Department and Director of Teaching, before focusing on the needs of individual modules. An holistic view of information resource provision is being developed, in particular emphasising the Library’s interest in matching information delivery to pedagogy.

The emphasis is on delivering a greater proportion of materials directly to students electronically, while achieving a balance with print use in those disciplines where this is still important. The extensive use of electronic reading list software, providing links to any digital object, has revolutionised services, integrated with focused digitisation of full text, with print coursepacks and with the use of an Information Skills Module in the University’s VLE, developed in such a way as to facilitate embedding into academic modules.

In conclusion, the paper returns to the importance of gaining an understanding and acknowledgement from the University’s senior management on the advantages of collaborative working so that the technique is recognised as strategically important for the institution: embedding at the institutional level has to be in place if embedding at the module or sub-module level is to be successful.

Keywords: information literacy; learning and teaching; new partnership.

1 Definitions of embedding

Any conference that emphasises, through its title, ‘Embedding libraries in teaching and research’ can expect to result in as wide a range of interpretations and examples of practical implementations of the word ‘embed’ as there appear to be in the literature of librarianship, information management and education. From the typical dictionary definitions such as ‘to fix firmly and deeply...’ and ‘to fix or retain (a thought, idea, etc) in the mind’, embed is frequently used without qualification or explanation because it is always clear what is intended.

It is also interesting that a number of books on teaching practice in higher education, taken at random off the Library’s shelves, appear to make little or no reference to the word. It is largely in the context of the introduction of skills teaching or techniques such as enquiry-based learning or the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) that mention is made. Thus, with particular reference to librarianship – specifically, the implementation of information literacy in university curricula – Bruce [1] notes “the need for the embedding of generic skills in curriculum has been a matter of ongoing interest in some pockets of higher education”. She sensibly differentiates between the “integration” – a word used in the past to denote similar actions – “of supporting resources including face-to-face information skills instruction” – from “embedding of learning processes into curricula that support information literacy outcomes”. Hine *et al.* [2] emphasises “that the development of information literacy needs to be explicitly incorporated into course and subject learning outcomes, and embedded into teaching and learning strategies as well as assessment processes”.

In 2005, this author [6] wrote, “to be truly effective, an information skills resource needs to be embedded in at least four ways:

- in the course which the student is undertaking to gain a qualification
- within the library services being delivered to the student to support his or her learning and teaching
- with the wider full range of study skills considered by the institution or the individual department as key to the full understanding of the course or programme
- within the technical infrastructure – such as a virtual learning environment (VLE) – that forms the delivery mechanism for the learning and teaching.

Through an extension of the use of the word, one might add a fifth way: embedding into the 'acceptance system' of students, getting them to appreciate that information skills are useful and are worth spending time on mastering." All 'to fix or retain the idea of information skills in the mind'!

The current paper looks in greater detail at some of the points itemised above and, in so doing, suggests that there is a wider issue of even greater importance: the need to ensure that the Library is embedded within the institution itself. It is argued that only if the Library can justify its existence by developing and delivering services that are relevant to the core business of the institution will it continue to have the support of senior managers. And that to do this it must shrug off the mantle of 'support service' that it has carried round for last 100 years and be perceived as an equal partner with all other departments, academic and administrative.

This paper describes the steps that need to be put into place to implement embedding of the library at the highest level within the institution with examples drawn from recent experiences at the University of Sheffield. While the excellence of the library's services still depend on the mechanics of delivery, the implementation of the wider process – the strategy – is largely a political process; hence the title of the paper.

2 Drivers for change

The last 5–10 years have seen unprecedented pressures on university library services driven largely by changes in national higher education policies and the responses to these by university administrations. For example, the drive to increase participation rates – up to the stated aim of 50% in the case of the UK government – coupled with widening participation policies, have led to the so-called massification of education and the need to handle significantly larger class sizes comprising students from an increasingly diverse range of pre-university educational and study backgrounds. Also, the desire to introduce greater opportunity and choice once students have arrived at university, to allow them to move between courses, departments and faculties as they develop greater awareness of different disciplines and their own capabilities, has led to the re-thinking of education delivery. There has been a move towards the introduction of more common criteria for standards, assessment and marking schemes across institutions, removing what had previously been seen as a department's, or faculty's, right to set these independently of the rest of the university. Further outgrowths have been the introduction of semesterisation and modularisation as platforms for delivering this increased flexibility.

Additional changes in the UK – the introduction in 2006 of the payment by students of deferred fees and the consideration currently being given to two-years degrees by some universities – is expected to result in an increase in a tendency already emerging: the student as customer. As the student pays for his or her education so their demands, and

those of their supporting parents, will increase and universities must be able to meet these expectations or at least define precisely what is on offer by appropriate service level agreements.

A further element is the rise of the 'strategic student' [4] who is primarily interested in the quantitative rather than the knowledge outcomes of their course: those who focus on what it will take to obtain a degree of a particular level, how much, or whether, individual assignments count towards a final mark, and whether topics will appear as examination questions rather than how they fit into the breadth of subject knowledge. And, it might be added – perhaps too cynically? – demand very specific readings – chapter and verse – to support individual lectures, seminars, tutorials, essays and project work. Winn [9] further identifies the student who 'devotes more time to social activities and employment than to study and appears to have little or no interest in the degree subject', exhibiting 'poor attendance at classes which did not contribute directly to assessment'.

Finally, these changes in the delivery of education come at a time when the sources of university finances are changing and can be subject to substantial swings resulting from global factors outside the immediate control of the institutions themselves: wars, social disruption, terrorism, government policies on immigration, and the opening up of the world-wide education marketplace itself.

Coupled with these national and global trends in the delivery of higher education, there is the position of university libraries. If the University of Sheffield is any indication, it has seen its library budget rise over the period in discussion but not in a way that is sufficient to support either the demand of additional students in different modes of study, the new range of services requested – e.g. 24hour opening – or the increase in journal prices [10]. More is being demanded from within the same, or similar, budget envelope.

This situation is reflected in the results of annual student surveys undertaken by the University where, in spite of an overall satisfaction level with library services of over 70%, satisfaction with the availability of books was significantly lower. The surveys also indicate that students, in common with those in other universities across the UK, are spending less on text books, presumably expecting their universities to provide these.

It is also worth remembering that libraries do not have an inviolable right to existence within any institution, certainly not based on an assumption of perceived need or past glory. In 2005, the University of Bangor, North Wales, appeared in the press [8] when senior management decided that subject librarians were no longer required in a technological environment where most information requirements could be satisfied by searching the Internet using Google. More than ever before, libraries must justify their existence and continue to provide evidence that they have a significant part to play in their home institution.

3 The library response

Libraries are thus having to respond in situations where student numbers are increasing, where library budgets are continually squeezed by inflation and the demand for extended services, and where student satisfaction with at least some sections of library service is decreasing. What should be the library response? Can student satisfaction be increased with little or no more additional funding?

Another way of approaching the same questions might be to ask whether or not the external educational stimuli would result in any change of services if library funding was less of an issue? Look at the increase in student numbers which has caused individual core modules in several departments, particularly at first year level, to reach sizes of 300–450. What does it mean in library terms if multiple copies of core texts are to be provided in these cases? How many copies does multiple represent? 20? 100? 150? Not only does the provision of this number of copies appear impractical, the cost of doing so would eat into the budget available for increasing the breadth and depth of the collection so necessary for a well-balanced university library.

At the University of Sheffield, one response has been to move to a new mechanism for delivering information resources to students by taking advantage of the linking facilities available in electronic reading list software. At the same time, the emphasis has been on making greater use of what was already to hand – full text electronic journal subscriptions – to stress the connections inherent in the concept of research-based teaching.

The electronic reading list software – TalisList in our case – was first used in 2001 in a University-funded Learning and Teaching Development Grant project to investigate the integration of library services with the University's VLE (WebCT). One of the key elements that arose from this work was the need for a better dialogue between library and teaching departments and the realisation that, in spite of a long history of employing liaison librarians, very little was actually known about the rationales behind the delivery of individual modules and the recommendation of readings for them. Focus had tended to take place at the service level – the smooth flow of book orders, decisions on short loan copies, the delivery of user education – rather than looking at the underlying issues: perhaps the adequacy of bookfund did not necessitate any deeper investigations.

However, with electronic reading list software that allows direct linking to any digital object (from within or outside the institution), can include annotations by teaching staff for each item, and which can be organised in line with course delivery, it was possible to have a pro-active dialogue about improving the delivery of information resources to students, module by module, in some cases, item by item.

Through related discussions with academic colleagues, it was further decided to make use of services not previously explored by the library, such as course packs, to digitise articles and book chapters not provided through existing

journal subscriptions and also, through a second Learning and Teaching Development Grant, to develop a WebCT-based Information Skills Module.

In this way a library toolkit evolved consisting of:

- electronic reading list software
- e-offprints, specially-digitised articles or book chapters for a particular module
- course packs
- information skills module.

The aim is to take an holistic view of information provision and, through customising the various elements of the toolkit for individual needs, to enable information resource delivery to fit with the pedagogy of the module. It should be emphasised that library staff do all the data input and the linking to resources, from basic information provided by academics. Some terminology has been changed to reflect the new emphases and, in particular, reading lists have been re-named 'resource lists' to indicate their improved functionality. To emphasise the re-engagement with academic departments the umbrella service – dialogue; toolkit; delivery of resources – has been named the Library's 'New Partnership' and it is marketed to departments in this way.

Following the initial projects and explorations, a deliberate decision was taken to roll out the New Partnership in a strategic, rather than piecemeal, way. Rather than seek participation across all faculties, a small number of departments was chosen in which students had identified book availability as a particular problem and, moreover, where Heads of Department were keen to work with us to see if improvements could be delivered. Thus, a strategic approach was taken: instead of seeking out individual enthusiasts – who might still participate – Heads of Department were asked to support us and then encourage us to work with their Directors of Teaching and module convenors beginning with those modules – often core first year modules with large student numbers – where the greatest impact might be seen. The intention was to embed the New Partnership into departments from the top down.

4 Pedagogical developments

The main drivers for change may have come from outside the library but it is important to realise that the parallel developments taking place in pedagogy, that influence the way teaching is undertaken, must also affect the library's response.

Several of the current critical areas for debate are presented by Laurillard [5], in particular the need to provide students with coping skills for situations in the real world that differ from those found at university and, accordingly, the balance required in the curriculum between expert knowledge and practitioner needs. Not only is this seen as unwelcome by some university teachers, resulting in less emphasis being

placed on the purity and scholarship of their subject, but changes in teaching methods that facilitate practitioner knowledge can also be difficult to implement. Laurillard emphasises the advantages offered by a reflective practicum in contrast to the transmission method of teaching where students are seen as empty vessels to be topped up with facts. We must recognise “the difference between a curriculum that teaches what is known and one that teaches how to come to know”. As university teaching moves towards wider incorporation of reflection and discovery with the intention of producing broad-based, independent learners (see, for example, CILASS, below), so must the library be able to change its spots and move with the changing pedagogy; it must have services that match with reflective learning and seize the opportunities provided by this methodology for embedding information literacy into the curriculum.

At the same time, academic staff in the UK have found themselves under pressure to deliver increased research outputs for the Research Assessment Exercise. Jenkins, Breen and Lindsay [3] outline the way national policies (particularly in the UK) have impacted at an institutional level and created a situation where “teaching and research compete for the time, energy and attention of lecturers” making it “the disaster area of the decade”. In these circumstances, it can be difficult for changes like those suggested by Laurillard to be implemented.

At the University of Sheffield, the re-engagement with departments, coupled with the proselytizing delivery of the New Partnership message across the institution, led to a number of spin-offs related to pedagogy. In particular, the author was invited to be a member of the University’s Learning and Teaching Development Group whose terms of reference include: the fostering of good learning and teaching practice, innovation and flexibility; sustaining and developing professionalism and quality in all aspects of learning and teaching within the University; and the detailed development of the University’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. As a key forum within the University, it is also a meeting point for the Directors of Learning and Teaching Development, faculty appointees whose role is to disseminate and encourage take-up of best practice across departments, in addition to key staff from the University’s Teaching and Learning Support Unit. The networking possibilities arising from these contacts opened up opportunities for participation in the learning and teaching process which were not previously available to the Library, including an invitation to make a presentation on the New Partnership to the newly-established departmental Learning and Teaching Advocates at their inaugural meeting in July 2005. Of particular significance was the opportunity, through membership of Learning and Teaching Development Group, to input into the University’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy as it was being constructed, to have the Library recognised as a stakeholder and to have information literacy and access to information resources accepted as key themes.

Another turning point was the author’s involvement in the development of CILASS, the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences, one of two CETLs (Centres for Excellence in Learning and Teaching) awarded to the University in 2005. In an exciting melting-pot, new ideas were fertilised and nurtured between enthusiastic teachers across three faculties and the library was valued as a partner contributing equally with everyone else. It was in this crucible that information literacy was forged as a realistic concept for the University, particularly through input from the Department of Information Studies (DIS). Subsequently, the ‘Information Literacy Network’ has been created jointly within CILASS by the DIS and the Library with the intention of disseminating good practice on information literacy via workshops and other publicity.

Another driving force is the UK National Student Survey (NSS), a questionnaire survey of final year students across all UK higher education institutions which includes one question about the availability of library resources for ‘your course’. The common goal of wishing to ensure as high scores as possible for this question has led to further joint work between the library and academic departments, strengthening the idea of the New Partnership.

5 Progressing the New Partnership

Early positive responses about elements of the New Partnership, coupled with expressed concerns from students about lack of sufficient materials in some book-based departments, encouraged the library to target special funds to explore the effects of closer collaboration. In late-2004 six departments were chosen – English; History; Law; Politics; Psychology; Town and Regional Planning – and, as indicated throughout this paper, the emphasis was on a two-way dialogue to move things forward. Following agreements with Heads of Department, the convenors of chosen modules were invited to group meetings with key library staff who outlined different elements of the toolkit and from where detailed work began.

The overall aim was to improve students’ access to information resources either directly – by digitisation of specific articles, by linking to existing electronic resources, by course packs, by purchasing additional copies of books – or indirectly, by embedding the Information Skills Module into departmental modules. A key factor was a detailed unpacking and analysis of reading lists: what was expected of students, e.g. should they read every item on a list or only a selection and were some items essential; was it clear to the students which items were which and when they should be read; what were the anticipated simultaneous demands on particular items; which were absolutely key and which might be substituted by alternatives; were the students expected to buy one or more set texts?

In this way the resource lists for a number of modules were completely re-designed to take advantage of the New Partnership. For example, one History resource list was

organised to show, for each of twenty-one lectures, two 'compulsory' readings and two 'essential' readings – all electronic – backed up by a substantial, largely print-based, 'further reading'. Many of the electronic full text items on this list, and those on other modules, were digitised specifically for this purpose, obtaining copyright clearance from the publisher, digitising in-house or via a bureau, mounting on a server and then direct-linking to the resource list. The cost – calculated annually based on the number of pages in the paper and the number of students registered for the module – was borne by the library. Subsequently, the University of Sheffield has signed the 'pilot digitisation licence', an extension to the Copyright Licensing Agency Licence, which allows, under closely defined conditions, digitisation of material from UK publishers without the requirement of seeking copyright clearance for each item. However, this would have provided little help for the resource list described, having been created for the 'History of the USA' module.

The content and structure of the WebCT-based Information Skills Module was created from the beginning in collaboration with academic staff from a range of disciplines together with colleagues from the University's Learning Development and Media Unit [7]. At its core is a generic resource to which all students in the University are automatically registered and which includes pages on, among other topics, referencing schemes, the selection of keywords, database use, internet searching, evaluation of information, and plagiarism. A degree of interactivity is provided along with quizzes on each of the sections and students can work through the material in the order they choose. Some departments have used the generic resource unchanged while with others we have explored customisation and created subject-specific sub-sets. In addition to its 'stand-alone' status, links to the resource can be created from within academic modules while course designers can identify individual elements as re-usable learning objects and embed these into specific points within their own modules. We are now actively working to take the embedding one stage further by creating assignments, the assessment of which will contribute to the academic module rather than be interpreted as a separate 'library' mark. The Information Skills Module is also a key component in the Library's collaboration with departments in creating their Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategies.

Evaluation and feedback – by word-of-mouth, questionnaire survey and focus group – has been positive as indicated by this extract from the Strategic Plan of one department, a document which is received by the University's Senior Management Group (the Vice Chancellor, all Pro-Vice Chancellors, the Registrar and Secretary): "...we have worked very closely with colleagues in the Library to develop a number of initiatives designed to address these problems [of book availability]. These include the digitisation of many key resources on reading-lists, the development of course-packs, and the allocation by the Library of a small fund designed to make up shortfalls in disciplinary areas where we have hired

new staff, but where, historically, little resource has been invested. We strongly welcome the close collaboration that we have developed with colleagues in Library Services. We are working with them to challenge perceptions of the Library held by our students..."

There is now progressing a second round of engagement, with existing and new departments, building on the success so far but also focusing on refinements and improvements, in particular the development of strategies for getting students to read more than the full text items provided in resource lists or via course packs and the creation of tacit or explicit links between resource lists themselves and the exploratory skills required and delivered through the Information Skills Module. What is outlined in this paper is very much phase one of a long-term, ongoing, exercise.

6 The library strategy

As pointed out already, the library at the University of Sheffield took deliberate steps to introduce the New Partnership in a controlled way, though strategically, through the involvement of Heads of Department. The success of the venture led to a consideration of the directions to take in a wider rollout and agreement by the Library's senior management, 'Library Executive', to draw particular attention to the initiative via the new Strategic Plan. Due to appear in summer 2006, the Strategic Plan identifies eight core themes by which the library service will be enhanced over the period 2006–2009. The first two strategic themes are:

- *Theme 1: Building the partnership for learning and teaching*, where it states that 'improving student access to learning resources remains the top priority for the University Library in the planning period... We will extend and develop the New Partnership programme, working with academic colleagues to achieve better integration of learning resources with course design, targeting additional funding to support new initiatives, with the continuing objective of improving student satisfaction with this key aspect of our services'.

- *Theme 2: Information literacy*, which links the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy to the Library's Information skills module which 'comprises a mix of generic and subject-specific content available as learning objects for embedding into departmental modules. We'll work with departments, Faculties, the Learning and Teaching Development Group, and CILASS to extend this work and to support further initiatives aimed at equipping students with transferable information skills that will benefit them both before and after they graduate'.

Although in delivering the New Partnership to departments information literacy is inextricably linked to the improved access to information resources – just another part of the toolkit – a deliberate decision was taken to create maximum impact by identifying these as two themes.

To achieve the stated aims, additional staff are being appointed to the New Partnership team in the Library,

initially to be involved with digitisation elements but ultimately with all aspects of toolkit delivery. The fact that this is taking place within a reduced staffing envelope for the Library as a whole indicates the importance being attached to the programme. Also, for the foreseeable future, a budget is being allocated to support purchase of the additional information resources required, whether this be for digitisation, copyright clearance or the purchase of identified key resources, print or electronic.

The New Partnership communications and marketing strategy is still being developed but is something to which serious consideration must be given when the library is in this for the 'long haul'. Steps are already in hand to revise the guidelines for academic staff who act as 'departmental library representatives', to ensure they provide pro-active support for the New Partnership. A related factor is the badging of resources to try to ensure that students are aware these are being delivered by the university library and not their own academic department, or some other in the institution.

More recently, the New Partnership has received support as a methodology at the highest level of the University as a result of the Library's Strategic Planning Review, a detailed look at all key Library services and the financial implications associated with these over the next planning cycle. Following ratification of the approach, a presentation was given to one of the regular meetings of Senior Management Group and all Heads of Department with the particular aim of communicating the message to all senior University staff as a prelude to wider roll-out. This received verbal support from a number of Deans and Heads of Department and presentations to departments about detailed take-up of the package are now actively under way. The New Partnership is being embedded throughout the University, not just through an individual component such as information literacy, but as a complete programme adaptable to particular needs.

The wider roll-out is being delivered under the banner of the New Partnership or under the title 'Library collaboration in learning and teaching'. No mention of the library 'supporting' learning and teaching. So, is there anything wrong with being a 'support service'? Not inherently but one might use the analogy of the 'corner shop'. The corner shop provides support; it is seen as friendly, amiable, under-resourced and not very-well-stocked and, ultimately, ineffectual: a passive entity. And while ever our academics continue to see the library as a passive place to which to send students – either the physical location or the place on the local network – to get the books they 'expect' the university to have, a place that has little to do with the delivery of teaching, things won't improve. The library is not a support service, it's a collaborator, an equal partner developing new services and providing innovative solutions to well-established problems.

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