

Learning and teaching

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In the last Learning and Teaching column, I considered some of the challenges facing the Open University Library Service as learning provision is increasingly influenced by students who are more and more used to the electronic environment. I looked particularly at the implications and challenges of the pan-university systems being introduced to provide the infrastructure for the delivery of e-learning and teaching to our distance students.

One of the most interesting challenges these changes bring is in the redefining of roles across organizations where learning and teaching is taking place and the nature of those organizations, and this in turn brings changes for the roles of librarians and libraries. In today's learning environment and the learning society, the learning process is accepted in the broadest sense, that is to say, in academic study, in evidence-based practice and in development of skills as well as knowledge, which together bring improvement in the quality of life overall.

Systems in themselves, however well designed and implemented, will not bring advances in the learning experience unless they serve the need of the learning process. Whilst the activity of identifying system requirements might be demanding, challenging and engaging, ensuring that the vision for their use and thus their successful implementation is essential.

In order that academic colleagues engage in such a vision and lead the development of e-pedagogy, it is essential to convince them of the attributes of some of the new technologies and excite them as to how these can be used to deliver the learning outcomes they require. Two important issues here are to provide opportunities both for a degree of experimentation and the sharing of the experience of these experiments, both successful and unsuccessful, to build good practice around particular pedagogic

activity. There are roles to support both activities for information providers.

Delivering the former requires a measure of risk, particularly for those who are trying new pedagogic models. Developing familiarity with the technologies themselves is a key requirement. One approach to this is in providing an opportunity for access to a range of new technologies in order to build an understanding of what might be achieved through their use. So, for example, establishing an informal laboratory or play space might be one approach. What might such a space consist of? Well, this might be the provision of a collection of equipment or tools; anything from an iPod Shuffle, personal digital assistant (PDA), selection of games machines (such as a Playstation), access to Wikkis and blogs, to the use of instant messaging utilizing a webcam and microphone, and even experience of working with an Apple Macintosh in preference to a PC or a mobile phone with video capabilities. To this could be added exposure to the wide variety of computer programs now readily available, including programs for managing personal video footage, which a learner might use as part of survey work, or in clinical behavioural observation, music technology programs which a learner might use with portfolio work, speech recognition for dictating in written material for essays or screen readers for reading out textual material. The Library has a clear role in demonstrating how learning and learning support can be delivered through these devices, providing demonstrations of, say, delivering learning objects to mobile devices or establishing a Wikki for a course team development group to share ideas and thinking, or for groups of learners working across a number of clinical locations. Of course, this does challenge the library staff themselves to be comfortable with these technologies and applications, and may require an internal training programme in its own right, as well as encouraging

the use of these tools and techniques in everyday work within staff activities.

The second major role the library has to play in this agenda is in the dissemination of the experience of experimentation and the emergence of good practice and effective pedagogic models and e-pedagogy; the knowledge management agenda. Although there is an obvious role in the managing of documentation and outputs in some systematic approach to enable these to be shared, there is also the use of the physical space, as neutral space, to bring together colleagues to reflect on experiences. Here, educational technologists can work with research colleagues and practitioners to look at the effectiveness of pedagogic strategies and deployment of technologies and tools across different parts of the curriculum allowing new synergies and partnerships to be built. Such activities should help develop networks of expertise and interest as communities of practice, communities of purpose and communities of interest. A detailed exploration of the different types of communities and their functions is included in Lank (2006).¹ The use of case studies is a particularly useful way of explaining new pedagogic models and approaches utilizing the tools and techniques available. It allows both explanation and facilitation of discussion, taking the audience through the processes involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the learning strategy being demonstrated. The success of one piece of, say, assessment software, may both stimulate its use in another course and provide confidence that it is effective in pedagogic terms and popular amongst learners, whilst being technically sustainable and affordable to set up and manage. Providing feedback from all those involved in the process, including the learner, enriches the value of the trial and allows any future use to build on strengths and to address perceived weaknesses. The use of libraries both for facilitation of such meetings and posters would provide great exposure for such activity.

As learning and teaching changes, so there is a greater challenge to the use of library space to ensure that value for money is still provided for the organization. There are probably two particular drivers for the significant changes beginning to emerge. The first is the increasing use of electronic information resources, and the pervasiveness of

networks including broadband and wireless means that the learner does not necessarily need to be in the physical library to gain access to materials. The second is the increasingly popular activities which reflect the social nature of learning, especially collaborative activity. The Library as learner space begins to drive the agenda for the use of our space. As part of our own 5-year planning, we have considered potential scenarios for the print collection. One of the most interesting aspects of this work has been in the development of trend data and trend indicators to inform our thinking. We have drawn this from information available from publishers concerning their own print strategies, usage statistics of our own electronic, the demand on document delivery and the impact of e-journals on demand; evidence from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) collections work, information on local, regional, national and international digitization strategies and projects. In addition, we looked at trends for the development of regional journal stores—this, together with evidence of new library planning ideas, for example, the information commons, learning grids and laboratory spaces; and practical solutions such as one medical library throwing out almost its entire print collection of journals in preference to more reader places, other libraries throwing out print copies of journals when they arrive (the provision of print being part of some electronic licence packages) have significantly influenced the planning and thinking of our collections and service teams.

Recognizing that learning is a social activity allows a library service to rethink itself in both virtual and physical terms. Whilst there remains a place for quiet focused personal study, more and more library space needs to be bringing in both the café environment and the role of the ‘easy chair’ area traditionally located around the current periodicals and newspapers. Added to this must be the provision of group working space around flip charts and white boards. These types of facilities must be developed in a flexible manner to ensure that they allow the space to be continually redeveloped in response to the learner’s changing pattern of use and behaviour, especially the significant activity of collaborative work. Ownership of the learning space must move from the librarian to the learner, and library managers must collaborate with both

learners and faculty in a new partnership to ensure that they understand the demands of the teaching strategies being used. At the same time, the ranks of computers in library-managed computer laboratories can be rethought as increasingly learners already have their personal laptops, personal digital assistants, iPods and mobile phones, all of which can be used as tools to support their learning in more relaxed and natural ways.

At the heart of these changes lie some very significant questions for all our institutions.

How do we encourage leadership in our institutions to take such agendas forward and to vision, plan and implement the necessary changes? How do we develop the leadership potential of all our staff to engage in the culture change agenda? How can we develop leadership which addresses the degree of collaboration and understanding we need to achieve both inside and outside our organizations? Can our leaders work across organizational structures and boundaries providing 'political' support and contributing resources to enable cross-unit development investing time for experimentation and training?

How do we develop a sense of realistic commercial awareness to ensure that our institutions are able to survive and provide both the virtual and physical learning environments that can be afforded in today's environment, whether local, regional or global? How will institutions ensure

the skills base essential to develop new business models, whether in the public or private sector?

How do we inspire and motivate staff to take on the challenges and balance the demands of delivering the day-to-day service with the urgency of visioning, planning and developing strategies to meet the future scenarios? How can organizations ensure that appropriate objectives are built into appraisal processes and personal objectives and that appropriate reward is made for those delivering the behavioural changes that are desired by the organization, especially where personal power, influence, skills and job security may be challenged?

Background reading

- 1 Bennett, S. *Libraries Designed for Learning*. Washington: Council for Library and Information Resources, 2003. Available from: <http://www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub122abst.html>
- 2 M. Melling (ed.). *Supporting E-Learning: A Guide for Library and Information Managers*. London: Facet Publishing, 2005.

Reference

- 1 Lank, E. *Collaborative Advantage: How Organizations Win by Working Together*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.