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Article:

Teaching research students: refreshing our practice and responding to participant feedback

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Big Bang: the impact of the Roberts Report at Leeds University Library

We had a clear-out of a filing cabinet in our office a little while ago and, amongst the masses of neatly filed (and rather out-of-date) meeting minutes and budget reports, we discovered some dusty artefacts from workshops in the early 2000s: workbooks. Our information literacy support for research postgraduates at the University of Leeds used to be based around these traditional teaching aids. As well as giving an inordinately detailed guide to searching key databases, our workbooks typically included activities relating to getting the most out of Copac, Zetoc, Athens passwords and Subject Information Gateways. Then, in 2002, the Roberts Report[1] created a 'Big Bang' in research postgraduate skills development, and our workbooks disappeared into the black hole of the filing cabinet.

The publication of Roberts triggered an intense period of reflection, research and analysis, during which we questioned our current teaching prac-tices, attitudes and assumptions in relation to this group of students. Roberts funding also allowed us to appoint a member of staff to focus on this issue. By 2005, this dedicated staffing enabled the creation of two new workshops that emphasised the core elements of information literacy, based on the SCONUL Seven Pillars model.[2] Instead of using workbooks, we employed an interactive approach in the sessions; this involved the partici-pants in whole group, small group and individual activities. Both workshops were intended for students who were at the beginning of their PhD, and the topics that were covered are listed below:

Workshop 1: Finding information for your PhD (2.5 hours)
Planning a literature search
Mind-mapping
Keyword searching
Journal databases overview
Hands-on searching

Workshop 2: Managing information for your PhD (2 hours)
Brain style quiz
EndNote
Managing electronic information
Organising your workspace

Student feedback from our workshops 2005–2011
The increase in participant interaction in the sessions provided an opportunity for instant feedback; in particular, one of the key activities in Workshop 1 proved invaluable in understanding more about our audience.

'What's worrying you?' was a paired discussion activity in which research students talked to one another about their concerns at this formative stage of their PhD. When their thoughts were shared with the rest of the group, we invariably found striking similarities in participants' con-cerns.

Whilst many of the issues raised in this exercise were well within the scope of our workshops ('I often worry there's crucial papers out there I don't know are there…'), others seemed beyond the boundaries of our professional expertise ('How can I know this work is significant?'). Issues

in this category were normally referred back to students' supervisors, who, we felt, were much better placed to address such questions. However, our information literacy universe was about to expand greatly.

INFORMATION LITERACY AND ACADEMIC SKILLS: A NEBULA

In 2008 the Skills Centre at the University of Leeds was integrated into the University Library. As a result, there was an opportunity for the work of the Faculty Team Librarians and Skills Advisors to become more closely aligned. In 2010 an Academic Skills Strategy formally set out our shared future direction:

> 'Much of the Faculty Team Librarians' teaching on information literacy already overlaps with other key academic skills, in particular critical thinking and academic writing. The aim is that, by 2015, all Faculty Team Librarians will be able to deliver the full range of academic skills, with the exception of maths support.'[3]

Training and development opportunities in academic skills were provided for Faculty Team Librarians over the following 18 months, including a 'summer school' away day, featuring speakers from the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDHE).

This shift in the focus of Faculty Team Librarians' teaching activity, to incorporate a wider range of academic skills beyond 'traditional' information literacy, also highlighted the need to review and update our workshops for research postgraduate students.

NEW RESEARCH STUDENT WORKSHOPS 2011–PRESENT

In 2011 we began to look more closely at some of the participant feedback that we had previously allocated to the 'refer to supervisor' category. Following discussions with Faculty Team Librarian colleagues, we assigned this feedback to four different categories, and designed new learning activities around them. The four categories were:

- critical analysis/evaluating the value of information
- the research information landscape
- bibliometrics
- reading & note-taking

Our heavily revised workshops were re-launched in September 2011, with a new structure, different activities, and a deliberate shift in focus towards some of the issues that students had told us were a priority for them. The topics covered in the two revised sessions are listed below:

Workshop 1: Search & save: Information searching for PhD students (3 hours)
Planning and controlling the literature search
Search tools: Where to search for what
Search techniques
EndNote
Keeping up to date: alerting services

Workshop 2: Working with literature: Impact, evaluation & reading strategies (2 hours)
Which paper first? Measures of importance: bibliometrics
Which papers match my research question?
Reading & note-taking strategies

During 2011–12, our Faculty Team Librarians delivered 46 workshops to 610 participants (114 hours of teaching, compared with 58 in 2002–03), as shown below:

Title of workshop	Total number of workshops	Total number of attendees
Search & save	22	294
Working with literature	24	316

The majority of attendees were in their first year of study, though there were others who had progressed beyond this initial stage of research.

The University of Leeds has an intake of around 700 PhD students each year, and the popularity of the workshops was both unexpected and pleasing.

Teaching staff and participant verdicts: do we have lift-off?
Having altered the content of our workshops, it was vital to get substantial feedback on them from both participants and facilitators. Feedback forms were used in all the workshops to gather instant student responses, and an online survey was conducted at the end of the academic year 2011–12 to gauge medium-term impact. A question that prompted very helpful feedback was: 'What are

you going to do now as a result of attending this course?' Responses to this question gave us a valuable insight into aspects of the workshops that had potentially influenced changes in participant behaviour: 'Set up RSS feeds. Refine my searches. Not rely on PubMed'; 'Change my note-taking techniques'; 'Assess impact and quality of a paper from journal and citation count'; 'Now understand I'm a more visual person & will use text-mapping.'

Participants also highlighted a number of problems with the content of the workshops: 'Didn't address references in a LaTeX document'; 'Bibliometrics in Web of Science – as an arts student this was not particularly useful.' Although the learning activities on bibliometrics were enthusiastically received by many groups, some of those working in arts and social sciences disciplines expressed reservations about the suitability and relevance of this topic to them. This issue has been identified elsewhere:

'Particularly in the social sciences context, and the same is true of the humanities, it is widely recognised that they [bibliometrics] are not fit for purpose. As they are currently used, they are an inadequate measure of the scholarly and research outputs of social scientists' (Dr Kevin Lalor, School of Social Sciences and Law, Dublin Institute of Technology).[4]

This need to adapt our workshops, so that they better communicate the limitations of bibliometrics in certain contexts and subject disciplines, was also highlighted by the session facilitators. Our teaching staff felt that the revamped sessions were successful overall, particularly in terms of the range of content covered. However, they also identified issues with: the length of the sessions; whether the content of Session 2 was appropriately balanced between bibliometrics and reading / note-taking skills; and the need to include more real-life examples from University of Leeds researchers.

Future plans, problems and ideas: small steps or giant leap?

Leeds University Library is an active partner in our institution's research student support community, and we are keen to continue to innovate and to improve our offering to students. Taking into account feedback received from session participants and facilitators, our future plans include:

- Investigation of reference management software: Is EndNote still the right product to promote to our research community? We intend to compare the strengths of EndNote, EndNote Web and Mendeley
- tweaks to the content of our workshops for 2012–13
  ◦ more on reading and note-taking
  ◦ increased emphasis on the role of bibliometrics in helping to select where to publish, and in developing academic reputation
  ◦ incorporate videos featuring academic research staff
  ◦ include more content on the institutional repository and disseminating research
  ◦ reduce the number of handouts by improving online provision
- consider the feasibility of splitting existing workshops into shorter, one-topic sessions
- introduce new sessions aimed at wider research audience: final-year PhD students, post-docs, experienced researchers, e.g. a pilot session on 'Social media for researchers' is planned for 2012–13
- improve attendance at sessions through wider promotion, e.g. through Twitter, institutional mailing lists
- continue to develop and enhance the online support for researchers that we provide through our Researcher@Library web pages[5]
- raise the profile of Researcher@Library by incorporating it into our face-to-face workshops
- create and promote a dedicated Skills Collection, launching in autumn 2012

The changes outlined above are part of an ongoing effort to serve our research community more effectively. Mandates on research data management[6] and open access to publicly funded research[7] will have an increasing influence on the focus of our online and face-to-face teaching activities. Academic libraries are about to feel the full impact of these major developments in scientific and scholarly communication, and we must ensure that new generations of researchers are equipped to thrive in this rapidly changing environment.

Let's talk!

Are you working on PhD and research support? Why not get in touch? We are always interested to hear from colleagues working on the same issues, so do feel free to drop us a line!

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