

LIBRARIES, DELIVERERS OF LIFELONG LEARNING - AS STRONG AS OUR WEAKEST LINK*

By Barbara Hull

Abstract: The traditional, idealistic and expanding roles of the information professional are considered and a number of potential weaknesses in fulfilling the ideal are examined. A common failure of libraries and librarians to practice sufficient self-promotion, particularly in online environments is indicated. A need for improved internal communications and enhanced interpersonal skills, in dealing with both customers and more junior staff is indicated, as is that of cultivating better awareness of the broader context in which libraries operate.

Background

Librarians have been perceived in a variety of guises, each one trailing in its wake an awesome degree of responsibility. Overwhelmingly, we are seen as information providers, capable of opening up the channels of access to satisfy our clients' needs. The extent of our powers is seemingly boundless:

“With time and a kindly librarian, any unskilled person can learn how to build a replica of the Taj Mahal” (Angelou, 2002).

“Even the most misfitting child,
Who's chanced upon the library's worth,
Sits with the genius of the Earth,
And turns the key to the whole world.” (Hughes, 1997).

According to the Library and Information Commission, libraries and library staff, “make inclusion happen everywhere for everyone” (Library and Information Commission, 2000)

It is now widely agreed that it is no longer sufficient for librarians to be custodians and organisers of information: in an environment of widening participation in higher education, social inclusion initiatives and more complex ways of accessing information, teaching skills are seen as desirable. As librarians expand their role to teaching their onus becomes even greater! The potential influence of teachers, for good or ill, is legendary: “A teacher effects eternity; he can never know where

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his influence stops”(Adams, 1918). Gratitude to teachers may be still passionately felt over half a century later: a 66 year-old male student on a pre-retirement course reported, “I have always been slow on the uptake so I was always left behind at school. The only teacher who ever put me on, she took about five of us in the evening, in her own time, unpaid in her own time, and she did more for us than any other teacher I ever came across” (Hull, 1997)

With the Lifelong learning agenda, librarians are seen to be at centre stage as never before! Are we equal to the challenge? Where are our potentially weak links?

Promotion of services

Often there is an insufficiency of trumpet blowing! Librarians are not usually given to making extravagant claims tending rather to err on the side of caution – a desirable quality in many aspects of our art, but, if an overly measured approach is allowed to permeate the entire library culture, this can result in poor self-promotion. Our skills have long been recognised as underused: “Librarians are almost always very helpful and often most absurdly knowledgeable. Their skills are probably very underestimated and largely underemployed” (Medawar, 1978). One of the major problems facing information professionals today is the impact of “disintermediation”, which has been defined as giving the user or the consumer direct access to information that otherwise would require a mediator, such as a salesperson, a librarian, or a lawyer. Observers of the Internet and the World Wide Web note that these new technologies give users the power to look up medical, legal information, travel, or comparative product data directly, in some cases removing the need for the mediator or, at the very least, changing the relationship between the user and the product or service provider. Because of this widely held misconception that everything can be found on the Web reliably, easily, and quickly, there is trend to discount the value-added mediation that information professionals provide. That end-user searchers are constantly being presented with thousands of spam-ridden, porn-promoting, advertising-laden hits for most of their WWW queries, should be seen as abject failure, but rarely is (Downie, 1999). Unless the misconception is rectified, information professionals as mediators may be viewed as superfluous by the ill-informed. There is scope for greater efforts to dispel the myth than the only information intermediary needed is a *mouse*. However, there is some evidence of a realisation that disintermediation is far from adequate to satisfy the needs of all e.g. in online public services. In a recent review of online health services, Barrie Gunter expresses doubts on the efficacy of online public services and highlights the need for users to be *educated* in the way information is structured and in technological terminology which may well present barriers, “.once the user has found the online public service, they must be able to

get into it and find their way round it with ease....on a point of language use, some individuals may not be familiar with even the most common computer or net terminology. In the health context for instance, usability tests revealed that for some people the 'home page' meant the part of the site that dealt with 'health in the home'" (Gunter, 2002).

Many libraries, particularly academic, have provided access to good-quality information sources only to find that many of their customers display conservative tendencies and tend to shun new channels and to cling to the familiar, preferring to use hard copies of sources they know, even when the online version offers far more powerful searching capacity: it is clear that, for these customers, the ready availability of a technology does not guarantee its immediate take-up and exploitation (Morrow, 1999) and that the usefulness of a piece of technology is strongly tempered by the user's *perceptions* of its usefulness (Barry and Squires, 1995).

Additionally, although many customers, would deem themselves competent at retrieving online information via the internet, in LIS professional circles in the UK there has been general disappointment at the low levels of usage of *reliable* online sources. A report on a project, JISC User Surveys: Trends in Electronic Information Services (JUSTEIS), funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), advises us that students, academics and library staff in 25 universities were surveyed using critical incident and critical success factors methodologies. The findings revealed an ad hoc nature of search strategies adopted across undergraduate and postgraduate bodies within a range of disciplines. There appears to be little or no variation in the pattern of EIS use by the various student groups studied - the effect of the Internet on information seeking by students is hugely significant and the more formal resources, such as JISC-negotiated resources are little used. There is little evidence of coherent search strategies used by students (Armstrong, 2001). One key role for librarians is to constantly promote new sources and refresh customers on the usefulness of existing ones. We may fall into the trap of believing that we have already advertised the new database, the special collection or our user education sessions. But, if we look to the world of business, we see that the brand leader does not stop advertising on the assumption that everyone already knows about the product or service. It is recognised that even existing customers need reminding of what is available and there are always potentially new customers out there. In speaking of the need for continual promotion, an advertising guru reminds us, "You can never wash the dinner dishes and say they are done. You have to keep doing them constantly" (Lawrence, 1966)

Interpersonal Skills

Internal to the library service, the value of staff development cannot be overstressed. Most customer interactions take place with counter staff, who are not usually qualified librarians. Do we value these staff sufficiently to keep them properly trained and informed of current events? An organisation does not create a favourable impression if reception staff, particularly in the information centre, the library, do not have a clear idea of the institution's organisation or any major events taking place. The impressions, positive or negative, created by front line staff resound much further than the initial interaction. Satisfied customers bring in more; personal recommendation is the best kind of advertisement (Peters and Waterman, 1995) The *cost* of keeping staff informed is minimal, especially if they have access to email or an intranet.

For all library staff, besides the need for being well-informed, the importance of good interpersonal skills cannot be overstressed. Just as memories of positive encounters remain, so do those of negative ones. Libraries need staff with excellent technical and interpersonal skills, both of which can be improved by training. The desirable *personal qualities* for information professionals have already received some attention in a Library and Information Commission-funded research project, "Likely to succeed: attitudes and aptitudes for an effective information profession for the 21st Century", (Library and Information Commission, 1998). In a national survey conducted across different library sectors and involving 439 respondents with average 22 years' in the profession, respondents were asked to state the qualities which they deemed to be *most lacking* in new graduates and these included those of being *friendly, flexible and confident in own ability*. Even allowing for the seasoned professionals' possibly jaundiced view of the young, in view of the growing role of the librarian as teacher/facilitator/fellow explorer of new information horizons, it is not encouraging that new graduates were seen in such negative terms by their more experienced colleagues. End-users do rate the *friendliness and approachability* of staff quite highly: a male undergraduate, when asked to recall any abiding memories of using the public library service as a child, replied, "I remember particularly one librarian who everybody commented on. She was the most sour-faced unfriendly women on the face of the planet. If you wanted to take a book out it was like you had committed a mortal sin!" (Hull, 2000). We should remind counter staff that it is largely *they* who set the initial tone of the library/customer interface. Referring to counter staff in a University Library, a female undergraduate reported, "I've worked in the shop industry for 4 years and I know how to treat a customer. Some of them [counter staff] are OK but some of them are really miserable. They could smile at least.....I think a qualification for being

a librarian must be to be miserable!" (Hull, 2000). The paramount importance of the staff/customer interface is also recognised by Millson-Martula and Menon (1995) who make the recommendation that, "Hiring officials should make a concerted effort to employ frontline staff who possess excellent interpersonal skills together with a strong service orientation. For continuing staff, managers have the obligation to provide the proper training that will result in enhanced service". Internally, is there scope for strengthening links with our colleagues on the front-line? Without deluging them with too much detail, can we include them more in knowledge of the broader issues within the organisation? Do we always remember to express our own appreciation for their efforts and to give them a share of bouquets we, as more senior staff receive?

“Mind Reading”

Anyone working in information provision must be capable of interpreting the reactions of those whose information needs have not been met. Customers commonly express their anger and frustration at failing to retrieve information as being due to poor provision by the library, rather than their own lack of skills. All staff should be able to recognise the symptoms and be aware of how to defuse the situation. Another reaction to failure is for the customer to blame him/herself. "After multiple failures in the search process, students may conclude that they are too dumb to learn how to use the library. Social comparisons with others in the library who are perceived as more successful may reinforce this inference"(Keefer and Karabenick, 1998). The phenomenon is not uncommon: research conducted at the University of Teesside in 1999 found that 39% of the sample agreed with the statement, "Other students I see in the LRC seem to know more than I do how to use the facilities there" (Hull, 2000) Students with low self esteem are particularly vulnerable to the many potential knowledge gaps that the library search process can generate (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991). Each failure compounds previous failures and discourages them from asking for help. If they do ask for help, questions are often of a superficial nature, rather than addressing the more complex aspects of their difficulties. Are all staff, including counter staff, trained to recognise a hidden query, and, most importantly, are they capable of recognising when it is beyond their scope? Is there a clear matrix of referral for such more complex queries?

Alliances

Whatever the community they serve, all information workers should strive be in tune with the broader aims of that community. If they are in a Public Library, they should be in tune with the aspirations and needs of *all* in that community. In the

UK, public library usage, like participation in post-compulsory education, has long been dominated by the professional classes: social class AB is nearly twice as likely to visit a Library as DE, with 57% of AB reporting this as a leisure activity in the last 3 months, as opposed to 31% of class DE (Social Trends, 1995). A very similar contrast occurs between AB and DE when we consider participation in current or recent learning: 53% of AB report involvement in learning either current or in the last 3 years; or social class DE the figure is 26% (Sargant, 1997).

Dave Muddiman's more recent findings on public library policy and social exclusion make rather sobering reading: "Public libraries are, at present, only superficially open to all. They provide mainly passive access to materials and resources and they have service priorities and resourcing strategies which work in favour of existing library users rather than excluded or disadvantaged communities or groups. An ICT-led "modernisation" of the library service is doing little to change this pattern: our research concludes that this will simply replicate existing inequities of use in an "information age". The core conclusion of the study is therefore that public libraries have the potential to play a key role in tackling social exclusion, but in order to make a real difference they will need to undergo rapid transformation and change"(Muddiman, 2001)

In an academic library, there should be strong links with subject lecturing staff and, in many Universities, there is already good liaison on information *provision*. However, there is potential for further development in involving the librarian more deeply in the teaching of information literacy and in the United Kingdom there has been some uneven progress in this area. In a recent international literature review, it was found that "In comparison with the UK, considerable progress has been made into the development of information literacy strategies in the US and Australia. Although the UK has a relatively cohesive strategy in the early stages of the educational process, this has not been pursued into post-16 and higher education" (Big Blue, 2001). Jacobson (2001) indicated that in the US there is still scope to further improve communications between librarians and faculty, "Instruction librarians should make known their desire to work more closely with center staff and should volunteer to help with or apply to participate in center programs. Informal meetings with the center's director may lead to starting new partnerships or soliciting librarian involvement in current programs"

Clearly, there is scope for further strengthening of links. The concept of the Library providing user education sessions is far from novel, but it is increasingly recognised that information literacy sessions delivered by librarians have greater impact if they are endorsed by mainstream lecturers and preferably form an integrated part of an existing module. In referring to non-integrated sessions,

Samson (2000) states, “Individually scheduled classes rarely attracted a full house; even those who registered for the classes frequently failed to attend.” Indeed, as students become more and more assessment-driven they are even less likely to participate in what they perceive to be “extra” non-compulsory sessions. Additionally, the subject lecturer can influence the success of the librarian’s input, either positively or negatively. Caspers (1995) describes how the attitude of the professor, who gave permission for students to leave early, considerably undermined her information skills session. This may be contrasted to the experience described by Visscher (1995), who, having been acknowledged by the professor as “the library expert”, found the students “receptive to library research instruction”. How do we librarians gain such recognition from our own academic colleagues: recognition that we too are experts in our own field of information handling: that we are different but equal? Librarians *do* conduct and publish research and, as reflective practitioners, we frequently act on that research to make changes to our service provision. Do we bother to make our academic colleagues aware of this? Learning resources are at the very heart of lifelong learning. Do we make efforts to publicise our research findings *outside of* our own specialist LIS circles? E.g. the research findings from “Barriers to Libraries as agents as lifelong learning” research project (Hull, 2000), besides being widely disseminated to LIS professionals in conferences and publications, have also been publicised in education and computer ethics circles, thus making them available to those who would not normally be aware of LIS research.

Conclusion

There are many challenges remaining to librarians as deliverers of lifelong learning. If we are to succeed in this changing environment, there are some key factors to bear in mind:

- It pays to advertise! Let’s polish up our trumpets and remind people that we are experts in our field.
- Even in this electronic age, potentially, the most satisfying interface is human. Let us remember that we are dealing with people, both our clients and our colleagues.
- Alliances can improve our prestige and influence. Time spent creating links with others in our wider community is usually time well spent.

Never mind a replica of the Taj Mahal! With our expert help they can build something even greater!

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