

Northern Collaboration Conference 2016 – Collaboration: Delivering Innovation, Engagement and Impact

Conference Report by Amanda Swann

The Northern Collaboration 2016 conference was held at the Hilton Hotel in Liverpool. It was a glorious sunny day to visit the city and attend my first conference.

The first keynote was delivered by Richard Watson, futurist thinker and author of the book *Digital vs Human: How we'll live, love and think in the future* (2016). His talk provided a fascinating discussion on the impact of digital information on society, on the one hand bringing us closer together and more connected but conversely driving us apart and reducing the human aspect of communication. Richard spoke about how digital information and technology seemed to be amplifying the self-obsessed nature of humans and the broadcasting manner in which we transmit an image of ourselves to the world. Richard certainly raised some insightful points, reflected in the room through the number of people connecting with his talk via a mobile device. Ultimately Richard posed the idea that the need to maintain a human connection and human purpose was vital in an increasingly digital world and that libraries are able to provide this intersection between information, people and solutions.

The second keynote was delivered by former university librarian at the University of Hull, Richard Heseltine, who spoke in his capacity as chair of the James Reckitt Library Trust, a charitable trust supporting public libraries in Hull. The keynote gave an emotive and passionate perspective on the nature of librarianship. Richard discussed the need for librarians to really understand the fundamental purpose of the profession, focusing not on the services provided but WHY they are provided. Richard emphasised that this understanding of beliefs and value was just as important for academic libraries as public, as the safety net provided by collections could one day be removed from academic libraries, just as it has from public libraries. The emphasis on the power of knowledge and communities, and the ability of librarians to make an impact here, was a truly inspiring note to end the day on.

The first session I attended, delivered by Nadine Sunderland, was about the HeadStart programme provided at the University of Cumbria. This session covered the importance of the library having a positive impact and engaging with students before they even arrive at university, something that was also present in another session, delivered by Sara Hastings and Fiona Ware of the University of Hull. Whilst the HeadStart programme was provided to Cumbria applicants, the University of Hull had begun their engagement even earlier, running sixth form visit days to the library, in the hope of embedding real university experience into an extended sixth form project. Both sessions touched on the importance of connecting with students before they arrive at university in order to help prepare them for HE study, however, it also raised a number of challenges. At Hull, despite the rewarding nature of the sixth form visit days through introducing students to a higher education environment, Fiona

and Sara raised the point that a certain degree of promotion was inevitably involved, in order to transform the sixth form students into Hull applicants and to justify the resources used during the visits. Nadine discussed the challenges involved in providing the pre-registration students with access to HeadStart and the VLE, particularly in collaborating with IT and admissions. Nadine stressed the need to sell the benefits in a situation like this, in order to make systems work for you rather than curbing yourself to fit around existing systems. Both initiatives have been successful, with the sixth form visit days at Hull growing in number and seeing almost 350 students, and HeadStart receiving a THELMA award in June 2014 and seeing 1,015 students register in 2015. Nadine finished her talk by speaking about the importance of evaluating the impact of HeadStart, moving beyond a focus on numbers to identifying improvements in confidence and academic performance of students who complete Head Start, something which could be hugely beneficial in demonstrating the wider benefits of library services to students.

The University of Lancaster delivered a talk about the Innovation group set up in their library. I really enjoyed this session, as it not only focused on how Lancaster were creating a culture of innovation for service development for users, but as it also demonstrated a commitment to engaging and involving staff from across the library in this. The group at Lancaster is comprised of staff from across the library (with the exception of senior management) placing an emphasis on those in lower grade roles, those who directly engage with users and don't normally have an opportunity to implement change. The group was split into three teams (Coffee, Cakes, & Biscuits) who each worked on their own innovation idea. It was really encouraging to see how Lancaster were trying to engage and empower lower grade staff, as I know first hand how rewarding it is to see something you've been involved with making a difference to services and how rare those opportunities can be in lower grade roles. The speakers did however discuss issues this raised about the power and status of the group, particularly around allocating time to work on extra projects. It is ultimately hoped, however, that the innovation group will not be needed, as this will be embedded within library culture.

My colleagues from the University of Salford (Roy, Janet and Shona) delivered a session focusing on the academic reading behaviours of undergraduates. Termed 'digital magpies' through their tendency to pick and choose information, a pilot project was set up to understand how students read academically and their motivations. The recommendations of the project focused on better utilisation of the reading list system and creation of learning objects to support student reading behaviours. The next phase of the project hopes to take a more targeted approach, establishing a channel of communication with students through reading journals and the creation of student profiles.

Attending the conference was a great experience. Thanks to all the speakers and to the Northern Collaboration for awarding me a sponsored place.