

Northern Collaboration Conference, 15th September 2016

Beth Tapster

Last year's Northern Collaboration at my own workplace, Leeds Beckett University, had been my first ever experience of a library conference. It was instrumental in sparking my enthusiasm for learning and networking in this way. After a busy twelve months of attending as many conferences and CPD events as possible, as well as completing the first year of my MA Library and Information Services Management at the University of Sheffield, I was eager to see how different my experience in Liverpool would be. Once again, I had a fantastic day, and came away filled with ideas and enthusiasm. This time, I appreciated having slightly more experience and understanding of the academic library profession, helping me to contextualise the issues discussed throughout the day, and think critically about matters raised. It was also nice to observe how much my own network of fellow professionals has grown in this time, and how many people in attendance I knew already – although getting to know new people was still a highlight of my day.

I took useful ideas and insights away from the whole programme, but for me there were two stand out parallel sessions. These covered topics that I have a strong personal interest in and have been looking at during my studies this year. They were both engaging presentations of the methods and results of well conducted, thoughtfully analysed workplace projects. Firstly, Sheffield Hallam University's research support team's session, 'Researching the Researcher'. This is an area that, whilst not directly related to my current job roles, I am very interested in pursuing as a future career direction. Examining how academic libraries are expanding their support services for researchers has also been a key theme in my MA course so far. Therefore, this lively report on the work done by a newly established research support team was an excellent opportunity to find out how one university library has taken a particularly thoughtful and methodical approach to ensuring that their services meet the needs of their researchers. Having more theoretical than practical knowledge in this area myself, I was excited to hear about how they worked to combine theory and practice in designing and planning a new service, and how effective it has been so far. Whilst the team only formed at the beginning of this year, so are still in the early stages of implementing and assessing their services, I was deeply impressed by their approach to structuring and targeting research support. Development of new library services can so often be very piecemeal and ad hoc, making it harder to centre user needs. The team at SHU seemed determined to keep the actual needs and motivations of their University's researchers central to their activities, whilst also responding to external mandates and institutional aims. By approaching this as a research project, thereby further familiarising themselves with the realities of the research process, they discovered the 'barriers' and 'bridges' that exist around library research support services in their institution. I particularly appreciated the honesty about the perceptions researchers can have of the library as irrelevant to their needs when it comes to finding information, and how librarians themselves can be a barrier to better engagement with the research community. By prioritising continuous listening to their academics, they have reached some useful, though not wholly surprising, conclusions. Focussing on building links with a faculty through having a named person for each, speaking the language of the subject area, targeting supervisors (and the people training new supervisors) to ensure that awareness spreads, and events demonstrating the team's engagement with the wider research landscape at their university have all formed part of their approach. On a personal level, this session made me more determined than ever that this is an aspect of library work that I want to be closely involved with in the future. My overriding feeling throughout the session was that being in a team engaged in this work would be my ideal job!

Another session that I really enjoyed was 'Inspiring Collaboration: creative methods of co-teaching and embedding information literacy skills within the curriculum' by Zoe Johnson of the University of Huddersfield. As well as being a warm and engaging presenter, Zoe's approach to information literacy and the ways it can be taught was refreshing and exciting. As a drama subject librarian, she looked at fresh ways to approach IL with her students, overcoming the common barriers to engagement, and encouraging a more collaborative approach whereby students could work together to develop these skills. Again, her innovative work was borne from her initiation of a research project, grounded in a thorough literature review and interviews with academics from the department she supports. It really struck me that key to her project, and to so much interesting and relevant work within libraries, was real engagement with both theory and experience from outside of the immediate library field. For example, avoiding library and information literacy jargon and language when interviewing academics, and using the common language of 'finding stuff' instead. Reading theory from a wide range of educational perspectives, not just those closely linked to information literacy. Having studied a module focussed on the teaching and learning of information literacy this year, this session fitted well with many of the key themes that we explored, and it helped me feel enthusiastic about the possibilities of teaching IL in a creative and engaging way. This subject specific approach to teaching, taking on board the needs and aptitudes of the students in this field, seems a really important way to ensure that the relevance of a subject librarian can be sustained. The reference to social constructivism and Vygotsky on how children learn to read in a gradual, supported manner, and how this approach can and should be extended to learning to read academic texts really struck home. So often as librarians we can underestimate quite how challenging the transition to university level reading can be, whereas in fact we may be well placed to develop ways to help students deal with this part of their course and extend their comfort zone, away from the assessment and pressure associated with coursework tutors. And I hope that in the future I have an opportunity to teach information literacy in a similarly thoughtful, reflective manner, encouraging the development of so much more than just basic library skills.

Both keynotes were also interesting and enjoyable, Richard Heseltine's in particular. As a former public library worker myself, much of what he said resonated strongly, and it was refreshing to hear the realities of public libraries discussed in a room full of academic library staff. I particularly appreciated his highlighting of the tension between the strongly political space that public libraries occupy and the pressure on staff not to engage in any activity that could be interpreted as political. He made an important point about the popular perceived key purpose for public libraries, access to collections, having been comprehensively disrupted, and the repercussions that similar disruption to access to academic collections are likely to have in the future. This is something I feel quite aware of but which rarely seems to be directly discussed, so it was an interesting point to reflect on at the end of the day.

Whilst this brief reflection covers just a few of the interesting topics that Northern Collaboration inspired me to think more about, the conference really was packed with interesting material and conversations. I only wish I could somehow have managed to attend more than one parallel session at once – tweets and discussions arising from sessions I hadn't been to often sounded absolutely fascinating! My day finished with a sunny stroll around Liverpool's beautiful historic docks with colleagues and new acquaintances, which was a lovely note on which to end a really useful and inspiring day.