Northern Collaboration Report

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I was fortunate to receive a sponsored space to attend the Northern Collaboration Conference 2016 which was held on Thursday 15th September in the Hilton Liverpool. This was my first Northern Collaboration Conference and I found it an extremely informative and thought-provoking conference which made me evaluate my own role as a qualified librarian working in the academic sector and also gave me opportunity to meet other like-minded professionals.

The theme for this year's conference was "Collaboration: Delivering Innovation, Engagement and Impact" and the presentations which I attended certainly fitted within that title. Starting off the conference with the first keynote presentation was Richard Watson with his presentation titled "The Future: The Good, The Bad & the Totally Unexpected". This presentation focused on the book he had authored "Digital v Human" and looked at the future of society in a world with such a high amount of information being accessible 24/7. Richard stated that we were now living in a "me society" where people are more interested in themselves and their online presence that perhaps anything else. We are currently in a state of digital deluge with having access to too much information. An example of this is that only 1% of Google searches go beyond the first page of results.

In terms of how this fits in with libraries, around six years ago libraries had a concerted effort to be "anti-shush" and that they should be no different to any other information source. However with the need for people to take a break from information especially in a digital format it is now important for libraries to consider "silent spaces" for users' mental well-being. Richard also made the important distinction that libraries and books are not the same and that users have to realise what a library can provide for them that other information sources cannot.

The first parallel session which I attended was "Head Start – Library-led innovation and collaboration enhancing the student experience" by Nadine Sunderland from the University of Cumbria. This presentation discussed the online courses available to all pre-entry undergraduate to prepare them for an academic course. This session was of particular interest to me as my own institution (Leeds Beckett University) launched their first MOOC to new students this summer. The University of Cumbria's programme is more established since it was launched in 2013 originally via their VLE but now also as a MOOC. This programme replaced their onsite provision which was done via summer schools. There has been a large number of students who have signed up to these courses with 1,070 signing up in 2015. Now there has been a significant take up the next step is to demonstrate the value of the scheme. This is being done by looking at the retention rates, attainment and employment figures of those who took the course. At this stage it is too early to say what the impact is but 47% of students used the resources available once they had started university which demonstrates the value of the course. The way which Nadine was going to prove value of the course and its importance was to make sure academics have bought in to the project was of particular importance to me as it provided good ideas on how to evaluate projects which I undertake which require collaborative learning.

The next session I attended was Anne Gambles from the Open University whose talk was entitled "Is there a statistically significant relationship between library resource accesses and student attainment at the Open University, a distance learning institution?" This talk focused on the project they had undertaken to analyse resource usage online as this was mainly an institution who use online resources as most students are distance learners. They used the Ez-proxy system to analyse usage of resources. One of the biggest challenges they faced was getting library staff who were trained and confident enough to do statistical analysis as this is not something which you would normally associate with the librarian's role. The results they found seem to indicate that the more resources used the higher the level of attainment for the student, of course this is not the only factor but it was interesting to see the results. Other factors include the conscientiousness of the student for example. The next step of the project was to analyse the data in

regards to student retention to see if they can spot any patterns there. This talk was of use to me due to the fact that I work with usage statistics in my role and I am interested in developing my skills so that I can understand them further and how they fit within the university and the library as a whole. This talk gave me a good starting point and some excellent advice to develop my skills in this part of my role.

I then attended a session led by Roy Vickers from the University of Salford with their talk titled "The Digital Magpie: the academic reading patterns of undergraduate students". This project came about when the library was trying to work out how they could help with retention rates and improve the use of their resources which was low compared to other institutions. Undergraduates now read differently with the rise of online resources, they browse more and scan quickly through works instead of digesting the whole resource. This led to the university thinking about students' access to their resources via reading lists and what can be done to help them. Should lists now be annotated by academics and students themselves? It can then become a discussion with users about resources and their academic merits. There was also the question of whether students were being spoon fed or should use reading lists as a scaffold instead. They got their information from canvassing students via a form around their reading habits. If they were to do it again they would talk to students via focus group as it would lead to more detailed feedback. They are looking at creating a reading journal and trying to make students responsible for their own reading and to take ownership. This was interesting as our university has now got a reading list system and in the future we will be looking towards developing it to help improve the student experience.

The final breakout session which I attended was titled "Inspiring collaboration: creative methods of co-teaching and embedding information skills within the curriculum" by Zoe Johnson from the University of Huddersfield. This talk was looking at how teaching undergraduates information literacy skills requires partnership working and buy in from students and academics alike. When teaching information literacy skills librarians need to look at students, the literature and academics to create a workable structure. It was realised that students are no longer curious when undertaking research, they simply want to know what they need to know and no more. Meanwhile academics and researchers carry out their research as a way to satisfy their curiosity. When teaching information literacy it is important to recognise these differences. Students from the speaker's experiences don't want to look stupid so therefore that will motivate them to do the reading, however they do not want to use electronic resources if other formats are available. The speaker then gave some examples of teaching she did to improve information literacy skills, the aim was to get students out of their comfort zones and to think critically about resources. This was an interesting session to attend as it was interesting to see how academic librarians use resources and their own teaching skills to deliver information literacy training. It also made me think about how I deliver training and how the experience can be improved for those I am training.

The conference was closed by Richard Heseltine who gave a presentation titled "The Soul of the City". This was a passionate talk about the role of public libraries within the City of Hull. This was especially important as due to the cuts which public libraries are facing they have to reposition themselves within communities. He also made us think whether academic libraries were so different as well. Are they in such a secure position as we all think? He asked us to not forget what our role is as academic librarians, which is to provide an environment for knowledge creation. I found this a very interesting talk and thought provoking. It certainly made me re-evaluate my role and the role of academic libraries in universities.

I found attending this conference a very enlightening experience and all of the talks I attended all in some way made me think about my role and how I can provide a better service to users. I also found to opportunity to meet fellow professionals in such an environment a useful experience as we could share opinions and experiences. I would recommend anyone who is interested in attending the Northern Collaboration Conference to do so as it is an excellent and useful experience for any librarian.