Northern Collaboration Conference Report

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The Northern Collaboration Conference 2016 was my first ever, so my opinions may be tainted with keenness, but if conferences in general are as good as this was I will gladly go to many more. Held in the Hilton on Liverpool's Albert Docks the day started in beautiful and inspiring surroundings. When we arrived we were greeted with a big smile as well as snacks, and the caffeine which was so necessary after the joys of peak-time rail travel.

Self-proclaimed 'Futurist' Richard Watson kicked off the day with his talk about how the digital is effecting and changing human behaviour, if not always for the better. It was a light-hearted talk and he was an engaging and entertaining speaker, flitting between mentions of Douglas Adams, Peaches Geldof and Bill Gates. His point about using better technological means to achieve similar or worse end results was an interesting one, which I believe is sometimes sadly salient. He also mentioned the problems of information overload and the lack of quality data, which was again preaching to the librarian choir.

Further into his talk he launched a tirade against the distraction of the digital and the culture growing around self-obsession that is leading to more and more distance between people, with even couples out on dates preferring their phones to their partners. It was certainly something far too many of us are guilty of, and early food for thought.

After this everyone split up and attended a variety of pre-picked talks. I can only really speak for those I saw, but indications were from talking with others that the quality of sessions was high.

One of my favourite 'talks', though talk doesn't begin to describe the chaos, was run by Karen Crinnion and Susan Millican from Newcastle University. The session was about how they use games to introduce post-graduates to their library. Any question of whether the idea of games would be stomached by cynical post-grads was quickly dispelled as all of us equally world-weary librarians were dragged into the fun. The games were challenging enough, with even us professionals struggling with an obscure point on the referencing game, and rapidly built rapport and gave strangers a common goal. The fact that while this was going on key points about resources and research were being absorbed shows there is a huge benefit, and I believe a huge future, in thinking outside of the box when attempting to get otherwise slightly dull information over to an audience.

The other sessions I went to deserve an honourable mention, including that of the OU's Anne Gambles and her talk on the link between library resource usage and overall student attainment, a project looking to build on the literature suggesting that higher resource use increases student attainment. A mention is needed as well of the 'Research the Researcher' talk given by the friendly faces from Sheffield Hallam, who shared their experiences with supporting researchers and the changes that Open research compliance have made necessary. I'd be interested to see how both of these projects continue in the future.

A break from reporting on the talks now to mention the fantastic food on offer at the halfway point of the day. It was delicious. My biggest regret of the day is that I didn't go back for the pudding after my main. This also seems like a good time to thank the people who made the conference both possible and also successful. The organising committee did a fantastic job of getting a great venue,

an array of interesting speakers and a wonderful collection of attendees. It is also important to thank the sponsors, especially Proquest and Ex-Libris, but also everyone else who came with stalls manned with friendly reps and free (for us) goodies.

Having a background in Special Collections libraries it was a treat for me to visit Liverpool John Moores' Emily Parsons and Valerie Stevenson talk about using partnerships to create impact for Special Collections. This focussed on a couple of exhibitions, 'Willy Russell: Behind the Scenes' and some of the work done with the 'Femorabilia' collection. The idea of using projects connected to Special Collections and archives to help build credit for the REF exercises was entirely new to me and I'm sure it's something many institutions will soon be looking into. Building bridges with both local organisations and communities is the sort of worthwhile work which is why librarianship appealed to me in the first place and I genuinely hope projects like these become common across the sector.

My personal highlight of the day was Richard Heseltine's afternoon keynote, 'Soul of the City'. With his background in public libraries this was in theory what this speech was about, however Richard had a number of warnings for us in Academic Librarianship. These were drawn from lessons learnt as Public Libraries and therefore Public Librarians have had their very existence both questioned and dismissed. He posited a number of soul-searching questions: 'What does a librarian do?', 'what is our core and unique role in the world?' and 'can we confidently defend ourselves if our roles in Academia were no longer taken for granted?' He gave us his answer, stressing our role in the creation of knowledge and as a safe space for such creation. It certainly woke me up from any post-lunch afternoon sleepiness, and I've been thinking about his questions ever since.

All in all the day was a brilliant showcase of ideas and projects and managed to be as fun as it was thought-provoking. For the attendees, though maybe not the organisers, next year's conference cannot come soon enough!