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DIT Support Services

2009-01-01

Changing Times: the Changing Role of Assistant Librarians in DIT's Aungier St. Library

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Changing times: the changing role of assistant librarians in DIT's Aungier St library

Introduction

'They must often change, who would be constant in happiness or wisdom.'(p.1)[1]

Change is a fact of life in all professions, but subject librarians could be forgiven for thinking that they experience particularly high levels of change in terms of technology, resources, and job description, even over a relatively short period of time.

In 2004, I joined Dublin Institute of Technology's (DIT) Aungier St library, the largest of the seven libraries (plus the central services unit) that make up DIT library services. Aungier St library serves the students and staff of the business faculty, and some departments within applied arts. I became one of a team of three assistant librarians which reports to the faculty librarian who manages the library.

Even since that relatively recent time, my role, and that of my colleagues, has changed quite significantly. In particular, we have moved from providing 'user education' to 'information literacy', and have therefore had to acquire new skills and enhance existing ones. This paper examines the shift in our role, the reasons behind the change, and the skills that we consider necessary to allow us to fulfil our new role.

The Old Days - 2004

When I joined DIT Library Services in 2004 my job description included subject specialisation, liaison with academic staff, shifts at the library's information, issue and reception desks, development and delivery of focussed user education programmes to various levels of students and staff, dealing with in-depth information queries, managing staff, writing user guides, and committee work – in other words, the wide range of responsibilities with which most subject librarians are familiar. Even at that time, however, user education was considered by my colleagues to be perhaps the most important of our duties, and there was considerable interest in and enthusiasm for user education activities among them. The library's involvement in user education activities had already increased greatly since its relocation in 2002 to a new, bigger library which was equipped with a training room with 25 student computers.

Training sessions (as they were then termed) generally fell into two broad categories: basic library induction sessions, and advanced courses for second to final year students, and for postgraduate students. The library induction was a one hour session comprising a tour of the library and an introduction to the library website and the catalogue. This session was offered to new undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The advanced session usually lasted one and a half to two hours and covered devising a search strategy, Boolean operators, the library catalogue, databases, electronic journals, evaluating information, plagiarism, copyright, and referencing and citing. This session was offered to second to final year students, and to postgraduate students.

We generally provided both the induction and advanced training sessions in response to requests from lecturers, and covered whatever topics were requested by those lecturers. Our sessions were rarely integrated into the students' academic courses; a fairly typical scenario, traditionally, for academic libraries' user education programmes.[2]

As can be seen from the above descriptions, in 2004 our philosophy was to cover as much as possible in the short period of time we had with students since we could never be sure when or if we would get another opportunity to train them again. While very welcome, these occasional opportunities to instruct students were completely dependent on individual academic staff members requesting a library session, and were not conducive to truly integrating IL into academic programmes – a point also made by McGuinness [3.]

Fast Forward to 2008

My job description now, as with most subject librarians, consists of 'the old job … plus' (p. 33),[4] with particular emphasis on increased information literacy (IL) and additional liaison activities. A typical day can include teaching several IL classes, liaising with academic staff members about currently existing or future embedded IL modules, and arranging staff to cover upcoming IL classes, in addition to answering in-depth information queries (now online, as well as at the information desk or by phone), supervising staff, and overseeing the library's journal subscriptions.

My Aungier St colleagues and I now teach eight embedded IL modules to students in the business and applied arts faculties, and last year (2007/08) were responsible for assessing the IL component of projects completed by students of two academic programmes. We have produced and publicised a menu of the range of IL classes which we offer and liaise with our academic colleagues to devise the most suitable combination of IL classes to meet the desired learning outcomes. We feel that the shift from library sessions that were largely independent of the academic courses pursued by students to fully integrated IL modules that are linked directly with projects assigned by our academic colleagues has had a range of positive effects, in addition to the obvious benefits to our students. The additional contact between librarians and academic staff members that co-ordinating an integrated IL module requires has raised the library's profile among academic staff and has forged strong and lasting relationships between us.

What Happened?

Since user education was already considered to be of considerable importance in the library, it is interesting to examine the reasons behind this shift in emphasis from librarians being responsible for a range of duties, including user education, to librarians as teachers first, and library staff second.

This change was brought about by several factors, including the introduction of our first integrated Information Studies module in 2004/05, librarians gaining teaching qualifications, a reduction in subject librarians' desk duties, and DIT library services' information literacy project in the summer of 2007.

First Integrated Module

The first seed of change was sown in the 2004/05 academic year by the introduction of the library's first module to be integrated into an academic programme: the BSc in Accounting and Finance. This course was made possible by the support of an 'academic champion', the most common means by which librarians achieve the integration of IL into academic courses [5]. The course was entitled 'Information and Communication Studies' and was comprised of three elements: information technology, information studies, and communication studies. Five European Credit Transfer credits were allocated to the information studies component of the course, which was taught by librarians over seven contact hours.

Having witnessed the benefits to students of a seven-hour, integrated module rather than a single two-hour class, we sought to extend embedded information studies modules to additional academic programmes. In 2005/06 we added a six hour Information Studies course for BSc in Management and Law students, which followed a similar format to that of the BSc in Accounting and Finance course.

Learning and Teaching Qualifications

In tandem with the introduction of the library's first embedded IL modules, several librarians throughout DIT, including Aungier St, completed the postgraduate certificate in third level learning and teaching offered by DIT's learning and teaching centre. Some librarians subsequently completed a master's degree. The enhanced pedagogic skills acquired by these librarians have naturally influenced the design and content of the library's IL classes. The completion by subject librarians of these courses has also had additional, more intangible benefits. It has served as an opportunity for subject librarians to meet and collaborate with DIT's academic staff members, and, perhaps more importantly, has encouraged academic staff members to view librarians as teachers, and as peers.

Reduction in Desk Duties

More mundane factors have also contributed to the change in the assistant librarians' role in Aungier St library. In the last two years we have reduced the number of hours per week that subject librarians spend at the library's service desks. In 2004, subject librarians did several shifts per week at the library's reception desk and issue desk, in addition to the information desk. Now we no longer work at the reception or issue desks (except on our one late night per week) and library assistants and senior library assistants have been trained to handle most information queries. This change not only offers us more time to design, develop, and prepare IL classes, but has also resulted in a fundamental shift in how our library colleagues see us and our role, and indeed how we perceive it ourselves.

Information Literacy Project

The second major milestone in our journey from 'user education' to 'information literacy', however, was DIT library services' information literacy project. In 2007 I was seconded to the project for three months in the summer. One of my tasks was to design a generic, adaptable, IL pilot module, to be marketed for inclusion in academic

programmes in each faculty. Following a survey of and meetings with subject and faculty librarians throughout DIT library services, and visits and correspondence with other academic institutions in Ireland, I designed a new approach to IL for the library. This approach involves the use of a generic module consisting of a menu of eleven one-hour classes:

- Finding books
- Finding journal articles from their citations
- Developing a search strategy and using it in a library database
- Specialised databases (e.g., legal databases)
- Effective internet searching and evaluating information
- Plagiarism and referencing and citing
- Introduction to Endnote
- Intermediate Endnote
- Advanced Endnote
- Current awareness
- Citation searching and using Journal Citation Reports

Each class is designed to be one hour long, and each class can be offered independently of the others. The menu provides a description of the type of classes the library offers to students, together with learning outcomes, and gives academics and librarians a choice of options from which they can select the most appropriate elements for the students in question.

This approach has been used successfully in other libraries, including University College Dublin library,[6] and has several advantages. Firstly, rather than placing the emphasis on covering as much material as possible in a one or two hour period it instead allows the librarian to cover one topic well. Secondly, it advertises the range of topics on which the library can provide instruction. Thirdly, the module descriptors are written in a style and using a vocabulary familiar to academic staff members. Finally, it allows academic staff and librarians to work together to talk about the learning outcomes they wish a particular group of students to achieve, and to choose the relevant class(es) to achieve that outcome.

This module (with some modifications) has been used as the template for all IL classes offered by Aungier St subject librarians since 2007/08. Following the introduction of this module, demand for embedded IL modules increased greatly, with an increase from two to seven embedded modules between 2006/07 and 2007/08 in Aungier Street library alone, and even more embedded modules coming on stream in the current academic year. These additional teaching activities have also helped considerably in our liaison roles, since the additional, regular contact with our academic colleagues has allowed us to develop our relationships with them.

Skills Needed

We find that the changes in our role mean that we need new or enhanced skills in a range of areas. The increasingly integrated nature of our information literacy classes means that we must have good teaching skills. Not only must we have these skills (which may be innate), we must also be able to demonstrate 'an understanding of the

learning process' (p. 231),[7] and be able to communicate with our academic colleagues using 'mutually understood language'[8]. Having subject librarians with qualifications in third level learning and teaching has helped us to achieve this goal, as have special workshops provided by DIT's learning and teaching centre.

Our additional liaison activities also require that we develop our networking, marketing, and communication skills, all of which are widely recognised in the literature as being particularly important strengths for subject librarians to have in order to fulfil their changing role [9,10,11]. These skills are quite intangible, but can be developed through attending staff training and development courses provided by DIT and by organisations such as the Academic and National Library Training Co-operative.

Conclusion

Subject librarians' role and function changes at a rapid rate, as our experience in Aungier St library indicates. I believe that this change makes our job more interesting and challenging, and allows us to use skills that we may not even have previously realised that we had. Hopefully Confucius's words will ring true, and the frequent changes that we experience will also help us to achieve both happiness and wisdom!

References

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