
Being a science/ engineering librarian

**Back to basics for the University
Science and Technology Librarians'
Group: 14 May 2012**

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The University Science and Technology Librarians' Group (USTLG) is an informal group mainly centred around the LIS-SCITECH JISCmail list. The speakers at the roughly biannual meetings are drawn from volunteers giving their time freely, and the events are invariably friendly, supportive and, crucially, very honest affairs.

The meeting at Newcastle University on 14 May 2012 was no different, as USTLG went back to its core mission with the theme for the meeting: being a science/engineering librarian. Much of the content of the day was relevant to subject librarians of any persuasion, however. Wayne Connolly, Newcastle University Librarian, made opening remarks which helped to set the tone of the event, highlighting the importance of sharing, collaborating and communicating in the current environment. He finished by saying that 'conversations are more important now than they ever were', which summed up for me the whole ethos behind USTLG and the reason the re-invigoration of the group in 2009 was so enthusiastically received by the community.¹

Three of the presentations in the programme were very personal views of the role of subject librarian. Jenny Campbell, Faculty Liaison Librarian (Science, Agriculture and Engineering Faculty) at Newcastle University, described her current role as teacher, research support, explorer, subject specialist, counsellor, financial manager, politician and project manager. She now feels that the face-to-face information literacy teaching at Newcastle University is at capacity, and although the creation of a new assistant librarian post has helped with this, the library is looking at new

ways to reach students, including LibGuides and Twitter. Newcastle University Library is also reviewing the study space available in the building, and Jenny has been involved in employing students to carry out surveys on what students require from refurbished study space. Jenny made the observation that when changing the library's services or facilities, it is important not to 'destroy the library's unique selling point'. The results of the survey suggested that students do not want any further social study areas, and are keen for more silent study space – a finding which goes against observation of current use of study space. An interesting discussion ensued on whether students were actually asking for additional silent study space, or simply for existing space to be quieter, with a variety of practices revealed and no firm conclusion reached.

Emma Illingworth, Information Adviser at the University of Brighton, started her presentation on her experiences of being a subject librarian as a new professional with an excellent demonstration of the importance of having a plan B for technology (in this case, smoothly accessing her presentation via her Google Docs account when the USB version failed). As a librarian new to her role, she emphasised the value of getting to know her academic colleagues, students, researchers and school staff (particularly the administrative staff). One of the ways she developed these relationships was by sharing her successes – something we should all try to do more as we are required to prove our value. Emma concluded by asking those present to share one piece of advice with her (on a post-it note or as a tweet) to help her to develop her role further.²

Later in the day Jenny Brine, Subject Librarian at the University of Brighton, provided a contrasting presentation, looking at her role from the different perspective of having had (so far!) a 40-year career as a subject librarian. She had plenty of advice for those of us with less experience, recommending keeping tabs on interlibrary loan activity from researchers, reading study skills books for your subject areas and *New scientist* and, of course, joining USTLG. Having said that, Jenny had some great ideas for how USTLG could provide better support for science and technology librarians, so keep your eyes on the USTLG website³ for some new developments.

There was some discussion about what it means to be an 'embedded librarian', with no agreement amongst those present on a clear definition of this term! Liz Martin, Senior Assistant Librarian at

De Montfort University, talked about embedding her teaching into the engineering curriculum. By making the most of opportunities, such as School concerns about plagiarism and referencing, or comments about library skills made during an accreditation, she has been able to move from a single thirty-minute induction presentation in 2005 to embedded teaching, supported by academics. This begins with online induction (completed by 81% of students), and one hour of face-to-face induction (including a self-guided tour). First-year undergraduates then receive two hours' face-to-face teaching (for example, the engineering students receive this as part of the first year Principles & Design module, where they have to demonstrate evidence of research) and postgraduates receive a further four hours' face-to-face teaching.

Kirsty Thomson, currently Subject Librarian at Heriot Watt University, presented work she had done in her previous post at the University of the West of Scotland; she had worked with a colleague from the effective learning team to 'disguise' information literacy skills, such as evaluating resources and referencing, in tutorials on essay-writing. Kirsty's examples of the activities she designed to be carried out by students in her tutorials were enthusiastically received and are now available on the USTLG website.⁴

Steve Lee, Information Librarian (sport science and chiropractic) at the University of Glamorgan, began his presentation by stating categorically that he did not want to be an embedded librarian. He has dealt with his increasing teaching load by writing teaching content and handing this over to academics within the department to deliver to students. However, after hearing his inspiring presentation on the work he is doing to meet his students and academics on their own terms, and to engage with them in their common rooms and outside their lecture theatres, many delegates felt that he is indeed embedded within the activities of the departments he supports.

Two more presentations by members of USTLG focused on specific experiences relating to their current situations. Selina Lock, soon to move to a role supporting researchers at the University of Leicester, introduced the restructuring of the academic liaison team into three strands, one supporting learning and teaching (undergraduates and taught postgraduates), another supporting research and the third to develop the special collections. Subject clusters will be maintained across the strands. A quick show of hands demonstrated

that a number of other universities, but by no means all, have already gone down the route of separating learning and teaching from research activities. Tony Wilson, Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of York, spoke about the satisfaction and value he has found in participating in the university's widening participation scheme, visiting schools in the York area to deliver information literacy teaching, and providing support for students taking the extended project qualification (EPQ). Engaging with school pupils has given him a real understanding of the prior knowledge and skills with which first-year undergraduates might come to York; this has fed directly into his teaching as a subject librarian.

As with all USTLG meetings there was, in addition to the formal presentations, a lot to be gained from the other activities. A tour of the Robinson Library with Louise Gordon initiated a number of discussions about current practice in self-service reservations, short-loan collections and silent study space. A thought-provoking defence of traditional abstracting and indexing services was presented by Keith Furniss of ProQuest, who had kindly sponsored the lunch. Over lunch, conversation at my table ranged from the University of Huddersfield's 'roving librarians' (as I was sitting with two) to using iPads in teaching.

For me, the overall theme of the day had turned out to be the importance of being proactive. All the speakers were proactively seeking out opportunities to improve the service they offered, to create engaging learning opportunities for students and to meet staff, students and researchers on their own terms. In particular, I am left thinking carefully about new ways of actively gathering intelligence (on subject areas and staff/students) and the value of getting out of the library and being a roving librarian. Many thanks to all those involved in organising the event, particularly Moira Bent and Carole Rhodes, and to those maintaining the website: Lex Rigby and Lynne Meehan.

REFERENCES

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- 3 <http://www.ustlg.org/>
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