Innovation in libraries
Report from the Business Librarians Association annual conference

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Introduction

In June 2015, seventy delegates from 58 member institutions gathered in Liverpool for the annual conference of the Business Librarians Association. The theme was Innovation in Libraries. There was an international flavour this year, with one keynote speaker coming from New York and the other from Utrecht. In addition to the keynote addresses there were short papers from members, talks from staff based at both the University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University and the all-important networking. In this article I hope to give you a flavour of the conference by reviewing the two keynote speeches while also celebrating some of the innovative ideas being generated around the country as highlighted by our other speakers.

Library Innovation

Utrecht University Library has an innovation and development division whose manager, Jan Molendijk, opened the conference with the first keynote address. Some may say 'Do not reinvent the wheel', but even something as simple as a wheel can be re-engineered and improved. Innovation in libraries can be as simple as perfecting that wheel!

There are three key reasons why libraries should innovate. First, we need to adapt to a changing environment. Jan mentioned two areas of change directly affecting libraries: the move to digital, which is now almost complete for journals but still has some way to go for books; and the changing way our users search for information meaning that the traditional OPAC and even local discovery systems are becoming less relevant. Secondly we need to improve existing products and services. Examples might include harnessing the power of RFID further, improvements to study spaces, further developments of an app. Thirdly we need to make use of new opportunities. For example at Utrecht by facilitating open access publishing the library has become involved in research data management; this has led to opening up new services, such as giving advice on where to find other people's research data.

One way to test whether a new idea will work is to use what Jan called 'the incubator model'. Having identified a need, find or build a quick solution and see what makes it a success; this can then be built into an existing process. At Utrecht they support the creation of open access journals. Those that prove successful can become a fully-fledged, independently funded journal; the others can be closed, thus building efficiencies into the model.

Jan mentioned the concept of lean startup, as advocated by Eric Ries (2011). In any service you can continually innovate by building quick iterations and then observing and learning. It is vital to talk to the end users to see how they use the service and to allow your own assumptions to be challenged. That way you can quickly find out whether what you are building is actually useful without spending lots of money on it.

Stopping services is also innovative! We should continue to ask ourselves whether services we have been running are still useful, and if they are not, we should stop doing them. At Utrecht they have already stopped the local discovery service as users were finding the same material on the internet. They are looking to see whether they still need their OPAC.

Indirect Innovation

Robert Farrell is based in the library of Lehman College, part of City University New York, in the Bronx. CUNY is not a rich university, so they have to seek funding to get projects off the ground.

He talked about taking an entrepreneurial approach to start new projects. Entrepreneurs exploit other people's ideas with other people's money. Using

this capital you can use your own resources to invest in riskier projects; to find time to reflect, assess and improve; to maintain services if budgets are cut.

So where do you get this capital? You should look at new or developing disciplines, as there may be seed money attached that you can tap into. Look at grant proposals – maybe there is an element you can help with and thus get some of the funding. Capital doesn't just have to be money but can be labour, so for example use a group of architecture students if you are considering creating a new space.

In order to get something, you need to be persuasive and flexible. You need to illustrate the purpose of projects by means of stories. Identify change makers who can act as advocates. Acknowledge that it can be a long slow process. You may have an idea for which the political will or the capital is not to hand straight away, but if you keep chipping away, things change and suddenly everything falls into place and you can get that long-dreamed of project off the ground.

Practical examples

University of Liverpool – Emma Thompson

Situation: Business students doing the market research module were working with local businesses for their assignment. There had been large growth in student numbers, making it difficult to run a practical project. Students found that businesses did not understand that the purpose was to give the students experience of market research, not to provide cheap labour.

Opportunity: Emma Thompson had done a postgraduate diploma in learning and teaching in higher education, and this led to a conversation with the relevant academics. She suggested that they use the library as the client.

Innovation: The students did market research for the library. Different groups were given different areas to research. They came up with great ideas, some of which could be implemented. The students learned about the service and understood better how the library operated. An additional benefit was that the students' satisfaction with the library improved.

City University – Samantha Halford & Suzanne Griffiths

This is an example of continuous innovation as mentioned by Jan Molendijk.

Situation: The speakers took ownership of a previously created course in Moodle that was visible to all students in all modules, so was easily findable. 65% of students have used the module. The highest views were for posts from the library, database passwords, and the list of databases by topic. It is always a challenge designing a non-curriculum module that does not attract a credit.

Opportunity: New features have been added over the last couple of years, including lecture capture of student led-training and weekly posting on the news forum, which have proved very popular. Other features that were not so popular included a library FAQ and a revamped Cass Library Certification.

Innovation: The changes have been piecemeal and reflect changes in the library service. The speakers want to take a step back and start afresh. Areas of low use have been identified, feedback has been gathered from students, library staff and EdTech. They looked at best practice, including an MBA module and a law course, and will be developing over the next year.

York University – Ned Potter

Situation: At York, they are looking for a way to strengthen relationships between the library and departments and plan for the year ahead.

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Opportunity: Having done a LibQual survey, the academic librarians each produced an analysis but this was internal only. They produced an action plan but this was not discussed with the relevant departments.

Innovation: Having collated all these data, the librarians wanted to share them with the academics and discuss the action plan to ensure it was consistent with the direction of the department. An annual report was produced which included headline statistics. It also included feedback from students. Actions undertaken in the last year were included and an action plan for the year ahead was written. A draft version was sent to the academics. It was followed by an hour-long meeting to discuss the report, which was very productive and meant that the library could tell its story as it wanted.

Dublin City University – Jack Hyland

Situation: Library training for first-year undergraduate students was built into a Skills for Success module; it was fragmented, and not all students did this module. There was a 30-minute lecture followed by staggered 20-minute workshops. An online quiz gave 5% towards the module mark. Changes to the module led to even fewer students taking it

Opportunity: The training could be moved online. There was strong support from the associate dean.

Innovation: The training was embedded into the Introduction to Marketing module studied by students in both Dublin and Riyadh. It consisted of a two-hour asynchronous tutorial and a summative quiz. Students had two weeks to complete the quiz; the mark remained at 5%. There was a problem with enrolment due to the timing but there was lots of positive feedback; more students did it than in the previous, blended approach; the completion rate was over 90%; the average mark went up. Following studies observing how students interacted with the online course, further innovations were implemented, including more quizzes. The training has now been embedded into a module followed by all business students.

Imperial College – Paula Evans

Situation: Library staff are required to deliver training to students and ensure that they understand.

Opportunity: All students at Imperial College are now given an iPad and staff have been encouraged to find innovative ways to get students to use them.

Innovation: The speaker introduced sli.do into lectures. Students can post questions during the session and can vote for their favourite questions. This enables the session to be re-focused if it becomes apparent that students don't understand something. Questions can be answered in the class or answers can be exported afterwards and sent to the students. New functionality from sli.do includes the creation of infographics and sharing of slides.

Liverpool John Moores University – Val Stevenson

Situation: Research is becoming increasingly important at LJMU and the library needs to support this activity.

Opportunity: New posts have been created in the last 2–3 years to increase research support. Academic liaison librarians also support researchers and are the named contact with the library. There is increased training for researchers. There is promotion of open access via the research repository.

Innovation: Research cafés were introduced. These are based on the concept of Café Philosophique. Informal seminars are held with coffee and cake. Short talks are aimed at the lay person. This promotes the range of research at LJMU. There are normally 2–4 speakers with 10–20 minutes each. As an outreach the

Christmas seminar was held outside the university at Liverpool Central Library.

Liverpool University – Andrew Barker

Situation: Libraries and publishers do not always have the best relationship. The library view is that subscription prices are too high, and there is a lack of availability for e-textbooks; the publishers' view is that libraries have too high expectations and want everything open access.

Opportunity: Build collaboration between the University of Liverpool and Liverpool University Press to enhance scholarly communication. Following the successful launch of an open access journal, Modern Languages Open, the university and the press are now looking to see what other needs could be met through their collaboration.

Innovation: Liverpool University and Liverpool University Press are trialling the co-creation of material. At the outset the library was clear that the outcome of this collaboration would be a new book, but was unsure whether it should be a research monograph or a textbook. The clear expectation from students, though, was that there should be more textbooks in the library. However, for the library, buying more textbooks has implications of both space and cost; thus, creating something electronic would be an advantage. For the first book on financial management, much of the material for the e-textbook already existed in the lecturer's own notes and course material. A second, on using primary sources, is in production and provides an opportunity to promote archive material. (Barker, A. 2015).

Student-generated inductions – Nicholas Bowskill from Shared Thinking

Situation: Students know about services offered by the university but don't use them if they think their peers won't. It can be the most wonderful service in the world, but if the psychological reality is that students won't use it, then it is no good.

Opportunity: Redesign induction based on social norms and influencing behaviours.

Innovation: Move induction away from being a presentation by tutors and support professionals to being more about talking to peers. The agenda is then owned and co-authored by the participants. Shard Thinking found that the sessions were more focused on the concerns students had about coming to university and the solutions that were in place.

References

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