Identifying the barriers to libraries as agents of Lifelong Learning

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The author

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Abstract

Students in Further Education and in Higher Education were surveyed on the extent and frequency of their use of institutional library resource centres and public libraries and on their attitudes to them. Among some significant differences identified were: Females report greater barriers to accessing information than males; those from "blue collar" backgrounds rely more heavily than others on institutional provision materials; those aged under 21 demand increased electronic access and those over 21 more provision of paper-based materials; non-white ethnic groups report more misgivings. There is a mismatch between students' perception of their own information retrieval skills and their reported difficulties. Support from staff is seen as high in quality but insufficient in availability.

1. Background to the Research

The research was undertaken to test the veracity of those feelings of professional frustration, well known to those working in information provision, in contemplating the sheer waste of resources which can occur when barriers exist to block the interface between information provision and potential information users.

At the threshold of the 21st century, the convergence of a number of factors puts Libraries and Information Professionals, as organisers and facilitators, at the very heart of the Information Revolution. Firstly, there is a much-cited proliferation of information; secondly, the advances in information and communication technologies are creating ever-expanding possibilities for accessing information at a distance; thirdly, increasing development in distance will call for a greater reliance on online access and well-honed accompanying skills - the acquisition of which is frequently undervalued.

Regrettably, there are a number of elements which conspire to create barriers to accessing the full potential of libraries. Currently, especially in the United Kingdom, there is much rhetoric about striving to overcome what has become known as the "social exclusion" of some parts of society. Access to the national culture and heritage is, and has for many years been, facilitated by the resources made available by our libraries. Frequently, those at the margins of society are from a social background which does not have a tradition of library use. If even greater emphasis is to be placed on the Library as the lynch pin in the realisation of the Information Society, some concern is warranted that those currently excluded may remain so and, given the increasing importance of libraries' envisaged role, become even further disadvantaged because of this.

Not to be under-estimated are problems of poor levels of literacy. The Moser Report (Moser, 1999) reported that 7 million adults (one in five) in England are functionally illiterate. This means that, if presented with the Yellow pages, they cannot find the page number for "Plumbers". Using any library - paper-based or electronic - requires well-developed skills in both literacy and numeracy.

Those with poor skills in these areas are ill-at-ease in the environment and likely to avoid such interactions if possible. Given the drive to widen participation in Further and Higher Education the chances of students having some level of literacy problems are increased.

Many library users lack information retrieval skills. Incoming students' lack of information retrieval skills is well known to information providers in Colleges and Universities and some research has documented this. (Kunkel and others, 1996)

Those working in information provision may well under-estimate just how threatening a library environment can be to someone with little or no previous experience of a library. The growing need for familiarity and skills connected with electronic access may well serve to compound the problem. "Library anxiety" has already been documented. (Mellon, 1986)

Closely allied to the fear of the unknown is that of losing face, i.e. a threat towards a person's self image as competent and capable. People who have changed their social class, their job or their nationality are particularly susceptible to the fear of losing face. (Argyle 1972) Those recruited under widening-participation initiatives may well fit one of these categories. The pitfalls which may be present in the unfamiliar surroundings of a library offer multiple opportunities for perceived loss of face!

2. Conducting the research

The initial stage of the research project involved setting up Focus Groups at a "new" University and two Further Education Colleges in the North East of England, with the aim of identifying students' attitudes towards Library and Information Services. These Focus Groups provided the substance for the 33 item attitude scale in the questionnaire. Wording of the items was informal, using actual quotes from students attending the focus groups, e.g. " I hate having to use a computer"; "Other students I see in the LRC seem to know more than I do about using the facilities". For each item, respondents were asked to tick one of three boxes: "Agree", "Disagree" or "Neither". The items were subsequently arranged by the Research Team into

areas related to (1) Staff and Services, (2) Practicalities, (3) Personal Comments and (4) Information Retrieval. The research sought to assess the importance of libraries generally, and especially the degree of use of the institutional Learning Resource Centre [LRC] and of local public libraries in the individual's lifelong learning experience. Respondents were therefore asked for details of any public library used, whether they used the Learning Resource Centre, and, if so, the frequency and extent of services used.

To assess the extent of use of specific services - e.g. borrowing books, internet access, photocopying - respondents were asked to tick one of three boxes: "Regularly", "Sometimes", "Never".

Respondents were also asked for details of their age, gender, ethnic origin, employment status, home postcode, occupation immediately prior to starting their course and the occupation of their family's chief breadwinner. Because of the amount of personal information requested, the Research Team followed the advice of the Steering Group for the Research Project and made the survey anonymous. Only students who volunteered for subsequent one-to-one interviews gave their details - to allow for later contact to be made.

In an attempt to sample *all* students, i.e. not merely those using the Learning Resource Centre, the questionnaires were distributed at locations *other than* the LRCs: lectures, classrooms, workshops and coffee bars.

422 students at two Further Education colleges situated in Teesside and County Durham completed questionnaires. This sample consisted of 185 males and 237 females aged from 16-60+. 48% of participants were aged between 16 and 21.

In addition 518 questionnaires were completed by Higher Education students at a "new " University in the North East of England. This sample consisted of 242 males and 236 females with ages ranging from 18-60+ and with 65% aged under 21.

A total of 31 semi-structured interviews (27 at the University and 4 at the Further Education Colleges) were conducted by the research team. Interviewees were volunteers who had already completed a questionnaire. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and were tape recorded.

The data from questionnaires was analysed using the SPSS statistical package and, in reporting the research, emphasis has been placed on associations which are *statistically significant*. The tape recorded interviews were coded for recurrent themes, using Glaser and Strauss's principle of "grounded theory". (Glaser and Strauss 1973)

3. Results for Further Education

(a)Description of the sample

The sample was 44% male, 48% aged under 21, 37% attending full-time courses, 90% of white ethnic origin, 62% single, 25 % from professional family backgrounds. 45% had been in employment prior to starting the course.

(b)Extent of LRC and Library use

Over 80% report were using the College LRC, with 56% using it at least once a fortnight.

Of the 13 services listed, the most frequently used were accessing the Internet, using software packages and book borrowing.

53% also report using a Public Library.

(c)Attitudes towards information provision

Staff and Services The three greatest perceived barriers are:

- insufficient availability of staff to assist with Information Technology problems, with females significantly more likely to express this barrier;

- insufficient availability of books, with those aged over 21 significantly more likely to express this barrier;

- insufficient provision of IT workstations, with those aged under 21 significantly more likely to express this barrier.

Practicalities Lack of access to a PC in the home is predictive of preferring to work in the LRC rather than at home.

No other category (gender, age, social class, etc.) differentiates those who prefer the LRC to home.

Personal Comments Those expressing misgivings about their capabilities in the LRC are significantly more likely to be of non-white ethnic origin or to have been economically inactive prior to starting their course.

Information Retrieval Over 50% of the sample state that they can usually find what they need without much trouble. These students are most likely to be full-time and/or those who have had a formal introduction to the LRC.

Females, students aged over 21, and those who were economically inactive prior to starting the course, are significantly more likely to express problems with Information retrieval.

Being female or being a member of the public library are predictive of having difficulties in *physically locating* items.

Females and students of non-white ethnic origin are significantly more likely to express problems with using electronic sources

Key points on Further Education sample

(a) Gender differences Females both make more use of the services provided and articulate more readily their need for support. This is true for both paper-based and electronic sources.

(b) Age differences The younger age groups appear to be happier with electronic sources and more given to complain about perceived shortfalls in this area. The older age groups borrow more books and are more likely to complain if they perceive a lack.

(c) Class differences The professional classes are significantly more likely to have personal access to Information Technology and therefore, to some extent, are less dependent on the good functioning of College resources.

(d) Ethnic differences Non-white groups are significantly more likely to express a lack of confidence in using the LRC.

(e) Public Library use Those who use the public library are more likely to borrow from the LRC, perhaps indicating the value of a lifelong "library career". These students also appear to be more exigent in their demands on the service.

(f) Unemployment Those who have been unemployed prior to the course are more likely to indicate a lack of confidence.

(g) Lack of awareness of need for Information Retrieval Skills There seems to be a mismatch between the sample's perception of their information retrieval skills and the actual barriers they encounter. This is particularly true of the those aged under 21 and males. These attitudes must represent the greatest barriers of all - not only do they not know, they are not *aware* that they do not know.

The value of user education appears crucial, especially for part-time students.

4. Results for Higher Education

(a) Description of the sample
The sample was 47% male, 65% aged under 21, 89% full-time students, 81% single, 29% from professional backgrounds, 57% students prior to starting the course.

(b) LRC and Library use
96% of the sample report using the LRC, with 77% using it more than once a week. The most frequently used services are using the OPAC, borrowing books and accessing the Internet.

The heaviest users of services overall are females, those aged under 21 and those from "blue collar" backgrounds.

Students who were economically inactive prior their course are significantly lower users of LRC services.

39% of the sample also report using a public library.

(c) Attitudes towards information provision

Staff and Services Gender is a predictor of the perceived need for more staff help with IT in the LRC, with females significantly more likely to express this need. Gender is also a significant predictor for complaint about insufficiency of textbook provision, with females more likely to make this complaint. This is not surprising, as females borrow significantly more books than males. Females are more likely to say that they would use the LRC services more if there were more staff available to guide them. There is no obvious explanation for the apparent female discomfort with using IT: females and males in the sample appear to have more or less the same degree of access to IT in the home.

Practicalities Those from the Manual and Unskilled Classes are significantly more likely to say that the LRC is too noisy for them to study, presumably indicating that the facilities provided by the LRC are more crucial to those from a blue collar background, who may not have a dedicated area in the home.

Those from Professional/Managerial/Skilled Manual backgrounds report greater access to IT in the home and therefore enjoy a certain independence of reliance on LRC provision.

Personal Comments There is a statistical association between non-attendance at an introductory session on Library and Information Services and agreement with the statement "I didn't realise that learning to use the LRC was part of being a student".

Information Retrieval This is where the greatest degree of barriers are perceived, although respondents clearly do not see this as a result of their lack of skills, as less than one in ten agree with the statement, "I don't have the first idea of how to start looking for information".

Students aged up to 21 are significantly more likely to deny the existence of problems *generally*, although more of this age group than any other report having difficulty in physically locating materials on the shelf. Also, significantly more females express problems in physically locating items.

Identifying and finding journal articles is clearly problematic for many students (especially females).

The most evident overall barrier to Information Retrieval is the *mismatch* between respondents' stated estimation of their skills and the evident problems they appear to experience in accessing materials. Of the 239 who agreed with the statement, "I can usually find the information I need without any bother", over half (122) also agreed with "I don't know where to find specific journal articles". There are no significant predictors for this mismatch phenomenon.

Keys points on Higher Education sample

(a) Gender differences.
Females both make more use of the services provided and articulate more readily their need for support.

(b) Class differences Not surprisingly those from the professional classes emerge as less reliant on the LRC. They are more likely to own their own PC and less likely to be troubled if the atmosphere in the LRC is not conducive to work, presumably having alternative accommodation at home.

(c) Previous experience Awareness of what Information Services can provide appears to also be a factor. Those whose occupation prior to starting university had been either as a student or an employee, make significantly greater use of services than those from a background of unemployment.

(d) Lack of awareness of need for Information Retrieval Skills There seems to be a mismatch between the sample's perception of their information retrieval skills and the actual barriers they encounter.

5. Similarities and Differences between sectors

(a) Gender differences overall

Overall, females report more barriers than males. The differences are statistically significant for the sections of the questionnaire on Staff and Services, Personal Comments and Information Retrieval, but not for Practical Problems. Females make significantly more use of the services offered by LRCs, *except* use of Internet, software packages, and email.

(b) Comparing popular services between sectors

There is some similarity in the popularity of services across Further and Higher Education, with an increased emphasis on books in Higher education. The three most heavily used services overall in Further Education are accessing the Internet, using software packages and borrowing books. For Higher Education the three most popular services are using the OPAC, borrowing books and accessing the Internet.

(c) Access to Information Technology in the home

When compared to national published figures, a surprisingly high percentage of the sample (62%) report access to a PC in the home. Students from backgrounds where the chief breadwinner is from the Professional/Managerial/Skilled Non-manual Classes are significantly more likely to have access to a PC in the home. Those with access in the home are significantly more likely to use electronic services generally, e.g. OPAC, CD-ROMs, BIDS, in the LRC and for use of the Internet there is a statistically significant association. PC owners make greater use of Information Resources generally - e.g. 39% of them report using Public Libraries - compared with 29% of non-owners.

(d) New Deal students

93 of the sample were had been recruited onto courses under the Government New Deal. They differed from the rest of the sample in showing a greater proportion of males, a smaller proportion of single students, a smaller proportion from Professional/Managerial/ Skilled Non-manual Social Classes and a significantly smaller proportion (45%) with access to a PC in the home. Their use of the LRCs both in frequency and intensity is significantly lower than that for the rest of the sample. They report less problems in LRC use than the rest of the sample, but this should be seen in the context of their level of use. Nevertheless, the problems of which they complain most are the same ones as for the Further and Higher education students overall: lack of sufficient books, lack of sufficient workstations and an insufficient level of staff support. Fines are reported as a greater barrier to borrowing books than for the rest of the sample.

(e) Social Class differences

There is a progressively greater representation of Unskilled and Manual classes in the older age groups of the sample. This is possibly an effect of unemployment calling for retraining in Unskilled and Manual occupations. Generally, barriers to libraries, as measured by the questionnaire, are seen to increase from the Professional Classes, through the Skilled Manual Classes and are highest in those from Unskilled or Unemployed backgrounds. As use of Information Services generally is higher amongst PC owners and PC ownership is strongly related to Social Class, this may be an effect of PC ownership, rather than Class membership. There is

some indication that those from Unskilled and unemployed backgrounds may have a different perception of the central role of the College/University LRC and are significantly more likely to express ill ease in the LRC. They report greater use of public libraries than the rest of the sample and this may have coloured their perception of what constitutes a "Library".

6. The interviews

(a) Previous "Library" experiences

Most interviewees had had their first experience of libraries through the Public Library services, quite often a mobile library. Both positive and negative comments were made on these experiences. The example of parents appears to play an important role in encouraging library use. There may be an assumption on the part of LRC staff that all mature adults have used a library before, but some of the New Deal had not and found the LRC very intimidating. As one 45 year-old New Deal student put it, "I wasn't given a tour to start off with. A lot of it is which floor you need to be on. For someone who has never been in a library, let alone a university library, it can be fairly intimidating. ….I can get by without using it. It's optional in my point of view. If I had been given a tour maybe some of the fears may have been diminished. I have had problems. I gave it up as a bad job"

(b) Previous "IT" experiences

Although computerphobia seems to effect the older interviewees more than the young, there were under 21s who expressed positive dislike and fear of IT. One theme to emerge was the importance of the first experience: for some this had been in employment situations where proper training had not been available; for others it had been arrival at oniversity where there was a perceived insufficiency of support. As with "Library" use, home experiences often play a positive role, ensuring a feeling of ease with technology outside the home. Students, especially those at university, generally see access to a PC in the home as almost essential to their success.

(c) Physical environment of Learning Resource Centres

There were observations that the LRC was not a perfect environment for study - too hot, too busy, too noisy. There was an intergenerational gulf with older students offended by the behaviour of the young; there were complaints of chatting, mobile phones and eating. Complainants felt ill-equipped to deal with problems themselves and called for greater policing by staff.

(d) Staff Availability

There is a general perception that, although staff are mainly helpful and knowledgeable, they do not have *sufficient* time to deal fully with customers. Queues at Information Desks and staff appearing hard-pressed were mentioned as inhibiting factors. There as also a call for more staff "on the floor", to troubleshoot IT problems and monitor behaviour of other users.

7. Discussion

(a) Role of Public Libraries

For the sample, gender is a predictor of public library use, with females significantly more likely to use them. There appears to be a relationship between public library use and attendance at a course of study. Care should be taken in attributing causality; this may indeed be an effect of the public library as an agent of Lifelong Learning or these students may be "self selected" because of some other motivational force.

For the sample generally, public library use is a predictor of *book borrowing* in the College LRC: positive experiences with the public library appear to encourage subsequent interactions with other Information services.

(b) Role of College LRC

The College LRCs in the sample are used by the majority of students (over 80%). Gender is a factor in extent of use of the services, with females making more demands for support both in paper-based and electronic-based materials. **Social Class** is important as a predictor of use of PCs: the non-Professional classes are less likely to own their own equipment and therefore to be dependent on College facilities. Those from **non-white ethnic** origins express significantly more misgivings about their

capabilities in the Learning Resource Centre and therefore probably need more support. Providers should also be aware of **age** differences. Generally, older students are more demanding for paper-based materials; students aged over 21 are significantly more likely to make use of these and to complain about lack of textbooks. Conversely those aged under 21 make more use of CD-ROMs and are more prone to complain about perceived shortage of workstations. There is a general mismatch between the samples perception of their capabilities in information retrieval and the reality.

(c) Role of University LRC

Over 96% of the sample report using the University LRC, with 4 out of 5 using it more than once a week. Females both make more use of services and indicate a greater need for staff support. Social class is a predictor of the importance of LRC provision to students. Those from the Professional classes are less dependent on the LRC - being more likely to have their own IT access in the home and greater available resources to purchase paper-based materials. Those from blue collar backgrounds report the highest overall use of the LRC. Those coming to the University from **economically inactive** backgrounds, rather than from employment or a previous course of study, are significantly less likely to use the LRC services. As with the Further Education sample, there appears to be a mismatch between many students' lack of Information Retrieval skills and their perceived capabilities. Accessing journals emerges as a major problem, with over 50% (including a disproportionate number of females) expressing difficulties.

(d) Role of IT

Given the association between Social Class and access to IT in the home, and Government stated commitments to universal access to IT, the need to provide adequate access in libraries and college and university Learning Resource Centres is crucial. The research has demonstrated the vital important of LRC provision to those from Non-Professional classes.

(e) Staffing issues

The level of staffing in the LRCs is perceived by the sample as below their expectations: there are queues at desks - and staff, whilst generally seen as helpful, do not have *enough* time to spend with customers.

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