Practitioner-led research in a public library

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The author

Angela McCormick is an IT specialist who was working for South Ayrshire Council in their public library sector. Her role is further described in the text.

The occasion

This article deals with practical problems and issues encountered in setting up public library research. As such it is very relevant to issues surrounding practitioner led research which have been covered in recent issues of LIRN and to researcher training initiatives. Advantages of partnership with a university department are also described.

Abstract

The reason for doing research into open learning and the internet from a public library point of view has a sound base in the current developments in South Ayrshire Libraries CyberCentres. The practicalities of designing and leading such a research project, while employed as IT Co-ordinator for the library authority, brought together a number of issues currently under examination in this area of research and practice. The research project itself was begun in September 1997 and ran for 14 months.

Background

An important part of my work as IT Co-ordinator at South Ayrshire Libraries has been to introduce and develop the role of the CyberCentres in the library service. This provision of a number of computers available for public use, including access to the internet, CD-ROMs and open learning resources, has been provided in response to the changing needs of library users. It has proven to be enormously popular. Staff in South Ayrshire have also responded enthusiastically to the introduction of technological resources and this has been crucial to the success of the venture.

In terms of the internet, Web pages have been developed to maximise the potential of the World Wide Web for the local community. In the field of open learning, analyses of needs and a database of the progress of open learners is maintained in order to support and develop the potential of those who choose to use the CyberCentre for independent learning. It was the popularity and the importance to users of these two areas which promoted me to look more closely at their relationship and their potential for exploitation in South Ayrshire.

Information relating specifically to this area in a public library environment was not explicitly available - indicating that a certain amount of research was needed before clearly defined progress could be made. My own work responsibilities prohibited any such undertaking on a personal level, and both CyberCentre and library staff were working to capacity and beyond already. What was needed was a specific commitment to a programme of research, with external funding providing the manpower and the resources to complete a worthwhile investigation into the needs of the local community in this field. The results would be easily transferable to other libraries.

Sources of Funding

One of the practical difficulties in applying for research funding from a public library base is the lack of the type of support structure which would automatically be available in an academic environment. Having already applied for European funding, I was aware of this. Relying on the internet, on mailing lists I used as part of my daily work and other contacts I had in this area, including

those from Project EARL, I discovered the British Library Research and Innovation Centre's Digital Libraries site on the internet, with its ongoing calls for research proposals. Finding the time to track down calls for funding, and the time to develop my contact sufficiently to pursue this line of enquiry, was always going to be a difficult thing to integrate with the normal day to day responsibilities of my own job, and this set the tone for the duration of the research.

The next four phases of the project - developing the proposal, refining the proposal, setting up the project and managing the research - have all been affected by these and other considerations.

Developing the Proposal

With the support of South Ayrshire Council, the original thrust of the proposal to the BLRIC was the way in which the library's current open learning resources could be integrated into those available on the internet. This would maximise the amount and quality of the provision available to local users. The BLRIC provided a number of headings and guidelines for applications for funding, which the proposal followed. These included the aim of the project, current relevance, timeliness, methodology, the management of the project, the time scale, the deliverables and benefits and the suitability of the applicant.

This stage of the exercise provided a number of problems, and a steep learning curve! Fortunately, a number of sources of support emerged to counteract the effects which the 'challenges' of the proposal were wreaking! Several issues were immediately problematic. The amount of time I could devote to research for the proposal was always going to be limited, and was fitted into my daily routine. Front of house responsibilities, always a priority in public libraries, took precedence, and the other developments in the CyberCentres, which originally gave birth to the idea for the research proposal, now paradoxically restricted its progress. The wider issue of research in a public library situation seemed to be encapsulated in this paradox - demand stimulates research into needs and best practice, yet also restricts the librarian's capacity to develop strategies to meet these needs. Very few public library employees are allowed to take this sort of initiative for reasons of time and money. It is to the

credit of South Ayrshire Council that they have supported this initiative enthusiastically despite this.

Research into areas such as the current relevance of the idea for the research, the proactive role of this and other libraries in this area, the work done in open learning in public libraries initiatives, the perception of lifelong learning in a national, international and European context and directories of open learning resources on the internet was included in the proposal.

In terms of the expectations of the proposal content, I was left very much on my own at this stage. Without the support of a college or university backup team I had to put my networking skills to work in order to complete the appropriate requirements. For example, in the absence of previous project management experience or training, and with a decided lack of certainty as to what was expected of a project manager, I contacted friends and acquaintances across a range of organisations for advice and suggestions.

With practicality in mind (the mainstay of this project always has been its practical value), and with potential workload issues at the forefront of my thoughts, I came up with a solution, which met all my criteria. The project management team would be drawn from a range of organisations locally, including education and business, and would (unusually) be practically responsible for providing the 'guinea pigs' or trainees on whom the research would focus. The management team would therefore not only have general duties of administrative oversight of the project, but would also be involved at a personal level. This would maintain cohesion and commitment, allowing continual contact among the members and enabling my own project management role to proceed in an informal yet informed manner.

The question of the content of the project - i.e. the benefits and deliverables - was less problematic, stemming as it did from quite a clear concept of what I wanted the research to be. A directory of open learning resources, both local and internet-based, web pages relating to these resources, articles in the appropriate journals, papers to be delivered at conferences, a final report - these were all within the remit of the research, and are indeed materialising. A more difficult aspect of the production of these

elements was a forecast of the time scales and manpower involved in planning their delivery, and for advice on this and other related matters, I approached the Corporate Services department of Council, who gave important assistance in this area of the proposal.

One of the most important features of the proposal, and one of the most difficult to complete, was the question of research methodology. It was in this area that I most missed the support and expertise of colleagues who had already submitted research proposals - brainstorming sessions, discussions of best practice, advice on what was practical and doable in the given time scales, experience of past mistakes or overconfidence - all of these would have been invaluable in the circumstances. As it was, advice and support, in various forms, did come from a variety of sources. Robert Newton from the Robert Gordon University had in the past visited South Ayrshire Libraries to see the CyberCentre developments, and, with Dr Dorothy Williams, became a valuable source of advice and information, to the extent that RGU later became a partner in the project. South Ayrshire Council was the second public library in Scotland to subscribe to Project EARL, which also provided assistance, partly from the perspective of a general enthusiasm for the research, and partly to provide support for a proactive rather than passive role for public libraries.

Refining the Proposal

The BLRIC highlighted several issues which were required to be addressed before the proposal stage was complete. Further thought and clarification was needed on several issues, such as the definition within the proposal of 'open learning'. Donald Steele of Telford College proved to be a valuable contact in this regard, and helped to provide an acceptable definition for the purposes of the proposal. Further comparisons were required between my own proposals and similar research which was ongoing elsewhere. To this end I made a further study of the CLIP project at Croydon, funded by the BLRIC, the PLAIL and LISTED and WEST projects which are influential in the field of open learning, and the Open for Learning project which is about to enter its next phase. I also looked more closely at the current European initiatives and their impact on national legislation and reviews, in order to place the proposal in context.

From a methodological point of view, I was requested to review the proposals for training a group of open learners provided by the management committee, and to increase the number involved in order to make the results of the research more convincing. This was duly done and the project is now in the process of training approximately 60 learners.

The feedback from the **BLRIC** at this juncture was extremely useful and enabled me to refine and develop the proposal and in turn to make the research project a more practical and timely exercise. My one criticism of this process, from the point of view of a practitioner operating in a public library perspective, would be that the assistance from the BLRIC in terms of the proposal would have been even move helpful had it been available earlier in the process in order to give support and advice to the grantee, or if the BLRIC had been able to recommend another source of this type of support during the proposal period.

The feedback from the grants committee, and the terminology used by them, indicates that the expectations of the individual submitting the proposal are relatively high in terms of research experience. This kind of experience is not always readily available in public libraries. In order to encourage future applicants I would recommend that there is more contact between the funding body and the applicants at an earlier stage, if not in terms of the central research idea, then certainly in terms of the machinery surrounding the application process. Public libraries rarely, as yet, have made research a central element of their *raison d'être*, and therefore of their training programmes.

If public library research is to flourish, then support must be provided from one source or another for those who proceed in this area. An important element of the refined proposal was the inclusion of the Robert Gordon University as a partner in the research project. At this stage it was also decided that an element of information skills support would be useful for open learners who are working in a web-based environment, and this too was included in the re-submission. This has developed into an information skills tutorial which provides support in the handling of information as well as ICT skills. This has become a feature on the South Ayrshire Libraries web pages which support local internet

users. The inclusion of, and partnership with, an academic institution in the project has also provided a useful source of support and structure of the project, and has reinforced the importance of partnership in any undertaking.

Setting Up the Project

Setting up the project involved setting up the project management team as discussed earlier, agreeing on the provision of trainees from the various sectors involved, i.e. the secondary education department, Community Education, the further education college, the University, a local community partnership and the local enterprise company. Enthusiasm and commitment was high, partly due to the involvement of the British Library, partly due to the professionalism of those involved.

Job descriptions and advertisements had to be agreed for the post of the research officer for the project, and interviewing had to take place. Getting a good candidate was crucial in the Public Library environment because, unlike in an academic environment, there is no fall back if the candidate does not produce the report. Agreement had to be reached on the job location for the researcher, and computing facilities had to be arranged. A cost code for the project finances had to be set up and appropriate arrangements made with finance and personnel departments within the Council, all of which was time consuming

Managing the Research Project

A variety of issues, many of which have already been articulated above, re-emerge in this phase of the project. Lack of a clear source of practical support is foremost among these, as has been the case throughout. This is demonstrated in a lack of confidence in my specific role as 'project manager'- what does this involve and how do I know if I am carrying out the role efficiently? The reassuring thing is that my researcher is still with me, and apparently quite happy and motivated! That must tell me something.

On a more serious note, it has been my experience that most project mangers on this type of research project are from academic institutions, with institutional guidelines and peer support thrown in. Most of the advice and support I have relied upon

has come from these very sources, but exactly for this reason, the goal posts have been in different places and success has been and will be measured in very different ways. I have therefore had to adopt and adapt as I have gone along, and tried to match advice to new situations.

Similarly, my confidence about everyday issues related to the project has been affected by the uncertainties regarding my general role. The time I spend on the project and on related matters varies as the research progresses and my depth of involvement and the levels at which decisions should be made continually exercise me due to a lack of guidelines on such matters. How much or how little to be involved; where to take personal responsibility and where to leave it to others?

On a wider level, other considerations are beginning to make themselves felt. When does the research stop being just that, and when does it begin to make itself applicable to the day to day business of the library? When does it become a relevant issue which should be implemented? How do I best maintain lines of communication with other library staff over the research, without giving the impression that I am increasing workload? How do I make staff feel part of what is going on? How involved should they be in the research as it progresses?

What about the dissemination of the research on a wider basis? It is difficult to know how and where to publicise the research findings in a useful and accurate way. How much should the BLRIC do in this area, and in what ways does the research belong to the BL or to ourselves? I am aware that we should publicise the research at conferences and seminars, but where does the time come from, and how much time can I justifiably devote to the research in the light of my other commitments?

Conclusions

Research led by public library practitioners is still not a particularly common phenomenon. Problems of time, place, money and motivation intervene continually, as they do in other fields of research. However, the basic ethos of research and its practice do not yet pertain sufficiently in public libraries for these problems to begin to be overcome. Several organisations such as the BLRIC, SLIC, and EARL

are already 'active in supporting public libraries in
this field. Perhaps the advent of the 'New Library'
and the 'Learning Society', and the resources which
will be made available for these initiatives, will
allow the emergence of a real research tradition in
public libraries as they take their place in the society
of lifelong learning.

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