
Little Acorns: small scale research in the practice setting - how employers can foster research awareness

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Abstract

Research is of importance to libraries and the people who work in them.

The Bursary Scheme that operated within the Faculty of Educational Services of Anglia Polytechnic University sought to encourage Faculty staff to engage in small scale research projects. Two examples of such projects are described.

Introduction

The recent publication of the Library and Information Commission Research Committee, *Prospects: a strategy for action* indicated that, while most research activity in the library and information research world takes place in specialist department within the higher education sector, 'other important players' included 'library and information professionals conducting research on behalf of their organisation or in pursuit of professional development' (LICRC 1997, p6).

However it is quite clear that library and information practitioners, like workers in most other occupations, do not themselves - as a general rule - engage actively in research. There may be several reasons for this. Research does not always seem to be of relevance to practitioners. Much of it may seem to be the product of acronyms rather than real people - BLRIC, LINC or JISC. Even where it is relevant, it is often difficult to see oneself actually making a useful contribution. This may not be because of lack of ability.

The annual LIRG Undergraduate and Post graduate prizes for work done by LIS students indicates that there are potential researchers of high calibre entering the profession. However 'research' is not a particularly welcoming career path. A life of short-term contracts and bidding for money may not appeal to many. Arguably a 'research' practitioner is not the same thing as a 'library' practitioner anyway. Probably most LIS graduates do not take up posts where research is required or valued. However most academic libraries exist in a world where library employees will at least come in contact with research and researchers even if they are not active researchers themselves.

Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) is such an institution. In such an environment the credibility of the library, and other support services, may be affected by the attitude of staff to research and researchers. Efforts should be made, therefore, to encourage staff, if not in actual research practice, then at least in research awareness. The bursary

scheme of the former Faculty of Educational Services at APU attempted to do just this.

The Bursary Scheme

The purpose of the scheme was to encourage all staff in the service departments encompassed by the Faculty to carry out research on a manageable scale. This meant manageable in terms of their confidence and competence to conduct a structured enquiry; it also meant manageable in terms of the demands on their time in an increasingly busy and pressurised working environment.

The departments within the Faculty, namely Library, Media Production, Computer Services and Education Development, each contributed a sum to a central fund which was administered by the Faculty Research Committee. This enabled the scheme to be seen as separate from normal line management structures, and it was hoped that this would encourage some staff to take the risk of carrying out research who had not considered it as a possibility before. It was considered that, for other staff, resource and time constraints had prevented them from making a start - so the money from the bursary could be used in any way including time for staff to be released, so long as this was justified in the proposal.

A considerable range of topics was supported by the Committee: this reflected the wide diversity of activities within the Faculty. In addition to the provision of release for staff bursary monies were also used for travel and subsistence, clerical support, purchase of equipment and software and even for refreshments for students participating in group interviews on their experience of LIS services! The key requirement for all bursaries was that the research should be relevant to the requirements of the post that the applicant held in their department.

There follow descriptions of two projects which were funded within the library. Both derived from issues identified by individuals in their working practice. Margie Mason's work on health and

safety issues relating to library staff has resulted in a commercial publication (Mason 1997). Alan Bradwell's work has informed library debates on servicing non-traditional courses.

Battling with Books

Margie Mason gives an overview of her project:

"I started work in a library in 1991 and like most people did not realise that it could be physically demanding. After suffering a shoulder injury I began to rethink the way I performed repetitive tasks. From my own experience, and that of my colleagues, I thought there was a need to provide information to new library assistants on safer working practices. About this time I became aware of a small research grant being made available within the University to encourage employees to improve their working conditions. I applied for this and was fortunate enough to receive it.

The first step I took was to ask, via an email discussion list on the Internet, if anyone had information on health and safety within the library environment. I was surprised to discover there was almost no information relating specifically to libraries and that people were anxious for guidelines. The project was to become larger than anticipated.

A questionnaire to the staff of Anglia Polytechnic University's libraries helped me to identify problem areas. I visited these libraries and questioned staff about their concerns. I read books and articles on back care, strain injuries and problems related to working with VDUs. I visited various health and safety organisations and spoke with osteopaths and health specialists. Using money from the £600 grant, I employed a colleague to work one afternoon a week to provide me with free time to carry out research. My daughter, an art student, was commissioned to create the illustrations and my husband to do the typing.

A small booklet was put together covering all aspects of a library assistant's work - including counter duties, lifting and carrying, shelving and using a VDU. With the remainder of the grant I

produced a booklet with the help of the University's Media Production and Reprographics Departments. Once completed, following a short message about its availability being put on the Internet, orders started to flood in .

Orders have subsequently come from as far afield as Canada and Zambia. I have been amazed that it was possible to develop my idea into a successful publication. Although at times the project was quite daunting it has proved to be both a rewarding and an interesting experience."

A 'keyhole' study of university library use.

Alan Bradwell also found his study to be both daunting and interesting. He works with the new School of Education at Anglia and his study looked at how a specific group of students used library services.

The Education Department of Anglia Polytechnic University offered, in September 1995, the opportunity for students to study towards a PGCE (Primary) via a University-based or a school-based pathway. This provided an opportunity for a 'keyhole' study into the use of the University Library by education students through the gathering of comparative information from the two groups: university based and school based.

The Department had been involved in the school-based PGCE (Secondary) since September 1993 and had now taken on its third cohort. Relations between the Library and the students were more problematic than with previously existing courses. Attendance at Course Committees, library skills sessions, interactions at the Counter and Enquiry Desk, informal discussions with student's and staff, and DYNIX statistics suggested that increased time in schools was making it more difficult for students to make as full a use of the Library facilities as previously.

The aim of the project was to provide suggestions as to whether and what changes were required for students on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses. The PGCE (Secondary) could have been an alternative. However, this course had no University-based equivalent preceding it and

comments made about the course structure and management suggested that it was as likely to be these factors that led to the student's negative view of the Library rather than the school-based nature of the course itself. On the other hand, the Faculty Librarian had good relations with the Primary PGCE team, being fully involved in the course management. The Course Leader was enthusiastic and committed about the tailoring of library skills sessions for the course and, moreover, she was enthusiastic and helpful about the setting up of such a research study.

Alan describes his approach to starting work on the study:

"I made a successful bid for internal funding to provide clerical support for the project. I did not bid for funds to cover my own professional role. It was the first time that I had undertaken such a project and I did not know what such cover would entail. I wanted to experience the impact of undertaking research whilst carrying out my normal duties.

I found that I was reliant on the clerical assistant developing her own work in support of the project; she was not, therefore, paid enough. It was difficult for me to find regular slots of time to pay appropriate attention to the project. I found it difficult to remain emotionally and professionally neutral when students criticised the Library. The project itself was worthwhile because the evidence gained suggested that the school-based students were at a disadvantage in accessing library resources on a regular basis.

A Starting Points questionnaire, which provided initial background information, and group interview showed school-based students to be more familiar with what to expect from a University Library. The school-based students borrowed at a consistently higher rate and were far more successful at returning or renewing their loans on time. However, feedback from a final interview, course committees, and the external examiner's report all strongly suggested that they were suffering from a lack of regular access to library resources - along with a lack of time to make use of these resources when they had access to them. Many of their selections for loan were

made cursorily: students often found once they got home that closer examination showed books to be not relevant to their needs.

It is interesting to note that since the end of the project: the PGCE Primary no longer runs on two pathways. The PGCE Secondary is being redeveloped to provide the students with more regular access to the University. We might conclude that where students experience difficulties in using the library, that this may well be indicative of more general difficulties they are experiencing with their courses."

Concluding comments

Clearly the individuals concerned got a great deal out of carrying out research projects within the library. Both the above writers found that, even with support, balancing the demands of everyday work with those of research could be difficult.

The projects described contributed towards the work of the library and raised its profile in the institution. Their work encourages an environment where all staff become aware of the value of research and that research does not need to be something totally divorced from daily practice.

Perhaps such small projects are beneath the attention of 'big players' in the library research field. However, if their work is to bear fruit in the real world, it has to answer the needs of staff in practice settings who can see instances where research is not an abstract activity but something that can be of value to them.

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