

CILIPS Conference 2017 – Student Report

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Abstract

This article gathers the perceptions of three students attending the MSc in Information & Library Studies at the University of Strathclyde, after participating at the CILIPS Conference – Strategies for Success - held in Dundee on 6-7 June 2017. The authors provide an informative overview of the presentations and workshops delivered on the second day of the event, enriched by personal viewpoints. Learning outcomes of a first experience as attendees of a professional conference are outlined, together with a reflection on the current state and future developments of the information and library sector.

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Report

CILIPS Conference 2017 represented our first opportunity of participating in a professional conference. We were not sure what to expect from it, and the off-putting, rainy weather was surely not the best way Dundee could have welcomed us. Nonetheless, the venue was revealed to be a comfortable, warm environment, and the excitement of being part of such an important event, gathering information professionals from across Scotland (and further), promptly revitalised us. Our first impressions of the conference were of kind and helpful professionals still lingering in conversations and ideas from the day before. The theme for the conference was ‘Strategies for Success’ and the opening speech by CILIPS president Liz McGettigan set the pace for the workshops and talks to follow, with a clear and resounding message: “when librarians meet, great things happen.” Moreover, the presentation of the Student Awards helped us feel even more motivated to work hard towards the achievement of our objectives and even more committed to contribute to the development of information services. The importance of collaboration between stakeholders and librarians, as well as among librarians themselves, was made clear and would be the leitmotif in all the following thought-provoking speeches and workshops, as well as in the exhibition presenting the latest trends and technologies available to the library and information sector. The prize draw was a good way to encourage delegates to approach the representatives of each organisation in the exhibition room. The breaks in-between talks gave us the opportunity to meet with professionals from different sectors of the information and library environment, allowing a fruitful exchange of ideas, while offering discoveries of new products (such as software and design solutions) that libraries can implement to enhance the quality of their services.

The fun, inspirational and entertaining plenary session by Dr Jane Secker and Chris Morrison on copyright literacy – *The road to copyright literacy: a journey towards library empowerment* - gave us an idea on how it is possible to approach a complex topic like copyright light-heartedly, and at the same time seriously, providing a picture of the most common perceptions on this challenging topic across the sector, based on research findings. The audience was taken through a journey towards an increased awareness of the potential behind copyright rules using an interactive quiz, audience polling and offering honest information on copyright to help dispel myths and fears. First, they explained the perceived characteristics of copyright: being considered often as a problem, it is seen as always changing and mutating, bearing unclear or incoherent messages, but also offering chances for cooperation and collaborations among librarians, and librarians and users. Then they stressed the importance of copyright literacy, more focused on education and less on training, balancing the importance of knowledge of the law with the approach necessary to understand it. As a matter of fact, learning to deal with copyright means working with non-binary situations in which answers are not a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The important message of this talk is that librarians need to cope with uncertainty when dealing with copyright issues, but at the same time, it is important to offer them better tools for a successful approach: one-day courses do not suffice anymore, and a proper education is needed. We exit the room with the idea that, as any other aspect of our profession, copyright requires education and keeping up-to-date with the latest developments, and this can be more easily achieved when knowledge and efforts are shared. The presentation left the audience energised and alive to a shared challenge for information professionals everywhere.

Dr Martzoukou presented findings from her recently completed study: *Lost in information? New Syrian Scots' information literacy way-finding practices*. Her talk was both a revelation and a validation: revelation, since we had never stopped to reflect about the essential role that libraries play in the delicate inclusion process of refugees; validation, as the researcher corroborated our opinion that libraries do not invest enough resources to illustrate what they offer and demonstrate what their impact is within the community. It was eye-opening, although it should have been obvious, to discover through the results of Dr Martzoukou's study how precarious the situation of refugees who had just reached the country was, and how libraries were able to assist them in fulfilling the most basic everyday activities, such as communicating and interacting with others. One take-away from the talk was that refugees widely depend on mobile technology for information and daily life. Among the recommendations to libraries hoping to engage with them are: the creation of a single national library card that can be offered to refugees upon arrival; pop-up classrooms; and peer education, all centred on creating different ways to reach and aid refugees with literacy challenges, be they media, health, or political.

During a parallel session panel, - *Overcoming disability and barriers: Using assistive technologies in libraries* - Craig Mill from CALL Scotland presented some of the assistive technology available online for visually impaired people: from the 'Books for All database', accessible through SCRAN and GLOW, to a plugin for reading voices with a Scottish accent option. Most of them are free for the public sector in Scotland and there is no reason for a public library not to implement them in their services. Jim McKenzie outlined Edinburgh city libraries' case study on the "VIP" project where a network of volunteers and qualified librarians distributed in 10 libraries throughout the city offer help and support in using technology for

visually impaired people (hence VIP). How to widen participation was identified as the most challenging part of the project. Since posters and banners were useless for obvious reasons, word of mouth was being chosen to promote the service through guide-dogs associations and audio-book meetings among others. A small concern was regarding the distribution of the service not covering all the libraries of the city, but that has been solved by some practical reasons we reviewed. To understand the reason behind the service not being used in certain libraries, seven focus groups took place and some issues were raised. For instance, not all libraries are close to bus stops or are relatively safe to reach considering crossings and traffic; also, not all library facilities or staff are ready to welcome VIP needs. Therefore, the seemingly limited coverage of the service is deceptive, because it reaches the wider pool of patrons possible in the most efficient way.

Following these sessions was a break for lunch, which allowed for networking, learning from others across the country, and seeking advice; it was very helpful to exchange opinions with professionals who built their career over the years, achieving significant results. (And it also featured macarons!)

In the afternoon, Dr Diane Pennington presented - in her intervention entitled, *Linked Data: Opening Scotland's library content to the world* - the findings of a survey conducted across Scottish libraries to investigate their perceptions of linked data and the status of its implementation. The results of the study highlighted how, although the potential of linked data with respect to improving the visibility of library resources and assisting cataloguing efforts is quite well-recognised, several obstacles are preventing the adoption of this technology in many

institutions. Lack of support and awareness from the managerial sphere, lack of knowledge, and licensing constraints are amongst the most frequently mentioned barriers.

The talk delivered by Dr John Crawford on information literacy strategy for Scotland – *Towards an information literacy strategy for Scotland* - underlined one of the key responsibilities that libraries are invested with: developing frameworks able to support the improvement of literacy levels among the population and put them into action. Strategic and policymaking issues have been increasingly affected by political events, cultural and technological development. Libraries are responsible for shaping the services they provide to effectually address users' needs, coping to the best of their capabilities, with the social, cultural and political environment.

Another after-lunch breakout session, - *Overcoming barriers in reaching readers* - presented challenges for outreach in two case studies: Aberdeenshire project for digital literacy towards refugees and the Comic Con in South Lanarkshire libraries. The talk on refugees in Aberdeenshire Libraries exposed the services offered, like classes in ICT, Arabic keyboards, and even the recruitment of volunteers from the refugee community to create the peer education recommended in a previous talk. The implementation of a member of the refugee community in the volunteers helped to overcome barriers like language and culture, finding contact points in which the different cultures could cohabit and, at the same time, improving digital competences for all. Coexistence is one of the values which libraries can never stop promoting through their services.

A similar example of coexistence is the one brought up by Fiona Renfrew, from South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture Library service. Looking to promote their online services,

improving the awareness of library offerings, while also creating new revenues, South Lanarkshire libraries looked for partnerships with an ‘unusual friend’, which was the Big Glasgow Comic Page (BGCP). Born from the synergy of knowledge of the topic, contacts brought in by BGCP, venue availability, management and publicity of the libraries, the Comic Con has been one of the most successful events organised by the library. It saw the participation from a wide pool of hard-to-reach users, who in turn got to appreciate all the freely available materials, plus it involved an excited staff who had the chance to do some uncommon activities and, for some of them, bring their own passions to the workplace. The results were very positive: during the two days of the festival there has been an increase in the libraries’ membership, an increase of attendance to the libraries after the event, and it has also been a chance to generate an income for the library in a non-lucrative way (entrance ticket was only a pound). Both presentations were done with heart and, retrospectively, they were important milestones in the developing roles of libraries towards the changing needs of their community.

The workshop *Fake news and alternative facts: The challenge for information professionals* took a more interactive approach, having groups hold table-top discussions about how fake news is impacting their libraries, and then sharing best practices. This workshop was more engaging compared to others as we all went around the table saying where we were from and what we did before digging into the topic. It was stimulating to see the differences from school libraries to special and public libraries in their approach and treatment of fake news. As a trending topic, though, this workshop felt too short! The sharing of different groups’ discussion points at the end revealed that information professionals felt fake news was not anything new for libraries, and they would keep doing the good work of serving the public accurate information.

In the last parallel session, Nicola Osborne's talk on Digital Footprint - *If I googled you, what would I find? Managing your digital footprint* - shed a light on how important is to be aware of the things we post online. Dead social media profiles, past public comments on papers' websites and third people tagging can be, among all, detrimental for the professional image we want to give of ourselves in an online environment. It is necessary to learn how to control settings of all our social media, preventing people from tagging us in unsettling pictures or posts which we do not really want to make public. To feed anxiety in the audience, Nicola mentioned some auto-tagging features in Facebook, which, even if at the moment unlawful in UK, are still dormant in the social media source code and can be retroactively activated in case of changes in the legislation. While in the US some awareness among young people has been recorded, librarians need to be more conscious of the necessity of digital literacy for young people, and develop the same awareness in their own practice. Researching for our own digital footprint on Google is not enough: DuckDuckGo and Bing are also important tools for looking for our digital traces, since they do not give us tailored results as Google does. The presentation was interesting and useful, considering the huge amount of time that each of us tends to spend online, and the remarkable portion of our life that we decide to share every day on social networks. Thinking of libraries' patrons and the necessity to improve their awareness on the topic has been one of our immediate thoughts. Few practical tricks were reported to keep track of our digital footprint and avoid incurring the consequences of a frivolous, impulsive and irresponsible use of the web space.

The keynote address of CILIP Chief Executive, Nick Poole, concluded the conference. It was an invitation to all information and library professionals to keep in mind that the results of

our current choices and actions will have a higher impact on the future generations, rather than on us. The world of libraries is changing and expanding. It is essential that we are ready to respond effectively to the change to remain relevant and prove our value. Mr. Poole was an inspiring speaker and the conference ended for us on a high note, full of hope for our chosen career path. This was a wonderful opportunity and looking forward to future conferences we know we will be better prepared, as we learned so much from this one.

Overall, we identified four main narratives in the conference talks, which we think will be important in our future practice:

1. Literacy strategy: from digital awareness, law knowledge to the use of specific, user-tailored tools, the future librarian needs to be a relevant figure and guide in the life of their patrons and make them aware of tools, risks and opportunities in the digital environment, and, at the same time, they themselves need to be aware. More training, though, seems to be needed, especially on more challenging matters, like copyright legislation. While there seems to be a lack in opportunities available for education, librarians need to be more proactive in seeking the necessary learning opportunities.

2. Outreach strategy: to develop a better literacy strategy, a complementary outreach strategy needs to be implemented in everyday library activities. Therefore, events and services like the VIP project, Aberdeenshire New Scots project and the Comic Con in South Lanarkshire demonstrate some successful way to stretch out toward a hard-to-reach population who will benefit from library services, improving overall population wellness.

3. Synergy strategy: starting with the CILIPS President's opening statement, all the interventions implied, or were based on, the importance of creating synergies with different

stakeholders and among librarians. This Gestalt vision seems to bring more and more positive results for library outreach and inclusion activities, therefore it will be carried with pride in our future practice.

4. “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation”: Libraries should never forget to be more approachable and ‘easy to read’ in even the most serious matters (as demonstrated by the Comic Con experience, the lively talks on copyright and the workshop on fake news). It will be with that levity that a wider pool of users can be reached and literacy objectives can be achieved.

Our overall impression of the CILIPS conference was one of a tight-knit group of information professionals who are extremely supportive of each other. As postgraduate students, one suggestion for CILIPS going forward would be for more opportunities for students to network and meet with colleagues, future employers and mentors at these events. Being students working towards the MSc qualification, to be ready to enter the profession with the adequate set of skills and knowledge, attending the CILIPS conference made us realise that research is necessary to improve the library and information sector. The achievement of an academic qualification will be only the beginning; we are aware of the importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). We felt part of a bigger community of passionate and knowledgeable professionals, sharing the common final goal of advancing the information and library sector, through advocating and improving their expertise and skills. It was an inspiring, motivating context, not least an opportunity for expanding our networking and improving our knowledge of different aspects of the sector. If we were to choose tags to describe the conference, collaboration, sharing, research, advocacy, best practice, development, engagement

and CPD would have been our selection. We are thankful for the opportunity CILIPS gave us to participate in this engaging event, which allowed us to compare our experiences, interests, viewpoints and aspirations with ILS professionals, treasuring their advice for our future careers.