

Roasting the old chestnut: promoting the practitioner perspective to information studies students

This co-authored article outlines a new initiative from UKSG, working with the Brighton University information studies students and their course leader to devise and pilot a balanced presentation that fits into the curriculum. The article presents the practical challenges of delivering and organizing such an event so that it is a genuinely joint and valuable experience for the students, the academic taking part and UKSG.

Theory vs practice in library education

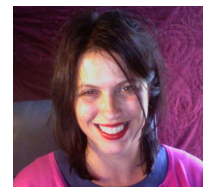
The debate about whether a university education is an appropriate and adequate preparation for professional library and information work is an old chestnut¹. Simmons and Corral² address this question very directly in a study about the educational needs of academic subject librarians, while Cox et al³ followed up a group of information management graduates from Sheffield University to investigate the graduates' own perceptions of the extent to which their course prepared them for employment. The literature tends to support a balanced approach, whereby theory and practice are combined to give students a core set of skills and knowledge. CILIP⁴ also emphasizes the need to include both theory and practice in its accredited courses and the Professional Knowledge and Skills Base (PKSB)⁵, which is now used to assess accredited programmes and support personal professional development, describes knowledge and skills in a way which juxtaposes theory and practice.

The MA in Information Studies (MAIS) course at the University of Brighton has a strong practical element running through it. While validated by the University as a masters-level course, it also emphasizes the importance of the practitioner perspective and practitioners are regularly invited to contribute to the teaching. So, as well as being taught the theory of organizing information, for example, students also take part in practical workshops delivered by practitioners specializing in acquisitions and metadata – or technical services, or even cataloguing and classification, to use old-world terminology. In module feedback, students regularly cite practitioner input as one of the 'three best things' about the module in question. When asked what they had gained most from the MAIS course overall, the 2012–2013 Brighton cohort cited this mix of theory and practice as key. In answer to the question 'What did you gain most from the course?' one student wrote:

"Theoretical + Practical Skills + Knowledge. Doing things like building web pages and creating business plans taught me a lot but has also given me practical examples that I have been able to use in job applications."

The UKSG contribution

For several years, one of the key practitioner sessions in the academic year at Brighton has been the UKSG travelling roadshow. This roadshow or workshop supported library and information programmes throughout the UK since 1991 and was conceived primarily to promote current knowledge and information about journals to a wider audience as well as a way of promoting UKSG to a new audience.



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88 The roadshow was normally made up of three or four half-hour presentations from a librarian, a publisher, a journals agent and a representative from the British Library, followed by a panel discussion. Although there were high levels of satisfaction with the content some of the feedback pointed to the need for increased interactivity and better linking to the curriculum at the particular institution. Also, attendance at the events was not always as expected and this, coupled with the difficulties of organizing three or four presenters, meant that a new sustainable and less resource-intensive approach was needed.

UKSG decided to review the process and in consultation with Audrey Marshall, MAIS course leader, began to formulate a prototype for a new approach with the intention of delivering it to the students on the MAIS course in April 2013.

As noted above, Brighton already worked closely with a number of local practitioners, one of whom was Sarah Lowe, the E-Resources and Subscriptions Librarian at the University of Brighton. She delivered a regular session on her role in the library to the MAIS students, as part of their module on collection development, and this had been popular in previous years. Together with Sarah, Jane Harvell (on behalf of UKSG), came up with a proposal which Audrey felt would adequately reflect current issues in this area and still fit with the curriculum, particularly related to collection development and the changing nature of resources. She was hopeful that it would also help students understand their assignment for this module, thereby engaging the students at the right point in their studies. So the overall aim was to deliver a beneficial session whilst, at the same time, promoting the work and value of UKSG.

“... a prototype for a new approach ...”

Workshop delivery

A three-part workshop was devised, which took around two hours to deliver. Firstly, the local practitioner, Sarah, gave a presentation on the topic of the online resource lifecycle, covering resource investigation, acquisition, implementation, review and cancellation. This was followed by a short Q&A session, during which the students were offered the opportunity to ask Sarah questions about her presentation. Secondly, Jane spoke on behalf of UKSG about scholarly communication in general and, in doing so, brought in the voices of the publishers and intermediaries.

This second part of the session outlined a little about UKSG, its mission and work. It also demonstrated to the students how UKSG supports librarians in their day-to-day work, through highlighting current issues, allowing practitioners to share problems or experiences and offering practical help. The resources highlighted included the Jisc mail, *lis-e-resources*⁶, *UKSG eNews*⁷, the *The E-Resources Management Handbook*⁸ and *Insights: the UKSG journal*⁹. An advantage of delivering the topics side by side was that we found it very simple to relate these tools to the presentation delivered earlier by the practitioner so the students could see how UKSG support could slot into their day-to-day work.

Feedback from the review and from previous UKSG roadshows had shown how much the students valued the presentations from the publishers and the subscription agents or intermediaries. To ensure this aspect was covered, we included information about their roles and responsibilities in the second part of the session under the headings ‘What do I need to know about publishers?’ and ‘What is an intermediary?’ From the publishers’ side we outlined what an academic publisher is and talked about the different materials they produce. We also touched on the journal process, including the role of editorial boards and peer review. Finally, we spoke about the current issues of open access as a publication model from the point of view of the publishers. For an insight into the intermediary perspective we gave examples of the types of intermediary and the services they offer to libraries.

“... engaging the students at the right point in their studies.”

89 The third and final part of the session, which lasted approximately 45 minutes, took the form of discussions. We worked with the students in small groups, inviting them to discuss how they would approach three scenarios:

1. "I'd like the Library to take out a subscription for the *Journal of Very Important Research Studies*" (received from an academic).
2. "Can we subscribe to the *Collection of Very Important Research Papers* which we believe is available as a nationally negotiated deal?" (received from a colleague in the library).
3. "We are starting a new course in drama – could you let us know what is available online in this area?" (received from an academic).

Groups were then encouraged to share their discussions, which allowed for further debate between the students and the practitioners. Throughout the session we offered plenty of opportunities for questions. This meant that the session was much more interactive than the previous roadshows had been. As outside speakers, this is an important consideration. Not only does it keep the student audience interested, it also allows speakers to gauge the level of engagement and comprehension of the group, particularly since the group is unfamiliar both to you and with you.

Feedback

The session was very well received. Audrey felt that it fitted extremely well into the module. It expanded on many of the issues already encountered in the lectures and gave the students a really good insight into how practitioners are facing and dealing with current challenges, particularly with regard to electronic resources.

"It gave a good sense of these issues being 'live' and not just something I'd dreamed up for an interesting debate. The juxtaposition of Sarah as an individual practitioner and then UKSG as a collaborative support network worked extremely well. It really brought to life the tensions between the different stakeholders as well as the importance of sharing good practice and encouraging open dialogue".

The response from the students was also very positive and encouraging. Comments from them included:

"Good insight into an aspect of the industry I didn't know much about before" and "I found myself thinking about how to integrate the discussions in my assignment."

"Very informative introductory session – a good mix of practical information and learning."

"Gave general impression of the tensions and collaborative efforts between different parties."

"Good to hear from practitioners who are aware of issues from different perspectives – publishers, librarians, educators."

And finally, feedback from Sarah, the local practitioner:

"I thought the format was good – a mixture of presentations and group work – and I think it is a pretty transferable format. The UKSG section was good and represented the relationships well."

"...a really good insight into how practitioners are facing and dealing with current challenges ..."

Successful model

With this successful pilot, UKSG now has a model that can hopefully be rolled out to all those UK universities who are interested. It is important that there is enough flexibility to reflect current topics and to suit the particular needs of the institution. Open access,

90 for example, was discussed at great length at Brighton, partly because it had been a hot topic at the 2013 UKSG Conference which a couple of the students had attended. One or two students were also undertaking dissertations on different aspects of open access and were conversant with the key arguments, which they were keen to explore from a practical perspective. There are plans in place to run the session at Manchester Metropolitan University and Sheffield University, and negotiations are under way with UCL. The model, based on our experiences from the session at Brighton, involves identifying a member of UKSG who would be happy to represent UKSG and who would deliver a centrally held standard presentation which may need slight modifications to reflect current issues. The presentation from the local practitioner would be around their role in their institution with the discussion questions for the workshop to be agreed between the course convenor and the presenters.

“... an important opportunity to demonstrate to students how classroom learning and real-life practice interrelate ...”

Conclusion

An important strand of the initiative is to promote the value of UKSG to students and to a new generation interested in scholarly communication. It is incredibly important to ensure those in the early part of their career are plugged into the support UKSG can offer in terms of training and awareness, not least the valuable free student places which are so popular now for the UKSG Annual Conference. It is a two-way street though, with UKSG needing to listen to the needs and requirements of a new generation. This approach, alongside the close interaction of the course convenors with the individual member of UKSG helps us achieve this aim. Of course, an additional element is to promote UKSG to the course conveners. For course leaders, it is an important opportunity to demonstrate to students how classroom learning and real-life practice interrelate, as well as to highlight the importance of networking and continual professional development.

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