Guerrillas in the mist: breaking through boundaries to provide a first-class remote library service

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The nature of distance learners and their varying needs requires an innovative and high-quality support service. Developments in teaching and learning provide an ideal opportunity for librarians to be proactive and change their roles and image within higher education (HE). The proliferation of electronic resources presents a 'double-edged sword' for distance learning students – offering increased access to information if they are able to use them effectively. All these factors have led to the development of a highly responsive library and information service, which is seen by academic staff as a key element of distance learning course provision at the University of Leicester.

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Introduction

Over breakfast at the fourth Libraries Without Walls Conference (2001) Lou McGill was inspired by a conversation with Liz Burge, a 'renowned expert in distance learning who has a background in librarianship',[1] who urged her to become a guerrilla librarian in the United Kingdom (UK). This comment followed a conversation about the changing roles of librarians and the need to take on a much more proactive role within academic environments. This has been a significant principle in the development of library services for over 8,000 distance learning students at the University of Leicester. This paper focuses on proactivity and other principles behind the service and the establishment of a dedicated team supporting students based all over the world.

Although the situation at the University of Leicester is unique in many ways, there are several issues that have had a significant impact on service development which are pertinent to all students, library staff and services.

Diversity and equity

Leicester has a very large number of distance learning students studying a range of courses, mainly at postgraduate level. They differ significantly from the 'traditional' full-time, campus-based student in that approximately 90% work full time, more than half live outside the UK and the majority are over 30 years of age.[2] However, they also share many characteristics such as a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds, economic backgrounds and social conditions, national and workplace cultures, cognitive and learning styles. Like all students who access electronic resources outside the campus there are a range of factors affecting access, from speed of Internet connection to restricted computer access to a lack of skills in using the technology.

Distance learners at Leicester are diverse, but so are all students. Diversity is about difference – there is no one definition or category that suits all students and we would argue that any student deserves an *equitable* service. By equitable we

mean that it is our responsibility to provide a range of services in as many different ways as possible to facilitate inclusion. This goes against the more familiar concept of *equality* – where librarians have strived to provide an equal service for all students and fought to get it included in strategic aims and objectives. Apologies to those earlier 'guerrillas' but in the Distance Learning Unit we do not follow the concept of equality which means 'likeness'. We strive for equity which is about fairness and justice. Distance learning services at Leicester are based solidly on this principle because equitable services acknowledge diversity.

To illustrate this point we thought it would be interesting to describe some of our real students with very specific and unusual requirements. Most students, of course, do not have such extreme needs but do you think you could provide a responsive service to someone like Hugh, who spends days at a time doing research in a submersible? Usually based on a ship, he contacts us by e-mail or phone to arrange delivery of his photocopies of journal articles. He may sometimes offer a unique address that will be appropriate for a couple of days when the ship goes to shore. The team need to ensure that we deliver the items we have at the right time to the right place. Too late, and the ship has gone. Any problems, and he may be unobtainable for long periods of time. He may have to provide several addresses at any one time. Our student records and library system are too rigid to cope with this so the team have to be very creative and flexible to enable Hugh to access the service that he has a right to.

Ian is one of our UK students and is a Major in the Parachute regiment. He was posted to Kosovo at short notice. Naturally, the last thing he thought about was returning his library books – should he pay fines on these? Who is able to make that decision? If you have a team that understands these constraints on a student they will be less inclined to mindlessly process the usual library notices and allow fines to build up. At what level should a member of library staff be allowed to make decisions that affect standard library procedures?

We believe the key to providing services to students with such varied needs is not only a flexible system, but more importantly a team that understands the changing needs of a student and

can adapt systems (or even create alternative short-term systems). The service at Leicester is currently provided by a dedicated team of staff based in a single office. This is unusual and generates much interest both nationally and internationally from other University Libraries who are attempting to provide a similar service without a specialist team. We operate contrary to many other services within academic libraries in that each person in the team participates in, and therefore has a solid understanding of, *all* the key services offered. Team members have to be multi-skilled to do this and they gain from a long and detailed induction.

A crucial feature of the service at Leicester is that there is only one service point for students to approach. This one point can be accessed by telephone, e-mail, post and in person. When a student contacts the office they can be dealt with by one person and they do not get passed around due to a member of staff's lack of knowledge, or fail to receive an answer if someone is at lunch or on holiday. This facilitates a high-quality enquiry service as well as maintaining an interesting environment for the team. Working in the library's Distance Learning Unit is rarely boring.

Another aspect in maintaining such a high level of quality is the amount of communication required between the team to follow up and deal with the range of queries we get. Locating the service in one 'noisy' office enables this. The team also has to communicate with the rest of the library on a large scale as our work crosses that of other specialist teams such as inter-library loans and lending staff. In consequence Distance Learning staff have to attend many meetings. One of the reasons for the success of the service and the high profile it maintains is extensive communication with the academic departments. We do not rely on a reluctant library representative nominated by the departments. We have gone out into departments and made ourselves and our needs known. This very important factor will be dealt with in more depth later.

The services offered by the Distance Learning Unit at Leicester are not very different from other distance learning services within and outside the UK. Each month we answer about 350 enquiries, deliver about 500 journal articles on paper, send out about 250 postal loans within the UK, enable access to other libraries, carry out about

20 literature searches and maintain a distance learning library web site.

We have gone that extra step however, to ensure we uphold the principle of equity. For example, a valid institutional constraint has resulted in limiting the postal loans service to students based in the UK – this is certainly not equitable and not even equal. We have attempted to overcome this by offering to provide photocopies of contents pages of books that cannot be borrowed and encouraging students to order a copy of a chapter (which is often enough to support an assignment) through the document delivery service.

An economic constraint, such as libraries charging fees to students from other institutions in the absence of a reciprocal scheme, means that some students are disadvantaged by their location. We will pay reasonable fees for our students to access a library close to their current residence, anywhere in the world, because we acknowledge how important it can be to gain access to a library for distance learners.

Another service that has sometimes been contentious is conducting literature searches for people who have problems accessing the Internet. We have been accused of 'spoon-feeding' our students – but we see it as a way of helping students gain access to things that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible. We often find that requests for literature searches present a 'point-of-need' opportunity to teach them information skills. By giving them some guidance – what databases to use, keywords, help with search strategies – we aim to encourage them to do future searches on their own.

Role and image of librarians

'Changes in the educational environment are re-contextualizing conventional models of librarianship to such an extent that these are being substantially re-conceptualized in many institutions.'

Levy[3] here is talking about changes in the role of information specialists in the networked environment and particularly highlights the need for a multidisciplinary approach from a variety of services to support learners in higher education. This reflects our experience at Leicester as changes in the learning environment have presented many opportunities for us, as librarians,

to renegotiate our place within the learning community.

Technological developments have always been adjusting and redefining the scope of a librarian's role but technological developments in the educational world have meant a readjustment of roles and boundaries for academics, learning technologists and librarians. Whilst many librarians have been aware of their role as a facilitator of learning this has not always been recognized by the academic community. As e-learning technologies have emerged the academic community has had to engage with what Mason[4] calls a 'pedagogical evolution' and take on a facilitation role themselves rather than a pure teaching role. She goes on to list some key elements of this online pedagogy as: 'the importance of interactivity in the learning process, the changing role of the teacher from sage to guide, the need for knowledge management skills and for team working abilities, and the move towards resource-based rather than packaged learning … online courses are driving pedagogical evolution in higher education generally, because of the rush to digitize, virtualize and globalize the campus.'

A move towards resource-based learning has provided a more obvious place for librarians to contribute to student learning. In order to do this effectively it is important for librarians to engage with learning theory and practice. One challenge for us at Leicester was in persuading academic colleagues that we teach rather than train. We are concerned with enabling students to engage with information literacy concepts that will allow them to transfer their information retrieval skills to any context that they come across as student, worker or person. One of the team joined the University's PostGraduate Certificate in Academic Practice in Higher Education (PGCAP in HE) and used this forum to persuade academic colleagues that we did provide opportunities for deep learning. Participation on the course had a positive impact on the teaching provided by the Distance Learning team and raised the profile of the library.

Another opportunity presented itself in the form of a new doctorate in social sciences by distance learning. This example highlights one of the 'guerrilla tactics' that proved to be very successful in achieving collaboration with academics. This tactic involved suggesting that we could help the course leaders with a few key areas

where they sometimes experienced difficulty. We asked them if they would like us to write the sections of the research skills module about plagiarism, concept mapping (framing the research question) and evaluation of material. When they happily agreed to that we made sure we integrated these elements into a complete section on effective literature searching with context-specific examples of searches on appropriate electronic resources. We also offered some assignment questions and as a result have successfully incorporated information literacy, in its broadest sense, within the curriculum. We also got agreement that we would be involved in the assessment process. This was then used as a model of good practice to encourage other departments to do the same. Ask any academic if they need help to educate their students about plagiarism … .

Following on from the success of this module we presented a successful bid to the University's Teaching and Learning Fund to develop an interactive information literacy tutorial to be integrated within the course. This tutorial aims to be adaptable for other courses to ensure that it will provide context-specific learning and be embedded within student courses. This has placed the library as one of the innovators in teaching at Leicester.

Like many universities in the UK Leicester has recently committed to a new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Because of the high profile of the service and participation in the PGCAP in HE one of the team was approached to join the implementation group at the beginning of the project. This resulted in an opportunity to ensure issues of concern to the library, such as integration of digital resources, information literacy teaching and support, were on the agenda from the start and not tacked on as an afterthought. We produced some guidelines for integrating electronic resources, contributed to the support site for tutors and co-developed and presented training for academic staff. This opportunity was too good to miss despite the commitment of time, and more than paid for itself in terms of maintaining a high profile for the library. Several academic staff have approached their appropriate subject librarian for support within their new VLE-based courses.

Our message to all subject librarians is: get out of the library building – get a desk in your departments – get onto course planning meetings.

Our message to all librarians is: take any opportunity you can to become a fully accepted partner within the learning community. Our message to the teachers of new librarians is: make learning theory and practice a part of the curriculum.

Providing content does not provide the solution

Without doubt the most significant influence affecting today's student is the sheer amount of information. Our experience at Leicester indicates that students struggle to identify which type of information will be most useful for a particular need and often do not have the skills to efficiently locate and obtain the information. Whilst many of our students profess to know how to use the Internet most are unaware of the potential offered by more controlled electronic sources such as databases or electronic journals. Many of our students expect all the information they need to be available electronically and are disappointed when they discover the truth. This is borne out in a recent study by Ray and Day[5] when they discovered 'a lack of awareness of the full potential and function of electronic resources. Today's students may be more sophisticated than their predecessors in using some of the basic functions of many systems, however many are clearly unaware of the limitations and uses of many electronic sources of information.'

For distance learning students these problems are compounded by many other challenges. McGill[6] has discussed these problems and ways in which the Unit attempts to overcome these in more detail, but suffice to say we have to take any opportunity we can to support and teach students. This can take the form of services, such as the enquiry service or the literature searching service mentioned above. It may take the form of face-to-face teaching (without doubt the most effective method) or web-based support for those students who only access the service through the Internet. Whichever form it takes it is one of the most important things we can do for distance learning students. Each time a 'wonderful' new electronic resource is added to the library, the cost in terms of people support needs to be counted. A rise in enquiries is inevitable and can range from access and authentication issues to requests for help in

navigating or using the resource effectively. Pointing people to links on a web page is not enough.

Another problem for us is that academic staff are also unable to keep up with the changing electronic resources which can result in expensive and potentially valuable resources not being used. As one academic member of staff in an American study on information seeking methods said: "I think librarians, if they can adapt to all the information, are going to be more important than they have ever been because there is so much information to plow through that you've got to go to the expert … Because it is changing so fast we can't keep up with all the latest techniques, and even the students can't keep up with it. So the librarians are going to be the ones to … be there to help people get through the information overload."[7] At Leicester, we have provided demonstrations for the academics to take out to students in other countries when they visit, which often helps to boost their own knowledge.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude by highlighting some of the principles that are most important to the Distance Learning Unit at Leicester. We believe that the starting point has to be the student. Once you understand their diverse situations and needs, it is possible to accommodate these by building a library service that aims to be equitable. Institutional constraints can make this difficult, sometimes impossible, but we prefer this principle to the more restrictive concept of equality that we are all more familiar with. In order to move away from the idea of a blanket service, where one way suits all, we took an innovative approach to the team structure, roles and training. This has not only benefited the students, but also the team, who have become multi-skilled as well as being committed and enthusiastic and able to take the initiative required to provide a responsive service.

Another key factor has been the significant effort to raise the profile of the service and the Library within the University. Developments in the area of learning and teaching meant that we had opportunities to persuade the academic community that librarians do teach concepts as well as skills. The PGCAP in HE course and the bid to the Teaching and Learning Fund were

significant in changing the perceptions of our academic colleagues at Leicester. We made sure that the library was involved with the development of the VLE from the beginning. The new technology offered an opportunity for the library to cover much old ground, such as encouraging information literacy teaching, using library subject web pages and electronic resources.

Raising and maintaining this high profile takes considerable resources in terms of staffing, as attendance at many meetings is crucial. What started as a means to ensure that academic and administrative colleagues were aware of the range of services available to distance learners has had a significant impact on the way librarians are viewed. Not many distance learning academics at Leicester would be at all surprised to hear us described as 'guerrilla librarians' as most of them have endured the tactics and surrendered willingly, particularly if they feel that our input will save them work or deal with a difficult issue such as plagiarism.

Technological advances and the proliferation of information sources have changed the world for students, but not necessarily made it easier. We often encounter an assumption that pointing students to these resources will result in effective utilization. We are very aware that providing content alone does not provide the solution for most students. They need accessible teaching to learn how to search for information and require support during searches. There is no question in our minds that it is the people in the Distance Learning Unit that are the most valuable resource for our students. This is illustrated by one of many unsolicited letters of support received from our students:

> "One of the most valuable additions to my program was access to the Distance Learning Unit … I realize the pressure you are under to perform at reasonable cost and to demonstrate added value to the people you serve. Let me assure you that you and your staff do both. I have taken the liberty of using your example in discussing such special library units with Universities here in the US. I hope we can learn from your example."

We hope that Liz would count us in her list of UK Guerrilla Librarians. How well do you integrate Liz Burge's[8] five maxims for librarianship in

distance education (which we believe are appropriate for all librarians)?

- Clarify and conduct work in user's terms (defined broadly).
- Build relationships (political, educational, informational, and logistical).
- Value your intermediation as essential.
- Reach past the technology tools to the human conditions.
- Grow tall from the soil of a fine tradition, but avoid being root bound.

As for the future – well, we haven't yet served a student in space but we like to think that we could manage it!

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