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Strength through partnering: new professional development opportunities in academic libraries

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Abstract:

The pace of change in Australian academic libraries has been rapid and shows no signs of diminishing. Transitioning the existing workforce to support the new information landscape has become a primary area of focus in academic libraries. Australian and New Zealand academic libraries recently identified developing and planning the workforce as their most pressing challenge (Council of Academic University Librarians 2013).

The University of Western Australia Library is proactively seeking opportunities to consolidate the Library's position as a highly valued service, integral to the University's core functions and the student experience, by partnering with other campus units to deliver priority projects where both parties have an interest in mutually beneficial outcomes. These collaborations offer powerful development pathways for librarians engaged in informal workplace learning opportunities, as demonstrated in cases studies in both teaching and research contexts.

Keywords: academic libraries, continuing professional development, collaborative learning, Australia

Introduction

The Australian higher education sector is facing continued uncertainty in 2015, after significant reforms proposed to allow universities and other higher education providers to source their own revenue through increased fees, have twice failed to pass through the Australian Federal Parliament.

The outcome of this political stalemate and any change to funding arrangements for Australian universities remains to be seen, but undoubtedly it will involve greater scrutiny of the costs of running universities, including staff, services, information resources and infrastructure. Australian academic libraries are actively finding ways to work smarter and build their value by aligning closely with university priorities. Libraries that are prepared to demonstrate value across teaching and learning, student experience and research agendas will be well placed.

The University of Western Australia Library (UWA Library)[1] is facing these uncertain times with a new University Librarian who has a strong track record of consultation and collaboration with faculties and other parts of the university. In recent years, UWA Library has focussed on integrating Library and Information Technology (IT) services to offer students a seamless information support service from each library location, with Library staff delivering many aspects of this Library/IT service. UWA Library has also been building capacity to offer a broader range of support services to researchers, including training and advice around research exposure, research impact and research data management, delivered by a dedicated faculty liaison team since 2012. In 2015, UWA Library has a new functional alignment within the University's education portfolio, and a role to play in implementing this portfolio's ambitious Education Futures Vision (University of Western Australia 2015).

With this trifecta of strong relationships in place (IT, research and education), UWA Library is well positioned to take collaborations to the next level, to consolidate the Library's position as a highly valued service, integral to the University's core functions and the student experience. This approach is consistent with recent literature suggesting that collaboration with like-minded partners is crucial to staying relevant in the academic environment, delivering core Library responsibilities within new and innovative user-centred services (Anderson 2011; Delaney & Bates 2014; Kaufman 2012; Neal 2010).

Transitioning the existing workforce to support this new information landscape is a primary focus for UWA. The profession has already witnessed new technologies bring about a great deal of skills development, process re-engineering and organizational change (Council of Academic University Librarians 2013). As new opportunities arise in supporting University priorities and intra-campus relationships grow, with a corresponding increase in expectations, how can today's academic librarians broaden their capabilities and develop professionally with so many demands on their time?

Professional development needs in Australian academic libraries

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) statement on Core Knowledge, Skills and Attributes for the Library and Information Sector sets a comprehensive professional standard for education, training and continuing professional development

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[1] http://www.library.uwa.edu.au/about

(Australian Library and Information Association, 2014). The ALIA statement includes both technical skills and what they describe as "employability skills" or generic skills. As the ALIA statement suggests, generic skills are an important part of employee contributions to their organisation and can have a significant effect on the organisation's bottom line or the "return on investment," for a particular employee (Wikipedia 2015)

Recent research suggests Australian librarians are uncertain whether technical or generic skills should be the focus of their professional development. A 2009 study (N=76, all library sectors) found that the skills necessary for being a successful practitioner during the Librarian 2.0 movement were quite generic, focussed on attitudes and traits rather than specific technical or technological skills (Partridge et al. 2010). Traits identified as important in this study included interpersonal, communication, change management, information management and leadership skills; also important were being innovative, adaptable and an active learner.

A more recent survey of knowledge, skills and attributes for Australian academic librarians (N=198, academic sector) aimed to collect information on what librarians believe are the most important skills now, and which of these will be relevant for the next ten years (Haddow 2012). In the analysis of the results from this study, technical or hard skills were the focus for most participants; however a strategic view of the role of the academic librarian appeared to be missing (Haddow 2012).

Another group of skills relevant to academic libraries can be described as "liaison skills", needed to offer advice and support from the Library in the context of faculty priorities in teaching and research. Applying the librarian's technical and generic skills to new contexts in liaison and embedded librarianship programs brings a number of additional challenges. These include building new kinds of knowledge about academic priorities, understanding culture, workflows and communication preferences in the faculty and using this knowledge and understanding to develop a relationship where the librarian becomes a trusted advisor to the faculty.

The breadth and pace of liaison activities and the necessary skills requirements pose a significant challenge for continuing professional development. A recent study found liaison programs are generally not underpinned by any dedicated training, assessment tools or measures of performance (Kenney 2014). It has also been acknowledged that formal avenues for continuing professional development to support new and emerging priorities in academic librarianship do not exist, and must be created by academic libraries themselves, most effectively in collaboration with their own institutions (Auckland 2012).

Service requirements, economics and technology developments have been the major motivations to inter- and intra-campus collaborations in the past (Kaufman 2012). Today's collaborations extend further, to the educational, cultural and social needs of the client (such as UWA Library's Carpe Diem case study, discussed below), creating value for the end-user and more seamless information services. Developing effective forms of collaboration has become essential for organisations dealing with the challenges of complex, dynamic environments (Pham & Tanner 2015). Collaborations may also offer a solution to the pressing need for continuing professional development amongst academic library staff in a form that is highly satisfactory: workplace learning opportunities.

The power of collaborative learning: the 70:20:10 model

Some of the world's largest organisations are using a model for staff learning and development called the 70:20:10 model. This suggests that optimal staff development should be based on approximately:
- 70 per cent workplace learning - from on-the-job experiences, working on tasks and problems, particularly new or challenging jobs, with performance support;
- 20 per cent social learning - from feedback, coaching, mentoring, networks, sharing best practice;
- 10 per cent formal learning - from courses and reading, chosen with regard to the other 90 per cent (Wikipedia 2015).
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Commentators suggest that this model speaks in four ways to the adult learning process: the learning experiences they have, the opportunities to practise what they have learned, the conversations they have with others about what they have been learning and doing, and the time spent reflecting on what they've done (Eyre 2011; Jennings 2010). This model is regarded in workplace development literature as a shift from a focus on learning, to a focus on productivity, or the results of learning (Eyre 2011). One of its great advantages is that workplace learning happens at the speed of the business, while formal learning is often trying to ''catch up'' skills to current workplace demands, and may be outdated by the time the skills are put into practice. Jennings suggests "organisations find informal learning generally more effective, less expensive and better received by the people who need the skills and development" (Eyre 2011).

Typical workplace learning activities included in the "70 per cent" may include opportunities to apply new learning and skills in real situations; assignments focused on new initiatives; the chance to work in small teams; co-ordinated swaps or secondments; opportunities to undertake research, and opportunities to develop specific areas of expertise (Eyre 2011). Each of these types of activities has been part of recent collaborations at UWA Library which will be described further below.

The 70:20:10 model has a great deal to offer academic libraries that are looking at how to develop staff more rapidly and authentically, as well as to drive innovation in new entrepreneurial partnerships. Workplace learning may be more affordable than formal learning and involves real-world productive outcomes from the learning: for example, project deliverables. The pace of learning is at the speed of the organisation (which in turn matches the cycles of the academic calendar), and the model may better suit the needs of adult learners. This can be summed up in the saying ascribed to Confucius: *I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.*

Strength through partnering at UWA Library

Libraries, as campus-wide entities whose broad service catalogues extend across many aspects of both the academic and business sides of the university, are in a unique position to enter into partnerships within their institution (Giesecke 2012). Libraries share vision and values with departmental units responsible for digital learning, literacy, information technology, research success, student support and more. Libraries can leverage off their reputation for innovation, status as a trusted advisor and relationships developed through liaison work. The librarians' skill set, involving technical information management skills, and

generic skills including IT skills, conceptual and analytical skills, communication skills and project management skills, makes librarians ideal partners in many new initiatives, centres of excellence and infrastructure building projects.

Two current examples of collaboration between UWA Library and other UWA campus units are presented in this paper, one with a teaching and learning focus and one with a research support focus. These two case studies demonstrate how partnerships combine skills to create fresh and agile teams who can respond rapidly to University priorities. Simultaneously, librarians involved in these partnerships have an opportunity to benefit from a workplace learning experience.

Carpe Diem workshops: seizing partnership opportunities in teaching and learning

Background

In 2012 a new course structure was implemented at the University in which the UWA Education Principles were embedded, with a focus on the practices of teaching and learning across undergraduate and postgraduate courses (University of Western Australia 2012).

The position of Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education Innovation), part of the UWA Education Portfolio, was created in 2014 and Professor Gilly Salmon was appointed to the role, with broad responsibility for implementing the UWA Education Futures Vision, supporting teaching staff and promoting of education strategies (University of Western Australia 2013). Professor Salmon is highly regarded for her research in the areas of educational innovation and the use of new technologies, as well as the development of a team-based learning design process she has called "Carpe Diem" (Salmon 2014).

The implementation of a new learning management system in 2015 has provided a further opportunity to review current teaching and learning practices, and take advantage of new learning tools within this system.

The Project

The University-wide roll out of Carpe Diem workshops, where individual units are transformed through a well-tested and highly scaffolded redesign process, has been a priority project for UWA's Education Portfolio. Unit coordinators are teamed with a librarian and a learning specialist to work through a two-day process of redesigning their units to incorporate e-learning activities with sound pedagogical purpose, resulting in an engaging and interactive learning experience for students. The aim is to "engage, challenge and transform students throughout their courses".

Opportunity for the Library

Through involvement in Carpe Diem workshops the Library has an opportunity to embed and develop information skills, digital literacy skills and advanced research skills, and to facilitate greater engagement with scholarly resources. These skills and practices are embedded in the context of discipline-based learning outcomes, and as an integrated part of the curriculum design. Collaboration in the Carpe Diem workshop format with other members of the Education Portfolio, such as learning specialists, ensures educational best practice.

Role of the Librarian

The Librarian:
- Assists in the facilitation of the workshop process;
- Provides knowledge of online tools;
- Advises on potential use of scholarly resources and follows up on copyright queries;
- Suggests ways to strategically embed information skills at a formative stage in unit development and "scaffold" them at an appropriate level throughout a unit;
- Provides technological assistance with the online learning management system (LMS);
- Suggests ways to address pedagogical challenges identified by the unit coordinator, with a growing knowledge of how others are incorporating technology into their course design;
- Acts as "reality tester" and devil's advocate for the redesigned unit.

Librarians attended prior formal professional development sessions on pedagogy and e-learning practices such as "flipping" the classroom, which have informed their ability to contribute in the Carpe Diem process. Librarians also have access to learning specialists at any time for support and guidance.

Combined skill set

The collaborative, team-based nature of Carpe Diem workshops is a significant factor in their success. The combined skills of the Carpe Diem unit teams include:
- Expert, research-based subject knowledge;
- Deep pedagogical understanding;
- Expertise in the innovative use of technology in education;
- Knowledge of relevant, accessible information resources;
- Knowledge of scaffolded information skills development;
- Ability to identify and resolve copyright issues.

Individual team members gain a deeper understanding of each other's expertise and roles which can be sourced for future collaborations.

Professional development opportunities

Collaboration with academics and education specialists in Carpe Diem is leading to professional development for the librarians involved, both in technical skills such as identified in Haddow's survey of librarians (2012) and the generic skills and personal attributes discussed by Partridge (2010). This model facilitates dedicated time in which academics can engage with librarians, strengthening their liaison function.

Technical knowledge and skill development outcomes for librarians include enhanced
- capability to exploit the features of the new learning management system; enabling greater practical assistance to academics in developing activities that engage and challenge students;
- knowledge of academic and administrative roles in curriculum and course construction, delivery and support; and

- pedagogical understanding, including a deeper understanding of technology-enhanced learning and strong practical skills.

The generic skills and attributes developed include enhanced
- ability to build relationships and communicate in small teams;
- ability to influence others;
- project management skills;
- knowledge of the University, including the students' experience as learners; and
- confidence to work with other parts of the university not just at the 'transactional' level but as a partner.

Benefits to the University

The redesigned units are being taught from 2015 and feedback is very positive so far. The Carpe Diem process has demonstrated that it is possible to redesign unit content to make better use of the online space in a manageable way and in a manageable timeframe. Students appreciate the engaging and often fun learning experience provided.

At the same time, the Carpe Diem process exemplifies the strategic goal, set for the University's Education Portfolio, of building a shared culture based on communication, collaboration and co-operation, with agile and flexible teams within the portfolio working together on priority projects. Greater awareness is being built among academics of the range of skills and support available throughout the Education Portfolio and the collaborative process is an informal learning opportunity for them as well. This is of particular value to academics who sometimes work in relative isolation, as found by Pham and Tanner (2015).

Excellence in Research Australia: partnering to manage a research audit

Background

The Australian Research Council (ARC) is a Commonwealth entity within the Australian Government. Its mission is "to deliver policy and programs that advance Australian research and innovation globally and benefit the community" (Australian Research Council 2015). As part of its mission, the ARC is administering Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)[2], a national audit of research quality in Australian higher education institutions, for the third time in Australia in 2015.

The Project

Preparing a submission to ERA is a significant amount of work, requiring tens of thousands of lines of metadata about University academic staff, publications, income, impact metrics and other esteem factors. UWA's Office of Research Enterprise (ORE) began a nine-month project to prepare the data in August 2014.

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[2] http://www.arc.gov.au/era/default.htm

Interest for the Library

The University Library as owner of the University's institutional repository has a significant interest in this project. Carefully curated collections of full text publications in the humanities, social sciences, creative arts and select other areas are made available in a secure subset of the repository, with an accompanying research statement describing the "research component" of any "non-traditional" work, to an assessment committee for peer review. Preparing the repository has been the Library's role in each ERA, and has involved significant staff time discovering and digitising each item with accurate metadata (around 1500 items in 2015). Having spent many hours of Library staff time on these activities in previous audits and with a significant dependency on other partners in the project, the Library was keen to ensure this ERA project ran smoothly.

Role of the Librarian

Due to staffing changes within the UWA ORE, the Library saw an opportunity to build the relationship between the two departments. A professional librarian (one of the authors) was seconded to fill the role of Senior Policy Officer for the duration of the ERA project. This role involved ensuring compliance with the government-mandated rules for the submission, assisting each academic area to curate their submission, in particular the content for the repository, and ensuring project milestones and deadlines were met. This position also acted as a liaison between the ORE and Library on project matters.

Combined skill set

The combined project team included skills in
- advanced data analysis;
- metadata skills;
- database architecture;
- discovery;
- information evaluation;
- liaison and communication; and
- subject expertise across disciplines including Science, Medicine, Social Science, Creative Arts and Law.

The librarians' skill set was particularly useful in managing the non-science publications and data, where indicators of quality are less clear and a more nuanced approach to curation, beyond metrics, is required. The author's experience with publishing practices and evaluating information in Humanities, Social Sciences, Law and Business disciplines was important for this part of the project.

Professional development opportunities

This collaborative experience provided several points of learning and practising both technical and generic skills. Technical skills essential to managing the large data set in this project included data analysis, information management, database development and XML. Librarians involved were able to learn from expert colleagues (PhD qualified data analysts) where they experienced a skills gap. Librarians developed a greater understanding of the breadth of the research function, how research priorities emerge at the University, and how these impact funding and reputation, gleaned from information shared amongst the team.

The generic skills applied to the context of this collaboration included the capacity for strategic thinking, problem solving, conceptual skills to analyse requirements and project management skills to translate these to a project plan and daily activities. Interpersonal and communication skills, emotional intelligence and the desire to learn were also essential to working in this culture and context.

Benefit to the University

The ERA project has a high profile in the University, with results impacting the University's reputation and reflecting upon the quality of research and research management at UWA. Through collaboration, the activities of both the ORE and the Library were completed in advance of project deadlines. The University benefited from high productivity and the project was completed within the allocated budget. The ORE, Library and IT staff involved developed working relationships that are likely to carry forward into new tasks and projects relating to University research publications collections. The resulting ERA dataset is anticipated to yield the desired results for the University, although results from the ERA project are still pending at the time of writing.

Implications for professional development

The two case studies discussed above involve development of different skills sets but important common themes emerge. Working in collaboration with another unit on campus offers the librarian a significant opportunity for workplace learning and development of several types of skills. New skills can be learnt by working with experts from other disciplines who share their knowledge in the pursuit of a common goal. Technical capabilities can be exercised in the performance of new tasks or contexts, and technical systems and processes used to meet new outcomes.

A more significant development challenge lies in exercising generic competencies within new contexts (Garavan et al. 2012). The context in which tasks are carried out involves new informational and structural features, ambiguity, and new and uncertain levels of accountability and autonomy. The social context and workplace culture in the new partnership are new or emerging. The physical context, which may involve a new workplace environment, influences workplace behaviour and performance. Employees involved in workplace partnerships are expected to display their generic competencies in combinations that meet the demands of a unique and dynamic work environment. The experience, exposure and challenges of working in a new collaboration or partnership create a powerful development pathway (Garavan et al. 2012), to respond to the modern librarian's complex mix of skills requirements.

As suggested by the 70:20:10 model, formal learning will continue to be important to the development of staff in academic libraries, particularly to staff members who are new or less confident (Eyre 2011). Workplace learning does not mean that formal learning and development opportunities can be removed but rather, that these should be used in the context of the workplace learning, and can be enhanced by a greater degree of engagement in the content as result of workplace experiences (Eyre 2011). Strong leadership is needed to ensure workplace learning opportunities are created, appropriately designed and supported, and recognised in development reviews. Professional associations can support the 70:20:10 model

via professional development schemes which recognise all three types of learning, such as the ALIA PD scheme.

Conclusion

Informal workplace learning is an important pathway for developing staff in complex and fast-paced environments. Entering into collaborations or partnerships with other campus units is one way in which academic libraries can provide new opportunities for staff workplace learning, in the context of real-world priorities and deadlines, and with minimal cost to the organisation.

Partnerships have enabled the UWA Library to gain additional resources, to combine skill sets and create entrepreneurial teams who can respond rapidly to University priorities. Collaborative efforts produce results greater than those working alone, and assist the Library to manage staff resources across its increasingly broad mandate. The successful outcomes from these partnerships are positioning the Library as a credible and innovative partner in new initiatives on campus, and the relationships developed are likely to lead to further cooperation and collaboration amongst the campus units involved.

Working outside the Library, being embedded in a different workplace culture and surrounded by professionals with diverse skill sets creates an authentic and transformative learning experience for the staff involved. A wide range of technical skills can be developed by applying this model to different university contexts and team environments, such as learning design, data analysis skills, IT skills and customer service skills. Further, the ability to adapt generic skills like project management, conceptual and interpersonal skills to new contexts is a great indicator of an agile and flexible workforce, such as strong libraries of the future will need.

Note: The views expressed in this paper are the views of its authors and not necessarily those of The University of Western Australia.

The authors have also prepared a paper and presentation for the IFLA WLIC 2015 Reference and Information Services stream. The two papers differ in focus and methodology, although some references and assertions regarding drivers for collaboration may be common to both papers.

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