The Training Imperative for the Virtual Library: Challenges and Opportunities in the Skill Development of Librarians

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Introduction

This paper describes the profound service changes occurring in a large multidisciplinary science library due to the establishment of a virtual library. The paper concentrates on the changes in service delivery which were developed in response to the growing electronic collection, distributed learning and research environment and the changing behaviour of users. The new modes of library service necessitate professional development in order to meet quality outcomes, particularly as librarians assume roles in which they collaborate with faculty in realizing key educational outcomes. The approaches to librarians' skills development and the challenges are presented and discussed.

Environment

Allyn and Betty Taylor Library at the University of Western Ontario offers services and information access to users affiliated with the Faculties of Engineering, Health Sciences, Medicine and Dentistry and Science. Its current total user group of approximately 13, 000 consists of 9,000 undergraduate students, 1,400 graduate students, 1, 800 faculty (includes all clinical faculty in the Faculty of Medicine) and about 1,000 research staff, many of whom are located in affiliated research institutes off-campus. Academic programs have become more distributed in recent years, especially in the health disciplines where students spend time in off-campus training sites. The library's strategic direction since 1999 has been to move its journal collections to digital format. In 2001, Western Libraries adopted a digital only policy and aggressively acquired electronic content. In the Taylor Library this policy has resulted in the numbers of current print subscriptions falling from 3,600 in 2000 to present day 1,800 titles. The available electronic titles supporting the sciences currently are at approximately 4,000. These titles are mainly available through large journal packages acquired through consortial purchases, and they support all the subject areas.

Library services

The changes in the external environmental have required us to rethink our service delivery. Even though the gate counts in the library have remained stable during the recent years, around 100,000 a month, undergraduate students now mainly use the library as a place to study or socialize with their peers, to send emails and to do research through available internet connections, and lastly, to use the print resources. Visits to the library by researchers, faculty and graduate students have greatly diminished because they often can access needed information from their desk tops. Increasingly, we have to support our users in their remote locations by providing instruction, help and reliable access. This

dual role of the library poses challenges as we try to serve the diverse needs of the user groups. We have chosen as a strategic direction the separation of the virtual library services from the in-library services via the implementation of a single in-library service desk, and the enhancement of our virtual services, end user support and teaching. This new service model will be implemented during the summer of 2003.

In-library service: In 2001 we analyzed the data on the types questions asked from staff at our Circulation and Reference Desks. At the reference desk approximately 10-15% of the questions were in-depth reference questions; 30-40 % of help requests related to computer use, 20% were directional, and 30% were ready reference questions requiring mainly the use of one single tool, such as the library catalogue, one database or the Internet. Interestingly, at the Circulation desk, 10 % of users were referred to the Reference Desk for in depth consultation. The Circulation desk staff already successfully handled a number of ready reference questions.

The concept of single service desk as part of the over-all user-centered service philosophy has been used in several libraries. Dain (1998) determines some of the staffing issues, makes recommendations regarding staffing and training and provides some evidence of the success of this model. In our planning we took special notice of the experience of the implementation of the User Services Center at the Health Sciences Library of the University of North (Moore et al. 2001). We also developed service guidelines which include explicit definitions of referral requirements. These guidelines were used as a basis of the training program which was developed for the training of all library staff who will serve at the desk. The desk will be staffed largely by library assistants; subject specialist librarians' shifts will be only a few hours per week. In addition, the librarians will assist the service desk by providing in-depth reference service by referral .

Virtual library service: Each of the librarians supports a specific subject area by managing print and digital collections, by providing teaching support and web based material development. Reducing the librarians' desk service requirement from current 9 –12 hours per week will allow them to better do what has become one of the crucial activities in today's academic library: liaison and outreach and getting more involved with information literacy programs to make themselves, and ultimately the library service relevant to the academic community. Crowley (2001) states:

"The threat of being seen as peripheral, invisible, and not inconsequential should encourage academic librarians to design and sustain service programs that appeal to those who have the power to alter or sustain value definitions in their particular academic contexts. Moreover, it should be a strong incentive to initiate or continue both short- and long-range efforts to ensure that the librarian, in any academic environment, is seen as central, visible and consequential"

Further on Crowley articulates that:

"Moving the academic librarian from the reference desks to brick and electronic classrooms, combined with a context-relevant alliance with researchers grounded in shared credentials and interests, may well be the answer to the academic version of the question, If your customers know as much as you do, why do they need you?"

Changing Professional Roles: Librarian as Educator

Librarians' skills in the areas of technology, educational design and teaching techniques are crucial in their new reducational role. Teaching skills are key in today's environment where librarians are taking an active role in forming partnerships with faculty in achieving key information literacy outcomes . Julien and Boon (2002) note the deficient skills of librarians in key competencies regarding information literacy instruction in Canada . Western Libraries and the Taylor Library support and encourage professional development. During the recent years, staff development budgets have increased, and librarians are encouraged to take advantage of learning opportunities which directly support their skill building in key strategic areas.

Strategies for Development

In order to facilitate skill development, the Library has formulated several training strategies:

- Workshops on instructional design and adult learning
- Staff development forum for instruction librarians
- Goal setting, ongoing performance management, and individual coaching
- Individual skill building in areas of technology

Shake up the one-Shot Workshop

Librarians at Western participated in a one-day workshop facilitated by Anne Zald, Information Literacy Coordinator at the University of Washington Libraries in 2001. The purpose of the workshop was to help librarians understand the Association of College and Research Libraries information literacy standards and use a simple model of instructional design. The model comprised five questions, closely tied to learning objectives that are part of the ACRL information literacy standards, the librarian can ask while preparing for an instructional sessions:

- What do you want the student to be able to do?
- What does the student need to know in order to do this well?
- What activity will facilitate the learning?
- How will you know the student demonstrates the learning?
- How will I know the student has done this well (evaluation criteria)?

Teaching for Librarians Course

The Teaching for Librarians course is offered by Western's Education Development Office, and will be offered in June 2003 for all instructional librarians; in 2002 some individuals participated in a similar course on trial basis. The course comprises two elements: theory and microteaching. Sections relating to the theory of teaching include how to design good lectures (e.g., set, body closure), tips for teacher effectiveness, how to establish instructional objectives, understanding instructional design, using active learning techniques (e.g., think-pair-share, quescussion, modified brainstorming, one-minute-paper, etc.), group discussion, and how to design appropriate evaluation.

The microteaching sessions involve the videotaping of short teaching presentations in front of a small group. Each participant is given feedback from the group and from the group facilitator on such things as articulation and enunciation, pace, voice inflection, enthusiasm, nonverbal communication, active engagement of the group, appropriate organization of materials with clear introduction and objectives, use of examples or illustrations, logical presentation of information, use of teaching aids, equipment, and effective closure. The feedback provide in microteaching sessions has been found to be one of the most effective means of evaluating participants' teaching strengths and weaknesses.

Team-Based Skill Development

In the past few years it has become evident at Western that many instruction librarians work in isolation of each other. This second strategy serves to ameliorate this situation and provides a forum for librarians to discussion teaching issues, problems, and strategies. Peer development of this nature results in sharing and learning that might not otherwise occur. This phase of staff development for librarians is still in its infancy, although currently some of the librarians informally discuss common problems and share ideas.

Performance Management

Association of College and Research Libraries Statement of Professional Development (2000) outlines that "learning, which is key to acquiring and maintaining individual excellence, is ultimately the responsibility of the individual". Through inclusion of teaching competencies in job descriptions and effective goal setting as part of the performance management process for instruction librarians, the expectations have been shaped to include the ongoing development of teaching expertise and effective practice as well as technical skills development. Following is a generic excerpt from the goals of a Taylor Library instruction librarian:

Goal - Develop and provide information literacy programs enabling users to become skilled in identifying information needs, and locating, evaluating, and using that information effectively.

The objectives are designed to encourage incremental skill building in key areas while being actively involved with teaching initiatives, and liaison and outreach activities, as well the exploration of new web technologies in teaching. The role of the supervisor as a leader and coach in this process is crucial. Through discussions in which common goals and strategies as well as training needs are identified, staff will ultimately reach the set objectives.

Individual skill building

In addition to workshop which are offered on campus, librarians are encouraged to improve their technical skills in web development, their marketing and communication skills when there is a need. Through efficient communication and coaching involved with the active performance management, they are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities for skill building. Librarians have effectively developed skills in the use of web authoring tools and the use of course management software, such as WebCT in this manner.

Challenges

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges is from colleagues who do not realize the full implications of our changing profession and who tend to hold on to traditional practice of librarianship. When such individuals are facing a change in their roles, or as Fulton (2003) calls it "a shift in professional identity", they can be difficult and require the leader to take an active role. They may display their feeling of vulnerability, anxiousness, inadequacy and self-consciousness with contemptuous, hostile and angry behaviour.

It has been well established that effective change management is crucial in achieving successful end results. In today's academic libraries, library leaders have a key role to play in facilitating change by effective leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2002) summarize them as five essential practices:

- 1. Challenge the process
- 2. Inspire a shared vision
- 3. Enable others to act
- 4. Model the way
- 5. Encourage the heart

From the beginning of the process, we engaged all levels of staff through group meetings and involvement in task specific working groups in the discussion of the external challenges, the exploration of solutions, and the impacts of proposed changes. The staff were full participants in the planning process which has taken more than two years. We

celebrate our successes and hold frequent formal and informal meetings to keep all staff informed.

Change management is a long-term process. Once shared vision has been created, the challenge of maintaining it and keeping librarians mobilized in the right direction is considerable. Enabling others to act through effective team work and outcomes based work assessment are key in the full engagement of staff in the new directions. Performance management at the Taylor Library is an ongoing process, yet sometimes external challenges interfere with the efficiency of the process. Periodic review of each librarian's goals and objectives helps to ensure everything is on track (or get it back on track). Still, one can expect that change of this magnitude will take years.

Conclusion

While Allyn and Betty Taylor Library has moved forward in its efforts of becoming actively involved with shaping the teaching roles of librarians, challenges are still encountered and they are not trivial. Effective leadership practices, change management, communication, and continuing dialogue with librarians are key in order to fully realize the role of librarian as educator.

The final outcomes of becoming aware of and recognize opportunities for liaison still need to be realized. While some librarians are naturally more suitable for and comfortable with this role, others need active encouragement, positive experiences and a supportive environment to realize their full potential.

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