Getting in bed with our customers: how did we embed our services to push the library mission at Vaal University of Technology

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GETTING IN BED WITH OUR CUSTOMERS: HOW DID WE EMBED OUR SERVICES TO PUSH THE LIBRARY MISSION AT VAAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

Emerging trends in technology have changed the academic libraries’ landscape and services. These changes will forever impact and influence how libraries conduct their businesses to satisfy the most important people in their lives; that is; the customers we serve, especially in academic libraries.

In the 21st century waiting for customers to come to the libraries to is no longer working and is also no longer relevant. Getting out of our comfort zones, getting close to our clients, invading their space when they least expect and getting in bed with those customers to satisfy their information needs is now a buzzword or the name of the game.

How can we get those customers to sleep in one bed with us academic librarians? As part of educational process academic libraries have a role to play. Retaining today’s customers and staying relevant has become more complex for academic libraries. This is due to the constant change in technologies that are used to store, facilitate and share information. Overcoming these complexities, librarians should know how to play the game to retain their customers.

This paper is going to explore on how VUT librarians stayed relevant in these trying times, redefined their roles, embraced technological changes and later embedded themselves to the faculties to support teaching and learning. The paper will further discuss the challenges we faced while we were pushing this mission. Lastly, the paper will discuss the best embedded practices that worked us; how we enhanced those chosen methods, adopted them and left a visible mark to both students and staff and enabled them to desire us more.

Keywords: Embedded librarianship, social media, pro-active, information literacy, collaboration, higher education, customizing, lifelong learning

1. Introduction

The constant technological changes in higher education have brought threats and opportunities in academic libraries. Responding to these changes academic libraries have realized that they not exist in isolation, as privileges that they used to enjoy as gate-keepers of information are no longer the same.

Chang and Chen (2011:425) note that these trends came to the forefront, transformed education and necessitated re-examination of the roles of the libraries and librarians, as well as faculties and additionally forcing upon both the need for collaboration.
Academic libraries are now part of the educational process and have a mission to play as Thachill (2008:1) further highlights; they exist to support students, staff and academic faculty in their research and teaching by acquiring and making the best information available.

To keep VUT’s mission alive we embarked upon a benchmarking exercise to determine what other academic libraries did to keep their missions alive. It was discovered that academic libraries were practicing embedded librarianship. The concept was introduced to the team of us in 2010 but we started playing around and practicing this new approach of making ourselves more visible in 2011.

We further enhanced and the embraced library’s mission (which is to contribute to the creation of knowledge and development of lifelong learning) by training the customers to be independent learners and to be able to help themselves. We are no are no longer using the library-centred approach to learning; instead we are now using a customer-centred approach. By doing so we are no longer assuming how our customers feel about us and the services and facilities. We focus on what customers feel about us and the services and facilities we offer. We are of the view that customer-satisfaction is the major indicator of our success.

- Understanding embedded librarianship

I came across with various definitions of embedded librarians during the literature review. Some of these definitions were developed based on how academic libraries have embedded themselves in their institutions.

Embedded librarianship in practice is still in its infancy at VUT. We are still using the traditional methods, hence supporting the authors below because it fits well with what we do at VUT.

Shumaker and Tally as cited by Kvenild (2012) define embedded librarians as “a librarians that focus on the needs of one or more specific groups, building relationships with those user groups, developing an understanding of their work, and providing information services that are highly customized and targeted to their greatest needs”.

Kvenild (2012) further stresses that embedding is another way to work outside the traditional boundaries and engage with students and staff in an authentic way while gaining understanding of their day to day information needs. Our role as librarians is crucial in supporting teaching and learning, hence it is important for us to grab this opportunity.

This paper is going to explore on how VUT librarians stayed relevant in these trying times, redefined their roles, embraced technological changes and later embedded themselves in faculties to support teaching and learning. The paper will further discuss the challenges we faced while promoting this mission. Lastly, the paper will discuss the best embedded practices and methods that worked us; how we enhanced those chosen methods; adopted them and left a visible mark to both students and staff to enable them to need us more.

2. Tried and tested models

As part of educational process academic libraries have a role to play and a mission to fulfill in supporting teaching and learning in higher education. To stay relevant we decided to get out from our comfort zones and became pro-active. Our aim was to know what was happening outside our traditional premises rather than just sitting in our offices and wait for our customers to come to us.
In 2012 we decided to formalize and implement the concept and practice of embedded librarianship. We piloted this new innovation by using various models. The reason for piloting this was to get a buy-in to the concept and to see how it will be received by the VUT community, and come up with strategies and implement models that will work for us. We collaborated with the faculties by trying and testing the following models:

2.1 Departmental visits and faculty collaboration

By being pro-active we started visiting lecturers just to introduce the concept, showcase our skills and competencies. Our additional aim was to collaborate with them in their teaching and learning activities. Matos, Matsuoka-Motley and Mayer (2012:135) state that taking the pro-active approach, talking to people, and selling what we can do based on our skills and competencies is directly connected to success, and we did just that.

The departmental visits enabled us to know what was happening on the ground and collaborate with the lecturers on various teaching and learning activities. We did so by introducing types of sources like online databases, e-books, printed journals, reference materials and general books the students can use for their academic work and other services that can assist them. Technology is now taking away faculties from coming to the library. Both students and lecturers think they can find everything from Google. They are not fully aware about other resources offered by libraries and librarians.

Some lecturers welcomed this new practice and started inviting us to address and offer training during their lecture periods; others were negative. This will be explored later when discussing the challenges we experienced as we were embarking on this new journey.

2.2 Class visits

The class visits enabled us to talk directly to students and focus on their information needs. A worldwide trend and the phenomenon observed by Owens (2008:8) also supported by the author is that some students are still doing research using Google only. In addition, there have been several episodes of plagiarism. This is worsened by lack of understanding of the purpose and use of referencing than the intent to cheat, hence the need of library instruction as Owens further explains.

We embedded ourselves by sharing with the students the services they were unaware of. This included online databases, printed journals, reference sources that they could use for their assignments and other projects. We emphasized that Google should not be the only source they need to rely on for their information needs. In addition, we support Owens (2008:10) observation which states that when students see for themselves what is available, rather than just hearing from the librarians, they will choose to use the library resources more often. Collaborative facilities bring new energy and relevance to the academic library as Dewey (2004:6) further insists. Our show and tell presentations proved to be the best methods in marketing our services.

Customizing training sessions distinguished by Norelli (2010:72) is essential to any embedded programme. We always customize training session according to the information needs of that particular course. For example we compile information that is relevant to that particular course; and also inform students about services that they were unaware of. Students who were not aware about these services were left more informed about these services.
2.3 Collaboration with the Department of Communication to incorporate information literacy

The new population today is technologically advanced. This is caused by emerging trends in technology which allow them to store, share and facilitate information. In dealing with these changes universities observed by Smidt and Gulcin (1998) have been forced to review their operations and revised their activities, and thus creating new opportunities. Lifelong is the one of the major graduate exit-levels or attributes that any institution of higher learning is striving for.

Supporting and enhancing life-long learning is also another major role of librarians working in institutions of higher learning. Academic librarians have been embarking on library orientation or library instruction programmes which are perceived by Norelli (2010:72) as being core services for academic libraries for years; but the advent of Internet has made information to be available at our finger tips. This influx of information made institutions of higher learning worldwide to adopt information literacy standards. These standards and other aspects of information literacy are not taught to students by their lecturers.

- Defining information literacy

There are many definitions of information literacy. For the purpose of this paper, the one by the Ministry of Education and National Library of New Zealand (2002) cited in Probert (2009:25) is more relevant to VUT and is described “as a broad concept that embraces information skills, ICT skills, and the library skills along with reasoning skills, strategies and principles that enable end-users to gather information and function effectively”.

VUT libraries too, have followed the suit to enhance these information literacy standards further. In 2006 I developed an online credit-bearing information literacy module called “Introduction to information literacy skills”. The module was incorporated into the End-user Computing because all first year students were doing it. Varsity was a course management system (CMS) that was used at that time. Assessment was done through multiple choice questions. The course ran over two years and was phased-off due to logistical issues. The library had short staff and lacked training on how to use that course management system. Furthermore, the staff did not have teaching and facilitation skills that were required to execute the job well then.

I’m extremely passionate about information literacy, when I saw my trial effort going down I knew I had to do something. We all go our way out when we want to reach a certain goal and leave a visible mark or a lasting impression.

In 2010 I registered for Advanced Diploma in Higher education. This two year diploma helped me with the necessary teaching, facilitation, proper module development, research and e-learning skills. Empowered with these skills I developed a new information literacy programme in 2012. This time I managed to speak the language that academics understand better. For example, outcomes of the course - (what the students will learn after completing the course); intended learning outcomes - (how the students will benefit from attending the course).

I presented this to the library staff for their input. This initiative was taken to the Senate and was given a stamp of approval. A committee comprising academics and library staff was formed to find ways of incorporating the programme into the university curriculum. It was agreed that the course will no longer be incorporated and offered under End-user computing. Instead; it will be incorporated into the Department of Communication in July 2013 as all first year students are required to do Communication irrespective of the course they have registered for.
2.4 Owning Turnitin software

I know plagiarism is part of information literacy but I have a reason for discussing this separately. As indicated earlier the paradigm-shift in higher education has brought exciting opportunities for librarians.

I also noted in this paper that students use Google as their first stop to look for information rather than going to the library to get credible materials that they will never find on Google. I also share with you that students copy and paste. Some do that intentionally; whilst others lack knowledge on referencing, and some are not aware about the consequences of plagiarism.

- What is the role of academic librarians in combating this?

Our role is to sensitize the students about the dangers of plagiarism and about the services that we have that might help them. In 2007 VUT bought an anti-plagiarism software (Turnitin) to be used by lecturers to check students’ assignments to determine whether the assignments were plagiarized or not; and for students to check the percentage of plagiarized content before submitting the paper to be marked.

This software was managed by Research Department but it never fulfilled the outcomes it was intended for. We helped the university from wasting money when this was handed over to the library in January 2012. We did not know how to use it because we never received any formal training.

I decided to play around with the software. I applied the knowledge I gained from ADHE because we were using Safe-Assign software when submitting our assignments. After putting more effort I managed to master the basics. We advertised this service and invited both students and lecturers for training on how to use this software. The response was good; students and lecturers came in large numbers. I remember panicking on day I was to offer the first the training. The room was full; all eyes were on me. My role and objective was to show students and staff that this service should be provided by the library. Furthermore my role was to put the library on academic landscape.

I was satisfied with the results because my extra efforts helped both students and lecturers to know how to use the software and also to be aware about plagiarism. Currently, I am still the only one who is comfortable with the software, hence training the entire VUT community. The ownership of this software was also another example where we demonstrated our key and strategic role in supporting teaching and learning.

2.4 Social media technologies

In the digital age librarians cannot shy away and be reluctant from using social media. Studies have proven that these tools have a huge impact in all aspects of life. They are also becoming essential and indispensable for accessing library services as Matos, Matsuka-Motley and Mayer (2010:133) further expand. Information goes viral when posted on social media.

To further fulfill our strategic mission and getting in bed with customers, the library took advantage of these tools and created Facebook and Twitter. The library has an administrator who posts information about activities that are taking place in the library. We improve our services by taking suggestions from what our customers have posted or suggested, although they sometimes suggest or ask for information that is not library-related.

To further strengthen our mission we also sensitize our customers about academic social media that they can use like (www.mendeley.com, www.academia.edu) and (www.researchgate.net) to collaborate, share information and discover new research during our training sessions.
2.5 The tablet e-reader project

Information today comes in various forms and packages. This means customers are longer forced to come to the library to view what is available. Library catalogues are now web-based; most of the databases come in electronic format; and libraries have books that also come in electronic format (e-books or digital books).

E-readers are required to view the e-books and are significant in higher education. Educause (March 2010) states that e-readers can store a large collection of books, articles, class notes; students do not need to carry a stack of textbooks in their bags.

How can we ensure that electronic resources we spend millions on reach our targeted users, especially the postgraduates who do not have time to come to the library due to the nature of their work and the nature of their studies? Even though these resources are available online some students are still finding difficulties in accessing and using them because some companies prevent their employees from viewing certain websites.

The library found a solution to that problem that prevents our customers from accessing the online resources. The library bought Archos tablet e-readers to enable our customers to utilize our e-books and online databases. This idea was initiated by our E-resources librarian towards the end of 2012.

- What is an e-reader?

According to Educause (March 2010) an e-reader “is a portable device, low power, high resolution device which is specifically designed to display digital versions of written material from book, magazines, newspapers, and other printed sources”.

![Image of an Archos tablet e-reader](image.png)
The library piloted this project by choosing Biomedical Science students in the faculty of Applied and Computer Science. Sixteen Archos tablet e-readers were bought for Master students. The aim was to enable them to download and make use of the e-books and online databases the library subscribes to. Training was provided to that chosen group. This project is still in its infancy, the library is monitoring its progress. It intends to buy more e-readers for other faculties after evaluating its success with the currently department it is working with.

3. Successes: Models that worked for us

3.1 Class and departmental visits

The lecturers who allowed us to visit their classes praised us because they saw improvement in students’ academic work and different types of sources they use. Some lecturers are spreading this initiative to other faculty members and the demand to attend classes is slowly increasing.

Students also praised us because they were not aware about other facilities that were important to them. They were also not aware about consequences of plagiarism. Some even go to an extent of consulting us for referencing before submitting their assignments.

We also have standing invitations to faculty and departmental meetings just to know what is happening on the ground. These standing invitations enable us to stay informed about possible opportunities for teaching and learning. They also provided a forum where news from the library or reminders of existing services can be share as Freiburger and Kramer (2009:139) further proclaims.

3.2 Taking over and owning Turnitin

Taking over and owning Turnitin did wonders for the library. I am getting invitations from all corners of VUT to come and train both students and staff, even satellite campuses. The library has developed posters sensitizing students about plagiarism. The trust the library has earned has also enabled the university to give the library a permission to compile a policy on plagiarism. This has been done in collaboration with academic staff.

3.3 Social media

Social media like Facebook and Twitter proved to be successful strategies because we were able invade the students and interact with them in their comfort zones. Our services are improving because we hear directly from customers about their experiences as Evan (2012:164) affirms, and work on things they propose.

Sensitizing both students and academics about academic social media also worked for us. Students and lecturers are using these academic social media sites to see what is happening in their respective disciplines. Some have already shared their researched papers with the world.
3.4 E-reader project and collaboration with Department of Communication to incorporate information literacy

I will not going to comment on E-reader project and collaboration with Department of Communication; as these projects are still fairly new. The results are yet to be seen. But we are certain about positive results and the legacy these projects are going leave behind.

4. Challenges we encountered as we were embarking on this journey

When we knocked to the lecturers’ doors we found ourselves answering questions that were not related to our visits. We listened and tried to solve complaints about other library services. Some lecturers did not take us seriously and therefore refused us to visit their classes. Others complained about time they don’t have hence they were unable to accommodate us.

The information technology (IT) department sent us from pillar to post when we wanted to have access to Moodle and Sakai; that is course management systems currently used at VUT. This prevented us from embedding some of our services online.

Shortage of skills especially like IT skills also prohibited us from executing the job well, hence appealing to all library managers to not hesitate to send their employees to acquire those crucial skills.

5. Future directions

We know our strengths and competencies that we can use to support teaching and learning. We should not be afraid to try and experiment with new technological innovations. Embedding our services online and reaching more students is one of our future directions. Dewey (2004:5) claims that librarians should embed themselves to as many venues as possible, because this will ensure that the collections and services are fully integrated into all aspects of campus life.

VUT will be migrating to Blackboard in June 2013. The university has accommodated us on this course management system. Training is going to be provided. This will enable us to increase our programme online using this platform and continue posting library customized information for specific disciplines.

6. Conclusion

Evans (2012) argues that staff members, whether passionate or hesitant about a particular technology, are confronted with these changes. Implementing embedded project is not a library duty alone, but a duty and a strategic goal of the entire institution. Building a good relationship with faculties before collaboration is extremely important. We must not be afraid to start slow with the intention of growing big. I support Kvenild (2012) when he states that we should first take a snapshot of our institutional needs and goals when developing an embedded project.

Innovative and exciting collaborations according to Dewey (2004:6) account for a major part of the library’s transition from passive to active, reactive to proactive, dull to lively and singular to social. Other important lessons to be learned and to be bear in mind when embedding as described by Mathew and Schroeder (2006:65) is the need to innovate, cooperate, and experiment. When faculties and librarians
work together in an open environment of trust and openness, mistakes might be made, but perceived obstacles can be overcome and lessons learned; these lessons according the above-mentioned authors can positively affect the way academic libraries serve students.

We are still partially embedded at VUT although our aim is to be sufficiently embedded. Constant reflection and evaluation of our services will enable us to reach majority of students. We must never underestimate what we can do. We have more opportunities now than before. We have a role to play, a mission to fulfill; and most importantly a legacy to leave in higher education and beyond.

7. References

10. Owens, R. (2008). Where the students are: The embedded librarian project at Daytona Beach College. *Florida Libraries, 8-10*