Living up to the name: developing learning in the Learning Resource Centre

Abstract

The role of library staff is changing. Many traditional tasks are now eliminated or accelerated by information technology and print publications are increasingly being supplanted by on-line resources.

Thanks to the internet, students in further education colleges have access to vast amounts of information, but studies have shown that their information literacy skills—the ability to recognise when information is needed, and to locate, evaluate and use it effectively—are weak. The staff in FE libraries and Learning Resource Centres (LRCs) are in a strong position to help students develop these skills, though this means developing their role to one closer to that of teacher.

Using an action research methodology, this study, funded by an LSIS-IfL Research Development Fellowship, investigates the introduction, through workshop sessions, of interactive support strategies designed to develop students’ information literacy. These were based on the principle that the process of teaching and learning is likely to be more effective if it is, conceived as active and reciprocal rather than transmissive. Activities were integrated into students’ regular curriculum through partnership with teaching staff.

Students are shown to be learning through engaging in purposeful dialogues with LRC staff, their teachers and their peers. Information literacy and curriculum learning are enhanced, while partnership learning is shown to be an effective model of professional development.

Introduction: The library worker’s changing role

The traditional function of the library in a further education college has been in question for some years (Levy and Roberts 2005). Although it remains a source of books for loan and reference, far fewer students are borrowing books to find their information. A recent survey in the library where this study was undertaken showed a significant reduction over the last three years in the number of books borrowed. On the other hand, a good proportion of the library’s stock is now in electronic form and students are often inclined to go first to the internet to seek information.

The job of the library staff has similarly faced change, with the traditional role of the librarian, based as it is on ways of storing and retrieving information, under threat. Moreover, the library in this study (in common no doubt with many other libraries) has seen
a marked decrease in the number of professional librarian posts over the last ten years, and library work is increasingly done by paraprofessionals.

Libraries remain popular places for students, in part because they offer free computer access, though this may attract students whose main focus is not on academic endeavour. A consequence of this is that the library worker’s role risks being reduced to that of police officer, dealing with students’ behaviour rather than attending to their information needs.

In contrast, forward-looking libraries (often now known as learning resource centres) are beginning to find new ways of supporting students, which go far beyond directing them to the right book or electronic resource. Students’ competence with computers often masks the difficulty they have in searching for information. Information literacy – the ability to recognise when information is needed, locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information - doesn’t just happen.

Staff and managers within learning resource centres are having to look very carefully at how their establishment can better meet the needs of students whilst providing challenging and rewarding work for the staff themselves.

This study is concerned with the way in which a group of committed library staff, working in a large FE college learning resource centre in the east of England, are working to develop their professional practice. Its aim was to collaborate with teaching staff to integrate information literacy into the current work of the students and to investigate ways of planning task-focussed workshops using interactive strategies, in order to increase the number of purposeful dialogues between students themselves, and students and staff members. In order to record, analyse and reflect on our work, we adopted an action research approach to examine a series of these workshops. This approach reflects a strong belief that teaching and learning are likely to be more effective if they are reciprocal rather than transmissive. We wanted to shift our role away from that of instructor to facilitators of learning conversations, engaging our students in dialogue, reflection and collaboration. The development of sustained relationships with these students would hopefully enable us to continue to support their learning through the year.

Like Sennett’s craftsmen (Sennett 2009), we would like to do our job well for its own sake, whilst recognising that the self-respect we can earn thereby by does not come easily. To develop skill requires a good measure of experiment and questioning.
Literature review

Information literacy

"Every day, we are inundated with vast amounts of information [...] Rather than merely possessing data, we must also learn the skills necessary to acquire, collate, and evaluate information for any situation. This new type of literacy also requires competency with communication technologies, including computers and mobile devices that can help in our day-to-day decision making"

Barack Obama, Information Literacy Proclamation, October 1st 2009

As President Obama points out, the ability to find information falls far short of what is meant by information literacy and the ability to enter terms into a search engine does not mean a person can do so with any degree of skill (Brabazon 2009). According to the Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework (Bundy 2003 –Appendix 1) ‘The information literate person recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed’. In England the Big Blue Project (JISC 2002), examining information skills training in FE and HE, identifies the information literate person as recognising and addressing the information need, retrieving and evaluating information, and adapting, organising and communication the information (Appendix 2).

Moreover, the possibility of quick, easy results can lead to unfounded confidence in them and mask the need to interpret as well as search (Brabazon 2009). Proficiency with hardware and software can be mistaken for information literacy when the latter is intellectually much more demanding. (Bundy 2004a).

Information literacy requires a critical approach, through which users ‘dig below the obvious, simple and predictable’. There is no reason to expect the skills required for this will develop spontaneously, especially where users’ prior education has encouraged ‘competency rather than expertise and skills rather than knowledge’ (Brabazon 2009). A sense of ‘information need’ can, however be developed (Bundy 2004a).

College students have used libraries less since the advent of online searching (JISC Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future Report 2007). They express great confidence in their ability to search, but research shows no evidence of improvement over the past 25 years. They are, however, fast, and this very speed encourages them to forgo evaluation ‘either for relevance, accuracy or authority’ (JISC Information Behaviour of the
Researcher of the Future Report 2007). Their development of technical skills does not equip them to use what they find to create knowledge (Brabazon 2009). Rather they tend to copy and paste text, without reflection on its meaning or ownership. (JISC Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future Report 2007). None of these shortcomings is obvious to most students, who therefore

‘have a poor understanding of their information needs and thus find it difficult to develop effective search strategies’ (JISC Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future Report 2007).

There is a tendency for training initiatives to focus on technology rather than information literacy, with money spent on initiatives based on ‘social networking sites such as wiki-enabled media, Facebook and mobile phones’ described as ‘wasted’ (Brabazon 2009). Bundy (2004a) calls for a pedagogy which is ‘technology mediated, not technology focussed’. As well as failing to develop information literacy in individual students, such initiatives overlook the need to develop expertise within institutions and their staff: ‘There is a denial, ignorance or unawareness of the role of literacy education or information scaffolding.’ (Brabazon 2009).

Literacy and information awareness are critical to social inclusion. ‘In a complex, information intensive society the greatest divide is between those who have understandings and capabilities, and those who do not. ‘Lifelong learning and full participation in society are likely to be impossible for those who lack these skills (Bundy 2004a).

In the context of information literacy, a conception of knowledge as something the learner creates anew (Bundy 2004a) rather than something received from another person –or a search engine- implies a new approach to learning within libraries. Teachers may see information literacy as a threat to their autonomy (Bundy 2004b), with the curriculum becoming disputed territory in an electronic age. However, its importance merits a developing partnership between teachers and librarians, with the latter group now needing to ‘understand the language of pedagogy’ (Doskatsch, cited in Bundy 2004a ). Through such partnerships ‘a portfolio of learning possibilities where Google is the start, rather than the end, of a research journey’ can be created (Brabazon 2009).
How people learn

According to Bundy (2004b), academic librarians’ first concern today should be learning outcomes, rather than information supply. He cites Bennett’s (Bennett 2003) view that a library’s core activity ‘should be collaborative learning by which students turn information into knowledge, not the manifestation and mastery of information’ Sfard (1998) argues for a new metaphor for the process of learning. Traditionally the metaphor has been one of transmission, and characterised in such terms as ‘delivery, transmission, internalisation, achievement, accumulation and transfer.’ The tendency is to assume that learning is individual. Such a metaphor sits well with the traditional view of a repository for information to be literally or metaphorically handed to its users. Sfard however prefers to use a participation metaphor, which locates knowledge ‘not in the heads of individuals, but in the simultaneous social processes of learning to belong to different ‘communities of practice’ (in Coffield 2008). Key terms in this case include ‘community, identity, meaning, practice, dialogue, co-operation and belonging’, with learning seen as something developed in context whilst working alongside a more knowledgeable other, a concept articulated by Vygotsky (Daniels 2001). Vygotsky (whose research centred on children, but whose findings resonate with experience of working with older learners.) also advanced the idea of the zone of proximal development: that area of knowledge which a learner is beginning to grasp but in which s/he remains insecure. When dealing with concepts in this area, the support of a more capable teacher or peer is essential. This idea was developed by Bruner (2006) into the process of scaffolding. In an FE context, tutors need to ‘provide activities and structures of intellectual, social and emotional support to help learners to move forward in their learning so that, when these supports are removed, the learning is secure’ (Coffield 2008, p12). Coffield cites Blatchford, et al., (2005) and Daniels (2001) support for group work and peer work, respectively as effective scaffolding strategies. Alexander (2005) draws on a wealth of research and practice to argue for ‘education as dialogue’ in which tutors and students learn together in ways which are reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful. (Alexander’s work is reflected in many of the activities for this study, so a more detailed exposition is included as Appendix 3).

The ‘more knowledgeable other’ may function as a model for learners, so it is important for students to see them as learners. This may entail ‘daring to give up the belief that a teacher’s top responsibility is to be omniscient’. Modelling confusion and not knowing makes these things (essential to learning) less embarrassing for students to experience (Claxton 2002).
**Professional learning in the library**

Although the focus on the section above is on students’ learning, the philosophy is of equal relevance to professional learning. Rather than seeking to transfer good practice, the focus of this study is on “joint practice development”, a process involving mutuality, in which all parties must be fully engaged (Fielding, et al., 2005). Our aim is to develop a community of practice in which there is a voice for everyone, as we develop good practice together (Action Research).

Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) link such ‘communities of colleagues committed to a renewal of enthusiasm and commitment to craft and career’ to new models of mentoring which are ‘open and responsive to the opinions of others’. These communities are by their nature ‘less hierarchical, less individualistic, more inclusive’, and new partnerships emerge when role boundaries dissolve. It follows then that ‘badging’ of individuals, formally signalling role and status, hinders the process. On the other hand ‘trusting relationships’, often established previously are a positive factor (Fielding et al, 2005).

Discussion is an important part of the collaborative participative approach, where stories of good practice can contribute to ‘renewal and change’ within an organization (Shuayb et al, 2009).

Entering into this kind of learning requires commitment. The teachers and library assistants taking part in this study are well aware that their skills can always be improved, and that this will require ‘a good measure of experiment and questioning’. Their reward for this risk-taking and effort is ‘The self‐respect that people can earn by being good at their work’ (Coffield 2008).

**Methodology**

**Context**

This study takes place in learning resource centre (LRC) of a large FE college in the east of England, which serves its city and surrounding region from a single campus. It currently provides 5,000 full-time students with a variety of vocational courses ranging from entry/level 1 through to level 4 (foundation degree, HNDs and art foundation courses) and academic courses including access to higher education, from seven purpose-built buildings. The main LRC is a large two-storey space (the largest space in the college), seating 130 students (including computer facilities for 60). There is a computer drop-in room attached to it. The small student common room in another part of the college is felt by many students to be inadequate. In the newest building (hair and beauty and catering) there is another much smaller learning resource centre. Many students use the LRC in a purposeful way. A small minority need constantly reminding of its purpose. The library staff comprises 6 full-time staff (including a manager and an apprentice, and 5 part-time staff). Of these 7 have been involved in some way in information literacy workshops.
Timeline
The study took place between October and February, with the majority of the data being collected before the end of January. During October and November the workshops were piloted with one set of students initially, data analysed, then a series of three workshops run with a new set of students. Activities were organised so that students worked in small groups and pairs in these workshops, and dialogue was recorded and analysed between students, and between staff and students. Subsequently a series of workshops was run in December and January as whole class activities, with students encouraged to continue contact with LRC staff as individuals and in small groups as they continued to work on their research projects. One group was booked in weekly for individual library supported research between October and January.

Research population
We have worked so far with level 2 and 3 students, foundation degree students and access students. Activities were planned by two or three members of library staff each time, with different people taking the lead with the planning as the project progressed. There was close collaboration with a different member of teaching staff on each occasion. Groups varied in size, from ten to approximately thirty. The number of learning resource centre staff involved in each session varied accordingly.

Action research
Action research involves simultaneously taking action in a familiar workplace context and studying that action and its effects. It is undertaken by groups or individuals who wish to improve and develop their practice by careful observation and reflection. According to John Elliot (1988) “action research interprets “what is going on” from the point of view of those acting and interacting in the situation e.g. Pupils, teachers and other staff [........] This is why interviewing and participant observation are important research tools in an action-research context.”

Action research is practical, but insists on claims to knowledge being justified by the production of validated evidence. Central to the validation of evidence is the principle of triangulation: the use of a number of sources of evidence to support findings. Action research improves practice and generates new theory. Rather than having external researchers impose policy on practitioners, practitioners themselves can look at ways of improving what they are doing.

A collaborative action research project seemed ideal for our purposes as a method of articulating and sharing the tacit knowledge and skill accumulated by more experienced library staff, and developing all our skills through the process of reflection. We might in fact consider ourselves as apprentices (very appropriate in an FE college) to the craft of librarianship, though apprenticed to each other, rather than to a single expert master craft worker.
Research instruments

Data was gathered by:

- Conducting interviews and discussions with library staff to ascertain how comfortable they felt about developing their role;

- gathering baseline information on student/staff knowledge and attitudes prior to the study, using open-ended questionnaires and interviews;

- asking teaching staff and library staff to keep reflective diaries and recording of workshop planning meetings/brainstorming sessions where we planned collaborative learning activities to facilitate peer-learning and increased library staff involvement;

- gathering evidence of teaching and learning through observations recorded in library staff and teaching staff diaries during workshops, through students’ diaries or accounts of sessions and audio recordings/photographs of interactions during the sessions;

- subsequently gathering evidence from student/staff emails sent to the LRC team, and drop-in sessions.

Research activity: the information literacy sessions

Group 1: Patients’ rights (Pilot study)

The first teaching session, with a large group of health and social care students, was designed to develop students’ web-searching skills whilst supporting an assignment on values and planning in social care. Students were looking for information about individuals’ rights (discrimination, confidentiality, individual needs etc) in health and social care settings, guidelines to health and social care workers about individuals’ rights, and cases where there was conflict between individual needs, and what particular organisations could provide.

Three members of the library staff were allocated to the session, one to each of the groups, and the teacher was given a copy of the activities and lesson plan drawn up by LRC staff a week before the lesson.

Information from a pre-session survey completed by students indicated their confidence in looking for information on the internet:

“I’m good at finding information on the internet but looking at books loses my concentration.” (Steve, student)

but less confidence in their ability to evaluate the information found there.
“I can find lots of websites, but I’m never sure whether they’re ok to use.” (Amy, student)

The survey also suggested that students had difficulties identifying useful search terms from their assignment brief.

“I find that I don’t always understand what the key points in the assignment are that will help me to look.” (Mel, student)

The main activity of the session was a jig-saw activity, in which students were assigned ‘home’ groups, were sent to a new group where they learned about one aspect of the assignment, and then returned to their home group to share their knowledge with other students. Group activities focused on:

- Using online magazines and journals to find information
- Finding key words to search effectively using a search engine
- Finding information in books and pamphlets
- Using a gateway to find information
- Recognising what a government agency is, and finding information on the website

Each member of the group had a simple table to fill in, asking them to find information from three sources. They were asked to fill in a research plan before they began, outlining where they might look for information, and what key words they might try.

**Preliminary findings**

During the session LRC staff and teacher circulated to support on an *ad hoc* basis. The following dialogue illustrates how this was done.

Mel: What are values? We haven’t done this with anyone..

Christine (LRC staff): Values are the things you hold important – that underpin what you do. You can’t go along to someone and say I don’t fancy giving healthcare to you for example. So we need to find written down somewhere a set of values.

Mel: There’s nothing in the list that says values.....

Christine (LRC staff): What’s most useful is to go to the book. You could look through the contents at the front of the book maybe? Right there you go. Yes. You’ve found it! You’ve got a whole section straight away. It’s a question of being determined.

Mel: I know what it means now, I think I’ll start.....

Without help from the library staff, the student may well have given up at this point. The students surprisingly hadn’t yet discussed this topic and were having trouble finding key words for a search engine because they hadn’t yet got sufficient knowledge of the subject. Starting with the text book was clearly a good suggestion at this point, and fits well with Tara Brabazon’s plea for a model of information literacy where there is a movement from
easier to harder skills. “Inserting a few words into Google search reifies and simplifies the complexity of information literacy....information literacy requires an understanding of the context....simply because we can use a search engine does not mean we have the vocabulary to use it well”. This was an important exchange also, because there was some blurring of roles between the teacher and library staff, with the latter taking on the teaching role (see later). It underlines the importance of establishing clear roles and common purpose in setting up a community of practice. (Bundy (2004a) talks about the possibility of teachers seeing information literacy as a threat to their autonomy..)

The library staff member also encourages the student to persist, an important part of becoming an independent learner. (Claxton 2002)

The evidence of the audio recordings is of focused discussion between not only library assistants and students but also between students themselves, supporting each other in trying out and refining search terms.

Amy: I'm not sure what I'm looking for here.....

Helen (LRC staff): Are you looking for anything specific?

Amy: I don't understand..... Shall I put in “patient”

Helen (LRC staff): Try putting that in ...what happens?

Amy: You get hundreds and thousands..

Tom: So if you write in.. In this one? You could type in ..patient ...patient charter...or what about patient rights.. and you could type in NHS as well. Then you get fewer hits.....(Turning to neighbour to help) How could you combine the words? You're looking for stuff about midwives? What about midwife and code?

Amy: Shall I try.. like.. patients' rights and hospital sort of thing?

Helen (LRC staff): Yes. You could try that and see.... That's a good idea actually. That finds a good website right there at the top. Look. Have a look and see... That would be a good one to keep a note of in your diary...

This is an example of purposeful, collaborative dialogue that is happening because students have been put into groups to problem solve together. Tom here is articulating his thoughts and so helping and supporting the other student. He is planning his search strategy and in the process scaffolding the learning of student B. Again, the library staff member is being supportive by encouraging experimentation (Alexander 2004). Student B’s initial attempt was to enter a natural language sentence taken directly from the assignment!

Mia: [panicking] I can’t see anything there though...

Alison (LRC staff): You can’t always find things straight away. Sometimes it takes a while and you have to scroll down.

Felicity: Yes. Look. If you look down there there’s Right to die and Right to refuse treatment. There’s loads there.....
Alison (LRC staff): Where else could you look?

Felicity: What about doctors’ surgeries? Citizens’ advice bureau..?

Alison (LRC staff): Yeh. Good idea.. Give it a go...

Here we find examples of students seeing the need to experiment and guess, and to persist until the information is found; of LRC assistants acknowledging answers aren’t always instant, and supporting by asking the open questions which allow students to make the discoveries for themselves, rather than supplying answers.

Exchanges like these, in which students articulate their thinking in order to improve their information searching through consensus, are clearly valuable. Other positive outcomes were a new willingness on the part of students to come to the LRC for help and a new understanding of what the LRC has to offer in terms of resources.

“What a lot of stuff there is on the learning resource centre pages. I didn’t know that was there – the book search, the magazines and newspapers, the subject resources and everything.” (Mia, student)

Despite all this, however, the feeling of LRC staff was that overall the session had a number of serious shortcomings. Some of these were beyond our control: there had been very little time available for planning with the (part-time) teacher; some of the LRC staff who had prepared for the session were absent; the group was exceptionally large; unexpectedly we had to change rooms mid-session. More seriously, there were gaps in our knowledge of the students and of what they already knew of the subject in hand. Only in the session did we discover that this was the students’ first exposure to their topic.

“I don’t understand what we’re meant to be writing...” (Mel) and “I don’t understand what values and patients charters are” (words in their assignment task from their teacher).

LRC staff found themselves needing to introduce key concepts to students, which left the teacher feeling undermined (she told us afterwards that “I need it to be clear that you are in the support role.”)

With better knowledge of the students themselves we would have allocated them to more successful groups and have planned a much simpler activity; the complexity of the jigsaw activity caused some confusion and distraction from the intended focus of the lesson.

This was a level 3 group, and we made assumptions about the level of study, knowledge and skills they might already possess. It soon became clear that we had a wide range of abilities within the group...... we should start with the basic level (for instance a textbook) that everyone can access and understand and then move to the resources page on the LRC website, before widening the research onto the internet.

It is useful to know whether any students have special needs before the session that could develop how we plan the session. We need more time to plan the session between ourselves, and more time to talk to the teacher before the session so we know how much ground has been prepared and teacher has appropriate expectations.
These were key discoveries for later groups. We found we agreed with Brabazon (2009) and the JISC report (2007) that a layered approach was needed, and that students would benefit from looking at library subscription materials before turning to the more complex task of searching Google. Students left to their own devices would always look at Google first.

One of the students said she’d have got much more out of session if we’d gone into the classroom after they’d started the assignment.

We learnt a good deal in this session, much of it linked to the need to liaise better with the teacher, in order both to understand the learning needs of the students and to ensure effective collaboration between LRC and teaching staff. Every session needs a clearly articulated common aim, and for the roles of different types of staff to be agreed and understood.

These lessons stood us in good stead for the next set of sessions.

**Group 2: Complementary therapy (Core study)**

Lessons learnt from the first session informed the subsequent series of three sessions for another group of health and social care students on the theme of ‘Legislating complementary therapy’.

The group’s teacher (Pam) was keen to share her clearly articulated vision of learning, which stressed the importance of students’ themselves constructing their knowledge of the subject in hand. She was happy to locate herself as a fellow learner alongside the students, for example admitting to learning things for the first time, and to making mistakes herself as necessary steps on the road to knowledge.

She was happy to make time to plan the sessions and clarify our respective roles. Before the sessions, she gave us information about students’ special needs. We learnt that the students had already started work on their assignment and were experienced in working collaboratively in pairs to find information online and from books. We also knew that Pam had made them aware of the aim of the LRC sessions. We had several meetings with Pam before the first teaching session and began to feel that we knew her well.

For our part, we checked the library’s stock for information about legislation about complementary therapies and had filled the gaps we found with books from another of our libraries, new books, leaflets collected from local practitioners and produced our own factsheets.

**Session 1: finding information**
The focus of the first session was finding information:

- by finding books via the online catalogue,
- within the books and pamphlets – both hard-copy and online
- within online magazines and newspapers

The group was much smaller than the earlier group – only 14 students. Another LRC advisor (Mary) was involved in meeting and planning the sessions with the teacher and me at the very beginning. Unfortunately (as in the earlier sessions) others had to help in the first session because Mary was ill.

This session also included a section on reflective diaries. We had asked for students in the earlier group to keep reflective diaries of their experiences as they worked on their assignment. Because the earlier group had simply listed useful websites they had found I decided, using a data projector, to share with this group a page of my own journal, recording the planning meetings for meetings for these sessions. (I kept a reflective diary throughout the project, as did other LRC staff involved in the workshops.)

**Sessions 2 and 3: presenting information**

The students a second session began with an exercise in scanning for information and synthesising findings and continued with activities to prepare students for making a presentation about the importance of legislation for complementary therapies, a subject which lent itself perfectly to the theme of the final session: comparing and evaluating websites. This was put to students as “How good is the information you find on the internet?” Because the group was small, we led a class discussion about how to present information to a group.

As noted in the literature review, students are good at finding lots of more or less relevant web-pages, but much less good at discriminating between them. The proliferation of websites making extravagant and sometimes dangerous claims about complementary therapies means that it is really important for students to compare and evaluate websites, determining, for example, who has produced them, the scientific validity of their claims and their commercial interests. In session 3, two websites promoting cures for malaria and aids in Africa were discussed as a whole group as preparation for students, working in pairs, to evaluate a number of websites dealing with the use of complementary therapy with cancer patients. One was an NHS site, the other was an alternative cancer website. Students analysed the sites, using a prepared record sheet, then compared responses.

**Following up the LRC sessions**

One of the consequences of the series of sessions just described was a series of requests from teachers, thanks to “word-of-mouth” recommendations. Several teachers subsequently requested information workshops for their students (Access students and health and social care students) who were working on individual research topics. For
practical reasons (shortage of teaching rooms meant that the LRC computer room was booked for other uses) it was decided that sessions should be conducted in classrooms, as part of timetabled teaching sessions. Despite its pragmatic origins, we could see some virtue in this approach. A general principle in our information literacy workshops has been to integrate the literacy into the work the students are doing, and we could reinforce this perspective in their lessons. Experience has taught us that students tend to be more responsive if they feel they are ‘getting something out of it,’ otherwise they may struggle to see the relevance/usefulness of what we are doing particularly if pressed for time.

**Preliminary findings**

**Session 1**

In keeping with our planning discussions, this first session was characterised by co-learning:

**Helen** (LRC staff) [to student]: You have to spell it right on the catalogue. It’s a nuisance

**Pam** (teacher): If I can’t spell I use the spellchecker on Word.

**Helen** (LRC staff) [to teacher and student]: Do you know about the “?” That’s useful if you know the beginning of the word. Therap* picks up therapies, therapy, therapeutic and so on..

Pam was keen to establish herself as co-learner with the students. “We are all learning here together”. Much of the dialogue was reciprocal (Alexander 2005), with all of us (library staff, students and Pam) sharing ideas. Students, LRC staff and teacher worked in groups in this session. The group was supportive, and working very much in the Sfard (1998) participative metaphor mode.

Two young LRC assistants (one an apprentice) who had recently completed study courses themselves worked with the students were able to refer to their own experience of the learning process with the students, discussing, for example, how they had spent a long time searching for information, and the methods they had used to organise their findings.

**Penny** (LRC staff): I’ve been studying recently in college. I’ve been doing the PTLLS teaching course and we had to spend ages reading lots of different books and magazines.. I found it really hard to remember all the things I’d been looking at.

**Helen** (LRC staff): Some people use Delicious to save all their websites – or save them
to Bookmarks. Or write them down in a notebook.

Susie (student) [to Penny]: So what did you do?

Penny (LRC staff): I collected all the references on a word document.. Otherwise I just lose track of everything.

Susie (student): Yes. I think I’ll do it that way.

The member of LRC staff is modelling her way of doing things with the student, and the student clearly trusts her judgement because she is also a learner. There is a sharing of ideas here – another example of reciprocal, purposeful dialogue. (Alexander 2005)

The apprentice also acknowledged that he was learning by doing the activities.

Students (below) are attempting to construct bibliography from resources they have found.

Apprentice [shaking head]: I had a go at that one earlier and I couldn’t find the editor in the front pages.

Sam (student): So I guess you’ll have to say no editor then?

Apprentice: Otherwise it doesn’t work. When I did it earlier....

Helen (LRC staff) [laughing]: It’s a bit like Blue Peter in here! [to apprentice] Where did you find the publication year I wonder?

Apprentice: How about that?

Sam (student) [correcting]: What about the title first?

Apprentice: Yes you’re right. And it comes out exactly how you write it, so you’d maybe want to put capitals do you think?

Helen (LRC staff): One of our colleagues does this all the time. She’s really an expert and puts all the information on the catalogue...She has to do just what you’re doing..

Library staff were openly acknowledging the learning process, sharing strategies, and the students responded to this by offering information themselves. The apprentice happily acknowledged that the task wasn’t straightforward.

Students’ journals began to include significant reflections.

Found it really frustrating when people are on YouTube, Facebook etc when I need a computer for work. It is really annoying when someone is sitting on a computer doing nothing. We did a workshop in the library this morning and they showed us lots of things we had no idea about before, like looking for books online, and looking for magazine and newspaper articles, and using our student email. I had no idea this service was available!

Student journal
Gratifyingly this student is finding library subscription resources useful. We didn’t spend any time looking at search engines this time. We had had no idea that these particular students were irritated by computer behaviour, and it is possible that they only felt free to express these views because of the participatory nature of the workshop.

**Sessions 2 and 3**

Here students working in pairs were evaluating and comparing two websites about cancer help.

Students found the “alternative” website to be a revelation.

**Sam** (student): He looks like he’s a doctor, but he’s not!

**Beth** (student): He just started training but didn’t finish.

**Sam** (student): He’s actually just making money. Look at all these ads...

**Beth** (student): He says he’s doing it for his mum? Yes. That’s what he says, but look – he’s advertising his book!

In this session, we felt that we had made a real difference to the quality of students’ learning.

These students and their teacher now regularly work as a group in the LRC, using resources, both books and people. The students all handed their work in very early and continue to be enthusiastic. At the end of the sessions the students and their teacher wrote:

“Your support for us has been fantastic this term. Our learning would have been poorer without you”.

Key to the success of these sessions was having sufficient time to establish clear aims in meetings before we started. We felt we knew Pam well (Fielding et al 2005), and it was clear that she was keen on not spoon-feeding students, but on supporting them in learning to be learners. Pam had followed this through with the students, who were also clear about the aims of the sessions before we started. Four members of staff (including the apprentice) were involved in the sessions, and all equally seen to be sources of help by the students both in the workshops and subsequently. To operate as an efficient team, with all of us involved in developing our professional practice, it is important that one single person is not badged as an “expert” (Fielding et al 2005).

**The follow up sessions**

The following extracts from the reflective diary of one of the LRC staff illustrate how the ethos and practice developed in the LRC sessions translated well into classrooms. We led
the searching from the front of the classroom, with a data projector, guiding the students through gateways, databases and catalogue searches, but basing the searches on the subjects the students were currently researching. We asked for suggestions for key words for searches from the students, in order to make clear the complexities of searching. We therefore had to think on our feet, with help from the students and teacher. The aim was to work collaboratively on searches as a group, to encourage discussion. We distributed a worksheet at the end of the session and invited students to come and see us individually in the LRC for more help.

Although we were in a typical classroom setting with the students seated and us up at the front, we wanted the session to be very informal. One of us led and the other chipped in, in this way we kept things light and conversational giving the students space to contribute too. ..........

It was a way of introducing ourselves to them and letting them know that we are friendly, approachable and very eager to help. ........

Access students tend to be highly motivated but may lack confidence due to previous negative educational experiences, lack of familiarity with computers etc. Some may feel slightly intimidated or exposed in a computer workshop leading to frustration and/or loss of interest. ............

From our point of view I think it was really helpful for the students to see us interacting with the class teacher in this way (professionals/colleagues) as it raises our profile and encourages students to ‘trust our expertise’ – to understand that LRC staff can make a genuine/useful contribution to their education..................

At the time I thought the session went well and this has been subsequently reaffirmed. Many of the students have been into the LRC asking for help..................

It is important that we continue to think of new ways of doing things and try different approaches.

Reflective diary, Felicity (LRC staff)

This approach worked for access students, but in the classroom with level 3 students we developed a different technique. The students each had a computer in this workshop, we and the teacher guided them through possible sources of information for their topic using the data projector at the front of the classroom, then with a guide, asked them to begin researching their individual topics whilst we circulated with the teacher to offer support.

Again, extracts from one of the LRC staff:

We were in a room with computers so we didn’t just talk to the students, the session was primarily practical. The room was large - half full of computers, the other half a traditional classroom layout. The teaching computer and projector were located at the far end of the classroom area which meant demonstration was a little difficult. It was ultimately easier to mingle with the students, working with them one to one as we would in a normal session.

I think ultimately the visit was successful as many of the students have subsequently come into the LRC looking for help with their research. I am confident that we will see more of them as the deadline approaches.

Again, I think it was useful to be in the classroom with the teacher present, using our names etc. This type of exposure is beneficial, students see us as relaxed and approachable - not the people always ‘telling them off’ in the LRC.

Students happily fell in with the co-learning strategies LRC staff had developed. At one point a student offered a better way of doing something on the data projector, and came out to demonstrate.
Many students were appreciative of the session.

“This will really help. I liked the gateway. It will save me loads of time." (Fran, student)

“When I search on google I get loads of useless hits.” (Kevin, student)

“I’ll use the wonder wheel to find words to search with. It’ll help me plan my project too.”(Duncan, student)

Even negative comments could have positive outcomes. A student who wrote, “I’m really frustrated. What will I do? You haven't got any books on organ transplants” was engaged in discussion about finding the best search words and came into the LRC later in day to find, with support, the information in nursing ethics books.

As the member of staff noted above, we did indeed have lots of student coming in for individual help – and still do.

Feedback from teachers after these sessions was enthusiastic. Several plan to use us for further sessions in the classrooms.

“Thanks to you both. Wonderful stimulus for the groups.”

“Thanks you very much for the informative session today. It was very clear and helpful. The students are keen to use these skills in their future assignments.”

At the recent partner university institutional review of college provision, students reported that the support they receive in the LRC is “exceptional”.

The reflective diaries shared by staff members have been invaluable in analysing and reflecting on the information literacy sessions. In the sessions above, the member of staff whose diaries are reproduced was initially very reticent about visiting and talking to classes, but has completely overcome any fears and happily takes the lead in sessions.

We showed that it was possible even with a whole class to promote collective, reciprocal and supportive dialogue, by asking open questions, working things out together, modelling “not knowing”, sharing ideas, listening to each other, and risking ideas not working.

Students have indeed been coming in to the Learning Resource Centre for individual drop-sessions.

**Findings and conclusions**

The consequences of these research activities have been numerous and interrelated, affecting students learning, the work of LRC assistants, relations with teaching staff and the management of the library.
**Students’ learning in the library**

Students have been weaned off overconfident overreliance on search engines and are becoming more thoughtful and persistent searchers, and more aware of the need to question and evaluate their results. By working together with library staff and teachers who openly acknowledge the learning process, students are beginning to discover that developing skill takes time, effort and persistence. They have developed their learning skills, showing themselves to be very effective at teaching and sharing strategies with each other.

Work with small groups of students both in the library and in the classrooms has led to a marked increase in the number of students approaching staff involved for individual help. Most had been surprisingly unaware of (often expensive) library resource, but when shown them, were keen to acknowledge that they would be useful to their research.

**Library staff**

Library staff have shown that they welcome opportunities to become more skilled and this growing skill has been evident in both the quality and increasing number of positive interactions with students. Confidence and job satisfaction are increasing as staff become more involved in workshops and material preparation. As more staff have become involved in the workshops, students are happier to approach different staff for support.

Recorded dialogues showed a shift in LRC assistants’ style from didactic to collaborative (See transcript in Appendix 4) of one conversation with a member of the LRC staff. Previously this member of staff had said that she’d been unsure of how much help to give, how long to spend with each student.

Rather than simply direct the student to the relevant subject bookshelves, this LRC assistant listens patiently as he articulates what he is really looking for. Once she has established his current level of knowledge she models being a learner in the same field, and then lets him lead the enquiry by choosing the search terms. By the end of the exchange, the student has engages in some purposeful searching and is able to continue without her, both getting closer to the information he needs and honing his searching skills.

The reflective diaries kept by LRC staff provide further evidence of a less transmissive, more participatory approach with the students, with staff adopting a co-learning style, being
willing to not know all the answers, make mistakes themselves, and students increasingly making their own suggestions.

Staff being in a position to talk about their roles as learners is particularly effective. Establishing common understanding with the students through shared experience – in effect being co-learners has made the relationship much more collaborative.

Library staff are well-suited to collaborative learning since the students, teachers and support staff know their subject, and we know about resources. We can all learn from each other.

**Student support strategies**

Context in two senses is important to effective support. First it is important that LRC staff are fully aware of the context of students’ information needs: details of their course, what they have learnt so far, assigned reading, assignment questions, students’ individual learning needs and so on. The most successful workshops were where the students were already interested in and had some knowledge of the topic they were searching for.

Secondly, the information makes more sense to the students if it is presented (and developed as knowledge) in the light of their current understandings and in familiar settings. Hence the success of sessions undertaken in classrooms.

Most students enjoy hands-on sessions where they are finding things out (with support) for themselves, but not all groups were suited to co-operative workshops. Access students for instance were more comfortable and less exposed in classroom session, but even here, a relaxed atmosphere, with team-teaching with teaching staff, and open questioning was conducive to group discussion.

Library staff can scaffold the development of students’ information literacy through carefully planned activities, helping them reflect and evaluate. Peer work, group work and relaxed team-teaching promote knowledge-building dialogues with students and teachers.

**Working with teaching staff**

This research has highlighted to both parties the value of collaboration between LRC staff and teaching staff, both in shared teaching and learning sessions and in an ongoing way. Crucial to this is a common understanding of their respective roles; workshops worked best when time could be found to clarify roles beforehand.
Taking time to share knowledge of students and their learning is also crucial. Developing information literacy with students on the basis of their current topic is highly effective.

More teachers are arranging to send small groups of students in to the library to do research, having told us what the students are looking for beforehand. More teachers are also asking for library materials to use in the classrooms when space runs out in the library. Flexibility is also important, for example over location, timing and number of sessions.

This growing relationship has meant that news of LRC activities is increasingly passed on through word of mouth.

Managing the library

The project has meant that better use is now made of the library stock, and that it is, in turn, becoming better suited to students and teachers’ needs. Working on some assignments has revealed gaps in the library stock, knowledge of which has significantly helped with stock acquisition. Raising students’ awareness of subscription library materials has led to their increased use. Appropriate stock has been purchased and obtained as a direct result of close contact with students and staff.

Demand for materials is higher, with more teachers asking for resources to use in the classrooms when space runs out in the library.

Recommendations

The good practice demonstrated in this study needs to be extended to all LRC staff, especially in the light of increased demand. It is important that all staff adopt the “let’s find out together” approach and the practice of handing over information needs to end, even on the enquiry desk. We plan to run active workshops for all staff to address this need. Another workshop will be established to support newly recruited LRC staff. Everything should be done to encourage a culture of learning and growing, in which LRC staff understand the teaching/learning process from the inside, and are able to use these insights in their work with students.

Extending involvement in workshops to as many LRC staff as possible will reduce the likelihood of one person being seen as an “expert” by students and teaching staff, and will encourage “joint practice development”. We should continue to plan and reflect collaboratively, co-mentoring, in order to further develop and share good practice.

We should collaborate to identify stories of good practice within the LRC that we can build on in the future.
Modelling the learning process has proven an effective strategy, and library staff should be encouraged to enrol on college courses and activities in order to be authentic fellow learners.

Collaboration with teachers is essential to an effective library. More time is needed to discuss and plan with teachers, both to plan teaching collaborations and to develop a shared vision of how the library can support students. Teachers and LRC staff should continue to explore imaginative ways of working together which are focused on best outcomes for students.

We need to find ways of marketing our information literacy workshops. Involvement in initial teacher training would ensure that more staff are aware of and make better use of available resources (both physical and library staff).

Library staff are well-placed to be involved in the teaching and learning of students’ independent research projects. We should approach managers to formalise our involvement.

**Bibliography**


Appendix 1

Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework

Information literate people
• recognise a need for information
• determine the extent of information needed
• access information efficiently
• critically evaluate information and its sources
• classify, store, manipulate and redraft information collected or generated
• incorporate selected information into their knowledge base
• use information effectively to learn, create new knowledge, solve problems and make decisions
• understand economic, legal, social, political and cultural issues in the use of information
• access and use information ethically and legally
• use information and knowledge for participative citizenship and social responsibility
• experience information literacy as part of independent learning and lifelong learning

Standard One
The information literate person recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed

Learning outcomes
The information literate person
1.1 defines and articulates the information need
1.2 understands the purpose, scope and appropriateness of a variety of information sources
1.3 re-evaluates the nature and extent of the information need
1.4 uses diverse sources of information to inform decisions

Standard Two

The information literate person finds needed information effectively and efficiently

Learning outcomes
The information literate person
2.1 selects the most appropriate methods or tools for finding information
2.2 constructs and implements effective search strategies
2.3 obtains information using appropriate methods
2.4 keeps up to date with information sources, information technologies, information access tools and investigative methods

Standard Three

The information literate person critically evaluates information and the information seeking process

Learning outcomes
The information literate person
3.1 assesses the usefulness and relevance of the information obtained
3.2 defines and applies criteria for evaluating information
3.3 reflects on the information seeking process and revises search strategies as necessary

Standard Four

The information literate person manages information collected or generated

Learning outcomes
The information literate person
4.1 records information and its sources
4.2 organises (orders/classifies/stores) information

Standard Five

The information literate person applies prior and new information to construct new concepts or create new understandings

Learning outcomes
The information literate person
5.1 compares and integrates new understandings with prior knowledge to determine the value added, contradictions, or other unique characteristics of the information
5.2 communicates knowledge and new understandings effectively

**Standard Six**

The information literate person uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information

**Learning outcomes**

The information literate person

6.1 acknowledges cultural, ethical, and socioeconomic issues related to access to, and use of, information

6.2 recognises that information is underpinned by values and beliefs

6.3 conforms with conventions and etiquette related to access to, and use of, information

6.4 legally obtains, stores, and disseminates text, data, images, or sounds

---

Appendix 2 The Big Blue Project
Appendix 3 The work of Robin Alexander

Summary of the ideas expressed by Robin Alexander in *Education as dialogue* – many of which are reflected in this study. (Where Alexander refers to “teacher” we can almost always legitimately substitute “library staff member”!

Key to Robin Alexander’s thinking is that teaching is much more likely to be effective if instead of being just transmissive, it is reciprocal.

Much observation of classrooms, however, reveals interaction which is one-sided, with the teacher talking, and students listening. Many questions are closed questions – the teacher already knows the answers.

Alexander refers to a recent study of classroom dialogue by Smith, Hardman et al (2004, 408) which found that sustained dialogue took place with individual pupils in only just over 11% of the exchanges. Most pupil exchanges were very short (5 seconds) and open questions made up only 10% of the time, with 15% of the sample not asking any such questions.

Alexander argues the case for *dialogue*, which involves the ability to

“question, listen, reflect, reason, explain, speculate and explore ideas; to analyse problems, frame hypotheses and develop solutions; to discuss, argue, examine evidence, defend, probe and assess arguments; and to see through the rhetorical games that people play in order to disguise their real intentions or deny access to the truth. Dialogue about education is a prerequisite for social and economic progress.”
Dialogue within the classroom lays the foundations not just of successful learning, but also of social cohesion, active citizenship and the good society.”

(Alexander 2005, 2)

Dialogue involves a more collaborative relationship between teacher and pupils, with ideas being exchanged rather than transmitted, students sometimes knowing more than the teacher, and the teacher being willing to learn from them.

He suggests five interactive strategies which classroom settings typically allow:

- Whole class teaching
- Group work led by the teacher
- Group work led by students, based on collaborative tasks
- One-to-one discussion between students
- One-to-one discussion between student and teacher

Whilst acknowledging that variable contexts, conditions and objectives of teaching require choosing different teaching procedures, he argues that interaction is likely to involve dialogue if it is:

- collective: teachers and students address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class;
- reciprocal: teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
- supportive: students articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over ‘wrong’ answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings;
- cumulative: teachers and students build on their own and each others’ ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
- purposeful: teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view.

Alexander (2004, 26-7)
Felicity (LRC staff): So ....it’s about crime within health care....?

Peter (Student): So I’m just finding it difficult to find information. We need more resources, like journals, books, things like that and I’m just finding it quite difficult... This is like your own research, so.. just being taught like the skills .. we’ll see. Obviously I don’t want just to use computers.

Felicity (LRC staff): You’re ok using the online resources that we showed you?

Peter (Student): Yes well. You came in and showed us, but I’m still having trouble..

Felicity (LRC staff): Sometimes one of the most difficult things is trying to think of key words..and search terms. Basically that's something we all struggle with. So if you try out some search terms and nothing comes up, and you just try and think of something else, and you know research does take a long time. I think sometimes people panic because they think they don’t find anything but it does take a long time.

So.. Basic (search) what else could we put..?

Peter (Student): Abuse maybe?

Felicity (LRC staff): Let’s try abuse...We want to make sure. Because you’re looking at abuse from professionals aren’t you? (Long pause while searching). No. That’s not the sort of thing you want is it? Try… Over here it gives us some....

So what aspects – are you looking at things that have happened...or things that are being done about them... or...?
Peter (Student): Yes really things that have happened. Cases within the health care service. Things that have been going on. Even like court cases – that sort of thing. Higher like white-collar people. People in the NHS like taking money. Like crime is very broad. Maybe I should like make it more specific, because it’s like, maybe it is a bit too broad? Might be more helpful to the research...Make a bit better for the research topic. Easier to write more about less...

Felicity (LRC staff): Yes. You might find it easier to narrow it down a bit..

Peter (Student): Maybe like the childcare thing..

Felicity (LRC staff): So. That might be useful. You won’t know until you have a quick look. Keep trying to think of different words... Hopefully you’ll come up with lots of things. All right if I leave you there to have a look through? If you need more help