
'The cook, the thief, the wives and the lovers': using staff development to build skills and promote the library for all

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Adult Learners' Week is an annual national campaign which seeks to engage and inspire people to pursue adult learning – to catch up on skills not learnt at school, to learn at work or to learn for fun. The University of Portsmouth took part in Adult Learners' Week (organised by UNISON, the public service trade union), by offering a wide range of workshops – from jewellery-making to keeping a beer cellar – across the university for any staff member to attend.

As part of this week the university library wanted to provide a fun and lively session as a way of engaging all staff (not just academic) with what we have to offer. Two members of staff had earlier shared their genealogy skills and knowledge during an internal staff-training event, and we felt this was something which would generate wider interest. So the library offered a session on tracing your family tree. The aim was to share our specialist knowledge in the subject, but also to encourage others to think about searching skills and the evaluation of information – which are key to the academic progress of our students – but in a subtle way! The event also promoted key library resources and databases which staff may have been unaware of. It was hoped that support staff would be attracted by this event and come to see the library as something not just for academic staff.

The session was advertised as:

*'The cook, the thief, the wives and the lovers':
library skills & resources to help you climb your
family tree*

*Ever wondered where your great-great grandparents
lived, what their jobs were,
or how big your family might really be?
Ever tried finding out and been baffled by the range of
different resources available?
Maybe we can help!*

This session will provide an introduction to family history research, and is intended for beginners and those with minimal experience of the subject. An overview of the main sources will be provided, as well as advice on techniques to aid successful research. In addition to this, a selection of specialized resources held by the University Library will be introduced, opening new avenues for exploration once the basics have been covered. The session will be interactive, with participants being encouraged to take part in activities alongside the presentation, which will illuminate the key themes.



Presentation



Hands-on element

Two sessions were run, with approximately 20 staff attending in total. The session started by outlining some key sources for searching and describing how these could be effectively accessed, including valuable resources that the library hosts, including Historic Digimap, the 19th Century

British Library Newspaper database, The Times Online Archive and the Economist Historical Archive. A handout was made available on top tips for climbing the family tree, with useful URLs for family historians, which were set into context through key dates, such as the start of parish registers, the Poor Law Act and so on. Another valuable handout was on 'How to get started', which included tips on using some of the key online resources and websites, and gave a taste of what is available. Suggestions and hints on family-tree chart-drawing were offered and it became apparent, when speaking to the group later, that several different styles were often followed. A practical case study for people to work on, based on 'The Beetlestons' family (an actual nineteenth-century London family), followed, which encouraged staff to explore and get involved with valuable information-gathering and using resources. The case study covered what happened to the family, accessing census records, establishing the family unit, using different resources and so on. A second member of staff was on hand during the practical session to give advice and help. The public library was promoted as a valuable resource for further investigation and the event enabled us to strengthen collaborative links.

Both presenters are library assistants with a keen interest in and experience of tracing their own family trees. We have worked over the past few years to develop presentation skills in a wide range of staff, and this benefits us when we have to show visitors and prospective students around the library on open and preview days. In addition one of the presenters is hoping eventually to build on her library NVQ to gain her professional qualification, so this is another way we could help her achieve it.

A key message from this event was that it helped staff to understand our students' needs far better: they got a sense of how it feels to plough through a sea of information and then evaluate their findings. We had been seeking a way to promote an understanding of information literacy in staff, particularly support staff, and this was an enjoyable way to do this. Also it helped to improve searching skills for both personal and professional activities. Not only did this activity create a lot of interest among attendees, which may develop into a support group, but it also further developed personal presentation skills and confidence-building in our own staff.