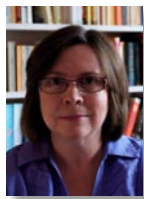# The P.G. Cert. from three perspectives: student, practitioner and action learning set facilitator

Sally Patalong
*Subject Librarian,
Coventry University
Tel.: 02476 795576
E-mail: s.patalong@coventry.ac.uk*

This is the transcript of a presentation given at 'Librarians as teachers: the new professionals?', an event jointly organised by the University, College and Research Group West Midlands and Career Development Group West Midlands and held at Warwick University Teaching Grid, 26 May 2010.

I should probably start out by saying that when I was growing up, the very last thing I would have ever contemplated becoming was a teacher. I loathed my schooldays. However, I first thought about working in a library when I was four. My former boss, Pat Noon, referred to (part of) the reason for this in an article in an earlier issue of *SCONUL Focus* when he said:

> *I am one of these really sad people who always wanted to be a librarian. I didn't back into it as a second-best option ... or even – as in the case of one of my colleagues – because she liked the shoes librarians wore! (They were Scholl's sandals, apparently, and she was at an impressionable age!)[1]*

The children's section of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne also had a large part to play in the decision. Honest! I returned to the idea when I was 16 and at technical college. I did my professional qualifications in 1978 and it was a very different profession in those days. We had card catalogues, for a start.

I had a career break when I had my children and when I came back as a subject librarian, in 1995, I began to notice big differences. Whilst we still had big queues at the enquiry desks and still made use of an extensive print reference collection, things like CD ROMs were creeping in and people needed to be taught how to use them. More and more groups of students were being sent over to me to be taught how to use the library and I hated having to do it. Because things like library catalogues have made sense to me since I was very young, I assumed that everyone else was the same and I felt that I was talking down to the students. I had no confidence about speaking to large groups of people, no idea of how to control a group of students, no notion about how on earth to engage people with what, after all, is not a very exciting prospect. With the best will in the world, it is hard to make a library catalogue seem interesting.

At this time we had a Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at Coventry. They ran our Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (P.G. Cert.), about which I knew nothing. They had decided to offer the first module to support service staff who were engaged in teaching. This would lead to a Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) qualification as an associate teacher. Rakesh Bhanot, who was leading the course at the time, appeared in front of me at a library enquiry desk, touting for custom! I duly enrolled. I did so because I felt that I was being asked to do a job for which I had no training, but I did so in a very belligerent frame of mind. I had never wanted to be a teacher and defied them to try to turn me into one. Unfortunately, the course had to be abandoned the first year it ran, mainly because Rakesh was ill for some time, so it wasn't until 2000 that I really got to grips with it. However, during that initial year I got access to the university's virtual learning environment (VLE), WebCT, for the first time and became very interested in using that. That is a whole different story, but it was working with WebCT to develop online support material for information skills that really began to get me interested in teaching and the ways in which people learn. It was also talking to groups of fellow librarians about the work that I was doing that gave me the confidence to stand up and speak in public.

The course itself, when I did come to do it, was not at all what I had expected. I think I had assumed that I would be taught how to teach. Quite how I expected someone to do that I do not know, but I suppose I thought there would be rules and that once I knew these rules I would be

able to do it – the teaching equivalent of AACR2! Instead I got educational theory; learning styles; learning outcomes; aligning assessments and reflective practice. I found it all very difficult at first, but I persevered. Indeed, I became so engaged with it that I went on to do the second module as well and get the full certificate and membership of what was then the Institute of Learning and Teaching – now the Higher Education Academy (HEA). However, I'm not sure if I would have engaged with it so fully were it not for the continuing work with WebCT, because I am much better at doing practical stuff than I am at absorbing theory, and by doing this I could see practical applications for what I was reading about.

Probably the most beneficial aspects of the course as far as I was concerned were the action learning sets and the opportunities to observe other people teaching. In order to complete the portfolio we had to both observe others and be observed. This is quite a nerve-wracking experience at first, which is something that David Gosling, who set out the principles for the peer observation of teaching, says should always be acknowledged.[2] The very first person to observe me was an academic whom I liked and respected very much. I was really chuffed with the report that he wrote on me at first. By the end of the course, when I reread it, I realised that it was an absolute masterpiece of constructive criticism! Watching other people teach is very enlightening and you pick up all sorts of tricks. I was really struck by one Egyptian engineer who addressed his (all male) students as 'Gentlemen'. You could see them straighten up and respond. I always begin my class by saying 'Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.' I feel it helps to set the tone and, thinking back, I can remember one of my tutors at technical college did something much the same and we responded with respect. I have learnt from others to walk around the room and to try and employ everyday analogies. I remember once explaining classification schemes in terms of grouping things like dirty washing by laundry symbols.

It really is by talking to others, though, that you learn: discussing problems in the action learning sets, discovering that others have the same problems, hearing how they deal with them, putting those ideas into practice. I learnt that learning to teach is an ongoing and evolving process and that professional dialogue is essential to it. I also learnt about how many assumptions I made. I mentioned before that I assumed that people would know how to use a library catalogue. I also assumed that academics would know as much as I do about the resources available to our students and that, indeed, they would be using them all themselves! How wrong I was. I have heard some librarians say that gaining a teaching qualification gives them new recognition in the eyes of their academic colleagues. The assumption seems to be that academics do not appreciate what it takes to become a qualified librarian, so we are somehow regarded as inferior until we gain a teaching qualification. I have certainly engaged much more with academics since I took the P.G. Cert., but I would say that it is not because I am suddenly 'one of them' and worthy of notice, but perhaps because I am more approachable now that I am seen to have some shared experience and vocabulary. In many cases academics know very little about libraries and are terrified of databases. Like the students they go to Google and their colleagues first, rather than admit that they don't know how to use the library. Some of them, at least, are in awe of what we know and can do. The changing nature of our role makes it possible for us to reach out and bridge that gap in a way that they cannot do as easily.

I can, hand on heart, say that doing the course changed my life. I began to enjoy my teaching sessions. It sounds obvious to us now, because over the last ten years we have all come to acknowledge the truth of it, but doing something as simple as tailoring examples to a particular group of students just made the time so much more rewarding. Before I had a 'one size fits all' approach, which meant that I was both boring and bored. I got to know my colleagues in CHED and they in turn began to get to know people in the library and to understand how we worked. It also meant that when the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for learning and teaching decided that the library should have a teaching fellow, just as the faculties did, I was ideally placed to apply for the job.

For three years I spent 50 percent of my time as a teaching fellow and 50 percent as a subject librarian. The then university librarian, Pat Noon, wanted me to find a way to unite the library with WebCT, as we felt we were somehow sidelined by this VLE, in which we had very little part. We did that by adopting the Talis reading list system, though it is really only now that we are moving to Moodle that it is coming into its own, as a reading list link appears automatically on the front page of every module. In WebCT/Blackboard the academics had to be persuaded to add the link manually and we had no idea how many of them had done

so. We also use Talis List to manage the access to material that has been digitised under the CLA (Copyright Licensing Agency) licence and this too is increasing its popularity. Another part of my role was to explore new ways of supporting information literacy teaching, following on from my work with WebCT, and I began to experiment with Captivate and Camtasia. The educational developers who helped me learn to use the software told other people that they worked with about what I was doing, which led to me working with people from the business school and the psychology department. All the time my horizons were being broadened as I saw different perspectives. The dialogue was continuing and the library's profile was being raised.

This was something else that Pat saw as my role – raising the profile of the library, and of the subject librarians in particular, and creating relationships with other support services. To this end I started working in the centre for academic writing (CAW) as a tutor for one afternoon a week. My first degree is in English and American literature and I have always been interested in how people write. The centre was new and none of the staff knew who we were or what we did in the library. It became apparent that our roles really were complementary as I discovered that some of the problems people had in writing were really down to lack of relevant information, and the staff in CAW have become used to referring people on to us. We in turn have been involved in developing the *Harvard style guide* which is published by the centre and our information literacy sessions have expanded to encompass teaching about plagiarism and referencing, informed by the work of the staff in CAW.

In my teaching as a subject librarian, as a result of doing the course and having this dialogue, I tried whenever possible to link my information literacy sessions to a specific assignment. I wrote lesson plans, rather than winging it. I put support material online whenever possible. I tried also to present that material in different ways – written, illustrated guides; 'how to' screen captures with narration; INFORMS tutorials for interaction, in order to suit different learning styles. I continued to be interested in action learning and with Chris Powis, from the University of Northampton, started action learning sets for librarians in the East Midlands academic library and information services in co-operation (EMALINK). It is a wonderful way of working – I call it speed networking for librarians! We managed to keep the sets going for about eighteen months, but it just became too

difficult to get us all together in the same place at the same time. Unfortunately for some people, it was also difficult to justify to management the time taken. It was mistakenly perceived as getting together for a chat every now and then rather than as a development event. I think all the participants would agree, however, that it was a very valuable exercise. Jo Webb gave me the opportunity to introduce the process to other librarians at a teaching day that she organised at De Montfort University and it provoked a lot of interest, as some people thought about how they could use it in their own institutions.[3] One person, for example, went away to set up a set for all the librarians in her partner colleges.

Coventry University then decided to restructure the teaching fellow system. It was decided that the new teaching development fellows (TDFs) should work more as a team, with a permanent base, to promote discussion and working together across the faculties. I applied for the new post and became a TDF for 80 percent of my time and subject librarian for education for 20 percent. I moved out of the library and became a principal lecturer (PL) in the centre for the study of higher education (CSHE), formerly CHED.

One of the roles of the TDFs was to work as part of the teaching team for the P.G. Cert. I facilitate an action learning set these days and am a first marker for some of the submissions. I also run sessions on the library, on reflective practice and reflective writing and on plagiarism – from the point of view of how to spot it and how to write assessments that don't leave scope for it. The course is now called the 'Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Professional Practice' and has changed a lot since I first did it, although peer observation and action learning are still core elements. It is now more structured and includes sessions on lecturing to large groups or dealing with difficult students. Instead of having to compile a weighty portfolio of evidence and commentary, there are specific assignments with set word limits. This is partly because the portfolios were becoming a burden for both students and staff. People often had problems getting their heads around how to construct the portfolio and sometimes they were so huge that marking them took a disproportionate amount of time. Two years ago, before the word limits were set, I was given a 20,000-word epic to deal with.

At first I was apprehensive about marking work – librarians for the most part do not deal with assessments – but we have clear marking criteria

and I had a lot of support from the rest of the team. Now I enjoy doing it, as again I learn so much from what other people are doing. It also helped to give me the confidence to develop some modules of my own and I now run two library modules as part of our employability learning programme. They are credit-bearing modules for which I set and mark coursework.

Being a TDF gave me the opportunity to go on a lot of training and development courses that I might not otherwise have known about, or had access to, including a session on writing assessments run by Phil Race.[4] With his permission I now use an exercise that he set to demonstrate to students how many assumptions we make about what we read. Called 'Statements', it consists of a brief narrative, followed by 18 statements. The task is to say whether the statements are true or false, or if you cannot say for certain either way, based on the information given in the narrative. For 14 of the statements the correct conclusion is 'don't know', but few people get even close. Phil originally designed it to make academics aware of writing ambiguous assessment tasks, but it works well in the context in which I use it and the students seem to enjoy it. You can find a lot of Phil's material on his web site.

Sadly, I am a TDF no more. CSHE was closed last year and I returned to the library as a subject librarian. I still teach on the P.G. Cert.; I still run my modules; and of course I still run information literacy sessions. I think if I had not done the P.G. Cert. my life would be very different. I may well not even be in librarianship any more. I was very unhappy when my job began to change, but the P.G. Cert. has helped me to deal with those changes and, most importantly, introduced me to the people who can help me to continue to learn. It opened up a lot of opportunities for me, even if some of them didn't last. It increased my confidence in my own abilities and has led to me being invited to speak at conferences and write for publications like this. I now use a variety of methods, media and technologies in my teaching and I feel my role has expanded as time goes on. I'm a librarian – but I'm an enhanced librarian!

I think there are three major things I'd recommend to you today, even if you don't embark on a P.G. Cert.:

- Observe the teaching of as many different people from as many different disciplines as you can. Do not just watch other librarians, although that is also useful. You will all have seen people teach when you were at university, but then you were concentrating on content. Here you will be concentrating on technique.
- Get feedback from your students, reflect on it and, where appropriate, act on it.
- And finally, save evidence of what you do. Keep all that feedback; make a note of how many people you teach, the topics and level. Keep your lesson plans. Save every complimentary or grateful e-mail, so when someone questions what you actually do, or how effective you are, you have the answer and the proof.

REFERENCES

1   P. Noon 'All that David Copperfield kind of c**p', *SCONUL Focus*, 45, 2009, pp 58–63

2   D. Gosling, higher education consultant, 'Peer review of teaching' [online], available at http://www.davidgosling.net/default. asp?iId=KDEIF [accessed 19 May 2010]

3   J. Webb, 'Together we are strong: peer support for learning and teaching development', De Montfort University, Leicester, 8 June 2006

4   P. Race, 'Assessment, learning and teaching in higher education' [online], available at http:// phil-race.co.uk/ [accessed 19 May 2010]