Personalised Library Services in Higher Education symposium

Symposium reviewed by Michelle Blake

The Personalised Library Services in Higher Education symposium was held in Cambridge on the 22 March 2011 and was organised and introduced by Andy Priestner and Libby Tilley.

In addition to introducing the day, they talked about how the idea for the boutique library model came about two years ago during a discussion. Based on this they wrote an article about boutique libraries[1] and developed the current boutique model. This was based on the boutique hotel idea where individuality and uniqueness are key. They argue that the model offers a good defence for the bespoke services libraries offer, especially those relating to subject librarians.
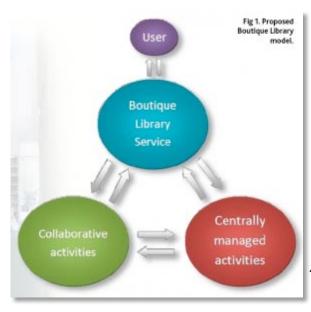

Fig 1. Proposed Boutique Library model.

Fig 1 Proposed boutique library model <caption>

The day was fast paced with a number of presentations and began with a presentation from Jane Secker (LSE) about research support. This was really interesting and Jane's advice was that to understand the research process you should undertake research yourself and that this can pay big dividends. Jane gave an example of where she had attended a course aimed at research staff to find out more about these areas. During the session she started talking to one of the participants with whom she was able to develop a relationship and then support in other areas after this session. Finally she commented that she does not believe that personalised services are scalable and that they should be premium services: if you wanted to do so, you could charge for them. She gave an example of supporting research within the institution and has her time costed into project bids.

Angela Cutts and Emma-Jayne Batchelor from Cambridge University talked about tailoring resources to courses and their experience of CamTools (VLE: virtual learning environments) in the Education library. They discussed how this fits the boutique library model as they adapt the VLE for different user groups; for example, they have fifteen different patron categories giving them increased flexibility. They have looked at the impact by using usage statistics of CamTools, as well as qualitative feedback from users, all of which shows very good results, especially during the Michaelmas term. Finally an OFSTED report gave them an outstanding rating.

Michelle Blake and Nicola Wright presented the research postcards developed at LSE for PhD students and the concept of snowballing ideas. The presentation looked at how these were developed in collaboration with liaison librarians and are designed to be a way of initiating contact with new PhD students where it is important to build a long-term meaningful relationship. The postcards are given out at the start of the academic year and liaison librarians reply to them with feedback about resources available for their topic. The impact of the postcards had been investigated to ensure that they were beneficial. A monetary value was put on them (how much they cost to provide) and this was followed up with qualitative evidence from the students themselves. An article about the research postcards has already been published in SCONUL *Focus*.[2] This presentation led into a workshop on developing ideas and 'snowballing'. Groups had to come up with ideas based on scenarios to develop services – these could be anything and did not necessarily have to be practical – it was really to have some fun and get people thinking.

Tim Wales talked about how technology can be used and whether it is possible to scale up per-

sonalised services. He presented two case studies: one on ebook acquisition and the other on using VuFind. Royal Holloway had trialled an ebook acquisition process whereby users could select the content. MARC records were loaded into the library catalogue and if users clicked on these titles to access them more than twice the library would buy them. In total the library purchased only 37 titles, a very small proportion of the total records that had been loaded. This session was also interactive and many participants raised issues that might occur in this model, such as content clicked on accidentally, content being too specialised once you actually read it (for one researcher only). The second case study looked at the implementation of VuFind at Royal Holloway. The library already subscribed to Summon but they found they were limited in what they could do with it. They decided to load VuFind over the top of Summon to increase the customisation they could do. This means that users can take advantage of some of the web 2.0 tags. Tim had benchmarked this against Amazon; however, again some participants found issues with this model. This was a very thought-provoking talk.

Chris Powis from Northampton University talked about relationship-building for teaching and learning. This started with a great brainstorming session about attitudes towards academic staff and students. The point was to show that preconceptions do not help when trying to form relationships and that we need to be careful about categorising people into different groups, as sometimes this can hinder rather than help. We need to understand our users before we can really start to help them; for example, how do they learn? There were parallels here with Jane's point about understanding the research process in the first session. Finally Chris talked about staff development and good practice and the idea that even within our own institutions we often do not do this successfully.

Space in USA libraries was the topic of Beatrice Pulliam's presentation. She discussed the different use of space in libraries and how technology can be and is being integrated in the USA. The creation of different areas to enhance user choice and the idea of peer support as a tool for learning were also mentioned. This was a good preamble to Chris Powis's presentation about personalising space. A study had been done into the drivers for students at Northampton University and came up with some interesting results. Chris discussed the six sector drivers:

- social learning (students can work collaboratively)
- virtual collections (ebooks, ejournals: they do not need as much space as physical collections)
- cross-disciplinary (modular model – everything may not be in one space)
- increasing student numbers (but no increase in space; this may change with fee increases)
- changing modes of study (part-time, 24x7 – need to change the space to meet demand, for example group assignments)
- shrinking resource (capital funds, staffing, materials)

He then discussed the individual drivers for students using the library:

- access to resources (books, journals, etc)
- environment (warm, comfortable, etc)
- social (see friends, work with others)
- emotional (pull to the area – particular seat, PC – emotional pull of the library; students do not necessarily need the resources – symbolic)

The most interesting of these and the one which surprised him most was this emotional driver and the pull to a particular area or seat.

Participants then had an opportunity to brainstorm some killer apps and the following were discussed: silence (users still want this); food and drink (litter is a different problem); nesting (make own environment and having control over it); balanced space (giving people choice).

Meg Westbury from Cambridge University talked about virtual personalised services when she was a solo remote librarian to a teaching course in the USA. She explained how she did this and the challenges involved. She quickly realised that these students were very remote, so started by setting up virtual office hours, actively posting in the VLE and promoting herself as a friendly face who was happy to help students. Her advice was to take time to get to know your users and their curriculum. Relationship-building is vital to your success.

A case study on marketing personalised services was presented next by Emma Thompson; Emma has already published an article on this subject in a previous issue of SCONUL *Focus*.[3] She had just taken up a new post and saw that she had a great opportunity. Her advice was to find the hook to get people interested, for example by telling them

'I can save you time'. She felt this was better than trying to talk about information literacy, and got rid of the jargon. Emma visited academics in their own space so she could find out about them and their research interests. This helped her to create library champions and to build trust. If you have helped someone in the past people will remember this and contact you again. Again the emphasis here was on the importance of relationship-building and finding that magic hook to get people's attention.

The final session was on evaluation and impact; Libby Tilley led participants in groups to undertake a SWOT analysis of the boutique model. Many of the case studies from the day will be used in the book that Libby and Andy Priestner are writing.

This was a very interesting, topical and enjoyable symposium. I think the boutique model is a good way to think about some of the more specialised services that we offer. However, my concern is that it does not put the user at the centre. I think this is a drawback with the model; the way it currently stands it makes it look as though the library is the gateway to everything for the user. In reality the user does not care who is providing a service – as long as it is being offered to them when they want it (just in time). We talk about this a lot at LSE and conversations with our PhD students in particular indicate that this is what they value. I think the challenges I will have now are ensuring that I find the right personalised library for my own institution and to keep things fresh. A good idea is all well and good but if it is overused it loses some of its novelty.

References

1   A Priestner and E Tilley, 'Boutique libraries at your service', *Library and information update*, 2010, 9(6), 36-9
2   M Blake and N Wright, 'Postcards from the (research) edge: staying in touch with students throughout their PhD travels', SCONUL *Focus*, 49, pp 33-5
3   E Thompson, 'Reaching out to researchers – from subject librarian to sales rep.', SCONUL *Focus*, 48, pp 4-6