Personalising library services in higher education: the boutique approach

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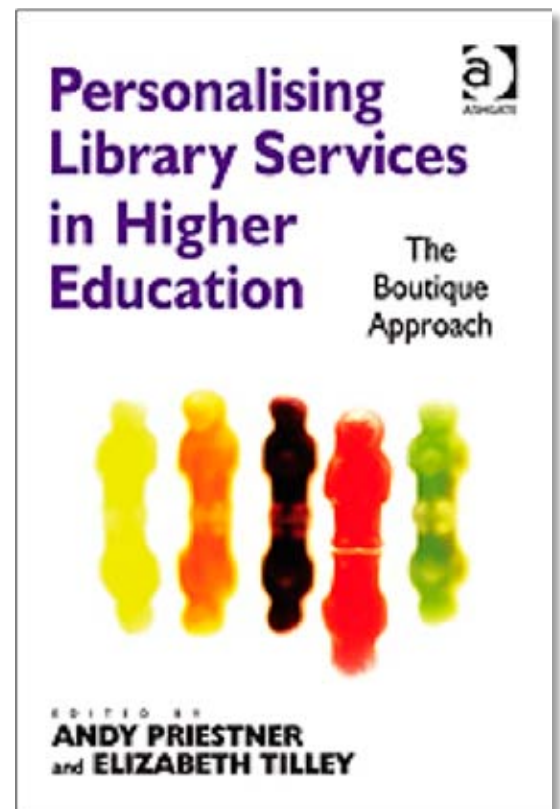
I heard Elizabeth Tilley speak about her work on the personalisation of library services at the SCONUL annual conference, and was interested to explore these ideas in more detail in this book. Elizabeth is the Faculty of English Librarian at the University of Cambridge and it was clear how she had re-thought the services provided in that library to provide the 'boutique' approach. For

me, working in a large metropolitan university with a broad-based curriculum, it was difficult to appreciate at the time how this approach could be applied to large, busy learning resource centres with a very diverse range of user needs. I'm pleased to say that I found a great deal of food for thought in the book. I found it easier to dip into one chapter at a time as each deals with a different aspect of service provision; chapters are written by contributors working in very different types of library service. Taken as a whole, the book can be used as a useful tool in strategic planning, as it works through topics such as space planning and communication to take a new approach to adding value for service users.

The current climate in higher education institutions demands that we focus on efficiency gains. This can often mean budget cuts, increased centralisation, a drive towards self-service (which can be seen as depersonalisation) and use of technology to reduce individual effort and therefore contact. The underlying philosophy of this book and perhaps even the term 'boutique' may seem at odds with these very real pressures on library managers, but on closer reading it becomes clear that it is possible to rethink the whole service approach to provide a more personalised feel in any type of library service. Andy Priestner on the Libreaction blog (http://libreaction.wordpress.com) pointed out that the boutique approach is about 'focusing on your users individually, rather than generically, and offering them unique and highly-tailored services in order to promote the relevance, and increase usage and engagement, of libraries.' As we all strive to improve our satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey (NSS) and other surveys, this book provides some very valuable advice, grounded in current theory and good practice, on how to improve the user experience and perception of quality.

The introductory chapter by Andy Priestner and Elizabeth Tilley sets out in detail what is meant by personalisation and the boutique approach, using diagrams and tables effectively to conceptualise the model – I felt that these could be used to start discussions by management teams reviewing their own services. Each of the following chapters covers different aspects of a 'boutique' library service: Andy Priester on communications; Beatrice Pullam on the information commons philosophy and design of library spaces; Tim Wales on technology strategies; Chris Powis on bespoke teaching; Jane Secker on research support activities; Emma Thompson on marketing; Elizabeth Tilley on the costs of service provision,

dispelling the myth that a personalised approach is necessarily more expensive; David Streatfield on measuring impact; and finally the editors sum up the process of implementing and managing a personalised approach. In addition there are a number of useful case studies illustrating the implementation of different boutique approaches in some very different library services. Key points or tips are summarised at the end of each chapter, making the innovative ideas easy to locate after reading the book.

This book is a very valuable contribution to current thinking on the provision of high value, high impact services at a time when we are all much more conscious of value for money for our users. Available as a Kindle e-book as well as in print, it will be a useful addition to any library manager's physical or virtual bookshelf.