Information literacy and mobiles in Vancouver

Peter Godwin
*Academic Liaison Librarian,
University of Bedfordshire*
Tel: 01582 743248
E-mail: peter.godwin@beds.ac.uk

In the past I have read articles about librarians who have been lucky enough to go abroad to deliver papers or have study tours. They have not always made me feel good, so I write this to encourage, not to irritate you! The main trick is that if you are highly motivated, determined, timely and a little cheeky, you will have a good chance. Vancouver was my dream location in the world ever since I read about its Stanley Park in a pre-war 'Countries of the World' book at home late one night. Almost by chance M-Libraries (Mobile Libraries: 'information on the move') chose it for their second international conference, and I can now look back on cycling round the perimeter of Stanley Park.

The first M-Libraries conference was held on 13–14 November 2007 at the Open University in Milton Keynes. One of the workshops was led by Jo Parker (Open University) and myself, in which we shared ideas for delivering information literacy on the move, via mobile devices.[1] Since then Jo and I have brought out our book *Information literacy meets library 2.0*.[2] The mobile platform for delivery of IL seemed the next step so I duly put in a proposal for the M-Libraries' second conference to be in Vancouver. I also delivered a similar short paper, 'Information literacy meets the mobile web' at LILAC (Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference) in Cardiff in April 2009. As we shall see in the following discussion, this is a new area and – as with Web 2.0 in its earlier days – working in it resembles trying to hit a moving target, or maybe several targets. The M-Libraries conference is international and the decision to go to the University of British Columbia was prompted by the partner who organises the equivalent of the Open University out there, Athabasca University. This was bound to limit the number of UK delegates, and I was very grateful for some financial support from the CILIP CSG (Community Services Group) Information Literacy Group, from SCONUL and from my own University of Bedfordshire. I am pleased to say that the rate of exchange with the Canadian dollar was considerably better than with the euro!

HOW CAN IL BECOME MOBILE?

The following are the main points, in a shortened version, of a chapter that will appear in the M-Libraries conference proceedings, which will be published soon by Facet.

- **Mobile sites**. Provision of a mobile interface of an existing library web site has been a starting point for some libraries, such as Mobilib at North Carolina State University library. This has given the potential for new outreach and a way of engaging users. Some other notable libraries that have gone down this route are Duke University's and Washington DC's public library. Databases are sometimes now being given special mobile-friendly versions that are easier to navigate and to access on mobiles; examples are Westlaw and PubMed. These could ease our IL mission by giving users another route to our databases. RefWorks is now available on mobiles using RefMobile on a smart phone, mobile or pda (personal digital assistant). Loyola University in Chicago, for example, is already recommending this to its students. Referencing is a key way of demonstrating the sources that have been used, and therefore of promoting ethical use of information as part of IL.

- **Tours**. These are beginning to employ mobile devices rather than the proprietory devices often used in museums. Audio tours of the Headington and Whealey sites at Oxford Brookes University can be downloaded for use on any mp3 player. Temple University in Philadelphia is offering cell-phone tours. As Gretchen Sneff, head librarian for science, engineering and architecture, said at the conference, 'Students always seem to have their cell phones with them. Offering the self-guided audio tour via cell phone enables us to provide library users with information they need when they need it – even when there is not staff on duty.' Students call a number and enter a tour stop number followed by the # key, with no charge for the call, just for usage of the cell minutes, and there is provision for feedback.

- **Reference help**. Reference desks using SMS texting are being trialled in many libraries, and could be regarded as individual help or tuition for IL. Library Success, a best-practices wiki, contains a long list of libraries (mainly in the USA) that offer SMS reference services. A project with librarians using handheld devices for reference service support has been trialled at Penn State University. They used various handhelds to provide support on the campus and, although all had their advantages, the Fujitsu Lifebook was the preferred device used. Its small screen size did make it hard to view all the options available and each device involved a considerable learning curve, however. The main advantage was the extra dimension it gave to the roving help on campus with a variety of online tasks.[3]

- **Screencasting, podcasting and vodcasting**. These are becoming more common in the delivery of IL by librarians, and their use on mobile devices is a natural extension. Users like to learn in short bursts, whenever and wherever they choose, so the creation of these brief broadcasts give us a great opportunity. The challenge will be in their promotion and making them available in multiple places on our web sites so that users can easily access them. Examples include those at Hannon Library at Southern Oregon University at Ashland, Oregon and a series at Washington State University. Arizona State University has a faculty workshop series on the 'ASU Library' channel on iTunes.

- **Personal Response Systems (PRS)**. There is increasing interest in the use of PRS to test comprehension of lectures or to gather opinion in classrooms. Poll software at various skill levels is available for use on many hand-held devices, which could be used instead of requiring Keepad clickers. Poll Everywhere is a notable example and was used by Toni Twiss during her project in New Zealand.[4] This enables class participants to choose simple options which are then collocated on a web browser for display on a presentation screen or for later use. Schools in the USA that cannot afford expensive clickers are experimenting with Poll Everywhere as a cheaper alternative, using student mobiles.[5]

- **Twitter**. Use of a special account for communicating with a particular group, or simply as a library site for current awareness, tips,

information flow, reference help and instruction and teaching IL online, is being tried at Santa Barbara City College, California.[6]

- **QR codes**. These are widely used in Japan. They enable text or a phone number or a URL to be encoded and given a special two-dimensional barcode. There are a number of free services for doing this on the web, such as BeeTag and Neoreader. Most phones in Japan have a QR reader already installed, but otherwise each user needs to download the free software to their phone. They can then scan any QR code and go straight into the object. The advantage of using these is that the user does not have to copy a long URL, and can instead simply capture it and go the object. Text and phone numbers are the easiest to access for all mobile users; URLs will require WiFi access. At present knowledge of QR codes is weak in higher education, as can be seen from investigations at the University of Bath.[7] Andrew Walsh describes the possibilities and present limitations for libraries.[8] Theoretically, a QR code by the side of the printed journal run of a title could link into the online full text. In reality we should expect this to take a while to display. A more practical suggestion would be to link to short instructional videos with the QR code at a critical point, so that patrons can point their mobiles and play the relevant short video. We shall be experimenting with this in learning resources at the University of Bedfordshire. YouTube can be viewed on the higher-end mobile devices and this format is ideal for short tutorials. As with screencasting, it will rely on heavy promotion to make an impact.

INTO THE FUTURE

The variations and capabilities of the devices at present make generalisation difficult. Users may be limited by having text only, slow access speeds, prohibitive access speeds and the need for WiFi. Opinions on the usability of even high-end machines are not uniform. Tests in the recent Nielsen report on mobile usability concluded that:

'designing for mobile is hard. Technical accessibility is very far from providing an acceptable user experience. It's not enough that your site will display on a phone. Even touch phones that offer 'full-featured' browsers don't offer PC-level usability in terms of users' ability to actually get things done on a website.'[9]

We can expect the prices of devices and therefore of access to come down, but how fast or when is unpredictable. In the meantime libraries can become the early adopters, and experiment.

REFERENCES

1   P. Godwin, J. Parker and A. Hewling, 'Information literacy: sharing ideas for delivery on the move', in G. Needham and M. Ally, eds. *M-Libraries: libraries on the move to provide virtual access*, London: Facet Publishing, 2008

2   P. Godwin and J. Parker, eds., *Information literacy meets library 2.0,* London: Facet Publishing, 2008

3   E.S. Cahoy et al., 'Handheld devices pilot project', 2008; available at http://www.libraries.psu.edu/etc/medialib/psulpublicmedialibrary/lls/documents.Par.18154.File.dat/HHDFinalReport.pdf

4   T. Twiss, 'Ubiquitous information: an eFellow report on the use of mobile phones in classrooms to foster information literacy skills' (2008); available at http://www.scribd.com/doc/9507014/Toni-Twiss-Ubiquitous-Information

5   N.C. Learn, 'Use cell phones to poll your students', Instructify blog 2009; available at http://instructify.com/2008/07/18/use-cell-phones-to-poll-your-students

6   K. Neufeld, 'Moodle, Facebook, Twitter and teaching online', on his blog 'Misc.joy', 2009; available at http://kenleyneufeld.com/

7   A. Ramsden, The use of QR codes in education : a getting started guide for academics (2008), available at http://opus.bath.ac.uk/11408/1/getting_started_with_QR_Codes.pdf

8   A. Walsh, 'Quick response codes and libraries', *Library hi tech news*, 5/6, 2009, pp7–8

9   J. Nielsen, 'Mobile user experience is miserable', on Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, 2009; available at http://www.useit.com/alertbox/mobile-usability.html