Building partnerships and collaboration through tea and cake

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This article shares how I am building partnerships and collaboration in an academic liaison context. The discussion is informed by the experience of moving institution, working in a new culture and supporting new subjects.

Context

I am an experienced academic liaison librarian, having worked in a number of universities supporting many different subjects. When I moved to a liaison role at the University of Sunderland, I started working with art, design and performing arts programmes. I had not worked with these subject areas before, and recognising how to build on and adapt existing skills to new contexts has been essential.

Sunderland is a civic university (see https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/more/news/story/proud-to-be-a-civic-university-896) with a strong focus on widening participation, and recruitment draws heavily from the city and local area. The library's strategy emphasises digital literacy, personalised experience and continuous improvement. Within the Academic Liaison Team, relationship management underpins all activities. As part of embedding relationship management as a central tenet, a mission statement has been created to capture the role of academic liaison librarians in the university: 'Academic liaison librarians are the eyes, ears and voice of the library… by forging and fostering relationships we are able to participate, understand and meet the needs of our diverse community' (University of Sunderland Library, 2017).

Liaison librarians are responsible for supporting learning, teaching and research activities of staff and students; leading and managing relationships with faculties; developing library collections; and providing the key interface between the service and our customers. Strategic planning for liaison with faculties is based on developing action plans endorsed by heads of schools. These are a core and tangible element of our relationship management approach. We recognise cultural differences both between and within disciplines, and so plans are tailored to each faculty. We draft content for the plans and discuss them with senior faculty members in order to ensure proposals are in line with faculty priorities. Articulating our actions in a formal document helps raise the profile of the library service and has been positively welcomed by senior university colleagues.

Personal approach

I'm passionate about relationship management, which indeed is central to the library strategy. Experience of working in both subject and functional roles has confirmed my preference for the former, where I engage with students and staff in a specific discipline. This facilitates getting to know individuals and building relationships. Developing understanding of the subjects and appreciating faculty priorities and challenges help me support students and staff in a nuanced way. Personal experience has demonstrated just how positively academic colleagues respond to having a named librarian, and how they can feel lost and less engaged with the library without one.

Tea and cake

I recommend that you find an approach that works for you, and that you adapt if it doesn't work in certain contexts or for the people you meet. Being proactive, meeting as many academic colleagues as possible, and finding out about their teaching and research interests is fundamental both when you are starting a new job and as an ongoing activity. I prefer to approach this over tea and cake! This approach has been successful for me and has evolved over a number of years. When meeting informally, people tend to be more relaxed and open up, and conversations develop more organically – it gives people a breathing space, away from office phones and paperwork. When offering academic colleagues the option of meeting in their office or in a university café, most opt for the latter. This has helped me become a trusted partner, but doesn't mean that being formal during meetings isn't part of my professional toolkit.

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Being adaptable to each individual is important. For example, when offering continuing professional development opportunities – such as getting up to speed on effective literature searching – it is helpful to recognise that colleagues may be reluctant to ask for help within earshot of their team. It may be more appropriate to meet in a location that offers greater informality and privacy.

Stakeholder engagement

Liaison responsibility for the Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries is shared between two librarians. We work together to identify where efficiencies are possible at faculty level and where a more nuanced subject-specific approach is more appropriate. We take an interest in faculty activities, and whenever we hear about faculty events where we feel we could make a valuable contribution, we proactively offer to do so. Delivering sessions at faculty conferences makes us more visible to senior faculty colleagues, and our focus on easy 'take-home' practical actions or messages for lecturers hopefully makes our sessions memorable. For example, use of the Sconul Seven Pillars model of information literacy (SCONUL, 2011) as a discussion starter helped lecturers identify study skills challenges that they encounter with their students, and positioned us well to highlight how the library can help address these issues.

The university has areas of high quality research activity, but its main focus is on learning and teaching, with research informing the curriculum; the library's support of research is therefore not as prominent as in more research-intensive institutions. Research support is, however, an area of current focus, and a task-and-finish group is exploring ways of enhancing online advice through web pages and supporting library colleagues in their confidence around the research agenda. My colleague and I co-delivered a session during a faculty research afternoon in which we focused on the benefits of library services and resources for academic colleagues. Rather than saying 'this is why the library is marvellous', we identified key drivers that may encourage our academic colleagues to engage with the library. We emphasised how engagement with library resources and services can save them time, help them keep up to date with literature in their field, and identify the potential impact of their research. An immediate outcome of this engagement was the appearance the following morning in the library of a lecturer wanting to talk with me about his research.

New subject areas

Working with unfamiliar disciplines has required me to explore new avenues, as well as drawing on my existing toolkit of approaches. I dedicate time to showing an interest in the subjects, asking lots of questions and being willing to ask for clarification. It's ok to say you don't know or don't understand something – having the humility to do that is a valuable attribute.

I have developed an understanding of different disciplinary approaches to how students are taught and learn. In art and design, they are encouraged to do research by looking at what other artists have done, using a range of sources, including visual materials. My experience in other disciplines was that research usually involves reading critical literature, rather than having more of a focus on practical works, so a different approach and language are required. Attending assessed end-of-degree shows gives me valuable insights into the end product that students work towards, and enhances my understanding of what research may be needed for their assessments.

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Subject-specific resources and approaches

When starting to work in a new subject area, I learn as much as I can about the discipline, curriculum content and how the programme relates to the wider profession. This helps me understand why particular resources are important and vary by subject. Meeting with programme teams, attending faculty meetings and reading module documentation are just some of the ways I learn about subject content. For example, attending course meetings with academics gives me an insight into subjects included in modules, and brings to my attention any changes in direction of the programme that may impact on resource provision.

In dissertation workshops I encourage students to talk about their topics, why they are interested in that particular subject and, in art and design subjects, how this relates to their studio work and professional practice. As I support a wide range of disciplines, this enables me to identify common themes of interest and informs my book purchasing decisions. Students are encouraged to take a cross-disciplinary approach and draw on resources from outside their own subject. The more I learn about each subject, the more I am able to support students and recommend resources that will enhance their research.

Finding out about the nature of the student cohort, their potential careers and the areas of professional practice they may eventually work in provides important contextual information. This is an ongoing activity – it's not necessarily about embedding oneself into a department, but showing an active interest and a willingness to learn.

For example, I have discovered from attending our students' final degree shows that many students of illustration write and illustrate a children's book for this final piece of work. I attended an evening talk by a former Children's Laureate who was discussing her career as a children's book illustrator. One of the illustration lecturers I work with also attended this event, and resulting conversations have led to ideas for future collaboration to help students understand the links between theory and practice – the starting point being a co-authored blog post (Williams & Patton, 2019).

At Sunderland the library has an extensive collection of exhibition catalogues which art students use as a primary information source and research tool. These are created to accompany exhibitions and often include critical essays about the artist and their work. I have discussed the importance of this resource with lecturers, and now take examples into information literacy workshops to highlight them to students, explaining what they are and how they can be useful in their research.

I have conducted mini-tutorials in fine art studio spaces to support students in their research thinking. Discussing the students' art work in the studio has been highly beneficial to my understanding of how students view the practical and academic aspects of their studies. One of the fine art lecturers and I have co-delivered a session in the BA fine art studios and have discussed with students their practice interests. This provided me with the opportunity to highlight audio resources such as Box of Broadcasts to students who prefer to learn aurally. The studio location of these sessions was outside my usual sphere, but my input was appreciated by both students and staff. Embedding library activities in faculty teaching spaces is an excellent way to help students see the relationship between studio practice-based learning and more theoretical modules.

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Social media

Each academic liaison librarian at Sunderland has responsibility for a blog in each of their subject areas – I have one for performing arts, and one for art and design. I learnt how to blog using WordPress. Over time I have collated a number of subject-related mailing lists and websites that I use for inspiration, and I schedule regular blog posts and tweets, relating them to library resources and services wherever possible.

The CILIP Kate Greenaway Award for illustrating children's books provided an avenue to promote a career development opportunity for BA illustration students, as well as highlighting books in stock by previous award holders (e.g. blog posts by Kitchin, 2019, and Kitchin, 2018a). By using my blog and Twitter to promote this and other subject-specific resources, the library connects with students.

Blogging has benefits external to the university; for instance, a post about the donation of calligraphy books (Kitchin, 2018b) was picked up by a local calligraphy group, who came into the library to spend a morning exploring the collection - they were amazed to find that they could use the library as members of the public.

Conclusion

The work of a liaison librarian can feel like a juggling act as the competing demands of academic staff, students, time and budget have to be balanced. My experiences highlight how important it is to think creatively and responsively about how to work with academic colleagues and students to enhance their learning, teaching and research. I encourage you to try things at least once and see where they lead you!

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