Showcasing outside the library walls: growth through collaboration

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1. Introduction

At a time when libraries in all sectors are facing threats: whether from within their own organisations or on a national scale, the challenge to prove value is a continuing one. Information professionals are fighting on many fronts; dodging bullets designed to take chunks out of budgets and slash staff numbers with no regard for expertise, and it can be difficult to keep focused and remember what makes librarians unique.

Under this barrage we need to bring in reinforcements – champions. However, these cannot be disconnected colleagues in the wider business singing out praise from afar, but by necessity active collaborators. Collaboration is absolutely core to the success of an information service and those who manage it.

This chapter seeks to explore collaboration in various ways, questioning what it is about the skill set of an information professional that makes them such a useful partner. We'll be looking at examples of those who have left the profession to see which skills they prize most from their previous career. This may seem an odd approach, but it is one I hope will demonstrate the enviable transferable quality inherent in this skill set. We'll also look at collaboration more broadly to see examples of this in action – librarians collaborating with other teams in their organisation, but also with those externally. These examples are not drawn from the corporate sector – it is markedly more difficult to collaborate externally in a competitive environment but I hope you will find the examples interesting nonetheless. There are some imaginative projects out there!

Proving worth is important, whatever the size of your organisation, institution, firm or company. Worth will go some way to securing you greater visibility and an increased likelihood of influencing the wider business. In today's climate the strategy for this is often very statistics-driven – numbers being generally the key language decision-makers value. However, narrative can also be very powerful when engaging the wider community, who in turn will be useful advocates for you.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Student and Staff Services at Aberystwyth University, Rebecca Davies, is a strong advocate for the power of collaboration of this type. She notes that a successful, collaboration-rich library and information service will:

- be part of the shift to open-access scholarly communication;
- be entrepreneurial and mutate services, take risks, and learn from (regular) failures to confront disruptive technologies; and
- collaborate within and outside our professional and institutional boundaries,

working as part of multi-service teams and with organisations and businesses outside our perceived sector walls.[1]

Rebecca's third point here is absolutely crucial – collaborating with 'outsiders' sends a very strong message about the expertise within the information profession: by working together with non-librarians, our circle widens and influence extends. In Higher Education (HE) the landscape has altered tremendously, with an emphasis on convergence and bringing more and more services together under the same umbrella management.

It is challenging to distinguish our work in this environment, particularly when the services we offer are less visible than a decade ago. The dominance of online, and the subsequent change in how academic staff teach, students learn and the means by which both research, mean we have needed to develop new competencies. Across all library sectors, except public, the less people need to visit our physical spaces, the more focus we need to place on ensuring the work we do is evident.

Faculty used to rely almost exclusively on the library for the scholarly materials they needed for research and teaching, and librarians guided faculty to and otherwise facilitated the discovery of these materials. As scholars have grown better able to reach needed materials directly online, going to or using the library is not essential to carrying out research and so faculty are turning to other options.[2]

2.   What's in it for me?

Survival is one thing but actively seeking collaborations has the potential to take your career in many different directions. My own experience as a law librarian who collaborated resulted in many opportunities: being asked to write papers and present at conferences all over the world, becoming a member of the editorial board of a non-library journal (*The Law Teacher*), being awarded various prizes from the library profession and externally, and getting the chance to connect with the full range of those from my discipline: students, academics, other librarians and lawyers in practice. However, this can only happen if you're prepared to move out of your comfort zone and seek connections in the wider world, outside of your library, your institution, your profession and possibly your country.

As law librarian at City University of London, where I worked for 14 years before changing to legal academia, I created a website for law students called Lawbore.[3] This began life as a simple gateway site; pointing students to quality legal resources freely available online, but over the years has developed into a bit of a beast, with community elements, skills tutorials, events roundups and a careers blog.

It has grown organically in the sense that I used my experiences with those I met in my work as inspiration for its features, and ideas would spring from my contact

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1   Rebecca Davies, "The Changing Higher Education Context" in Melling and Weaver *Collaboration in Libraries and Learning Environments* (2013), pp10–11.
2   K Guthrie and R Housewright, "Repackaging the Library: what do faculty think?" in "Climbing out of the box: Repackaging Libraries for Survival, Special Issue" (2010) 51(1) *Journal of Library Administration* 77–104.
3   Lawbore http://lawbore.net.

with both the students and academics. As time went on however, I became braver and began to look at actually involving them in the content, getting their buy-in, but also learning from them. I'll touch on a few elements of this work under the headings below. However, we'll also be looking at the many other collaborative 'stories' that have captured the imagination of their organisations and beyond.

3.   Librarians and academic staff

As a librarian I reached out to my academic colleagues on various occasions to collaborate with me in developing new resources for Lawbore, but I'll just detail two for you here. The first was *Talking Essays* – within HE feedback is always problematic: students think they don't get enough of it, academics aren't always convinced students read and take on board the feedback they receive. I worked with my academic colleagues to select a mix of assessments (varying standards) in the core areas of law, recording audio feedback and then making each snippet available as a hotspot in each essay so students could get a real feel for what works and what doesn't.

The second was Learnmore,[4] the skills part of the site, which housed online tutorials, talking slideshows, articles and video content around legal writing, research, mooting, careers and exams. I had created lots of content but the mooting area was incomplete. (For those of you unfamiliar with this activity, law students participate in moot competitions, representing one of the parties in a fictional case which has gone to appeal.) There were barely any resources on mooting online and I felt Learnmore could really fill a gap; it was something I was often asked about as a librarian. I approached a new academic who taught on a Legal Method module and together we organised the filming of many moots, trawling through footage to find short clips to illustrate points and getting students to share their tips with us online. This proved very popular and we were excited to receive the Routledge/Association of Law Teachers (ALT) Teaching Law with Technology Prize in 2013.

4.   Cross-institutional collaborations

The long-running Library Impact Data Project,[5] funded by JISC and managed by the University of Huddersfield, is an impressive example of many libraries working together (Huddersfield collaborated with seven other university libraries). The first phase of the project looked at whether links could be made between library use and attainment and the second focused on whether connections could be drawn between library use and retention.

Collaborations around data and library analytics are likely to increase – with librarians working with researchers, IT specialists and publishers to exploit the increasing quantity of freely available data in order to make connections and reveal new findings.

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4   Learnmore http://learnmore.lawbore.net/.
5   See the JISC Activity Data project blog for further information: https://library3.hud.ac.uk/blogs/lidp/.

5.   Librarians and learning technologists

At Regent's University London, an innovative Christmas-themed open online course "The Twelve Apps of Christmas"[6] was developed by a small team of learning technologists and a librarian. The aim was to engage their colleagues at the university in thinking about how they might use free-to-use applications (apps) in support of teaching, so was targeted firmly at academic staff and others with a teaching role at the university: e-learning teams and librarians. Each day a new app would be introduced to participants, along with reading content and a 10-minute activity to complete. There was also a discussion forum where experiences of use could be shared, along with alternatives suggested. Apps chosen for the programme included Poll Everywhere, Padlet, Dragon Dictation, Turnitin, Wunderlist, Prezi, Simplemind+ and Padlet.

With over 500 participants signing up from across the world this collaborative project has received much acclaim, both within the university and externally, and the team are working on other projects for the future.

Many university librarians work with their e-learning and educational development teams to develop workshops for academics, students and researchers.

6.   Libraries and the community

One of the most well-publicised partnerships of recent years can be found in the West Midlands: the fabulous golden library named The Hive. The hybrid university and public library in Worcester has drawn together the community – becoming a central point for a vast range of information and services, with an average of 2,500 daily visits.[7] The partnership between the University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council has continued to flourish, with complementary strategic plans and a focus on making a contribution across all sectors of the local population. Provision of a business centre was considered key from the start; and representatives from local companies and the Chamber of Commerce were invited along to explore with the university and county council how they might go about developing such a centre for the business community. The centre (relaunched in 2014) has developed many new partnerships, as well as a full annual programme of business-related events.

Although not strictly a collaboration, the University of Aberdeen has an impressive outreach programme to local schools, employing two full-time Learning and Outreach Officers to work with schools and local community groups, sharing their special collections with the community.

A music venue is likely to top any list of 'most unexpected library partners' but the Sir Henry's/University College Cork[8] (UCC) project is one of the most exciting collaborations of recent years. Sir Henry's, a Cork nightclub and live music venue,

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6   Andy Horton, "The Twelve Apps of Christmas: How collaboration between librarians and learning technologists brought success to an open online course" SCONUL Focus 65, pp18–22. http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/5_18.pdf.

7   Stephanie Allen, 'The Hive: the joint University of Worcester/Worcester public library that's open for business" SCONUL Focus 65 pp23–28.

8   Martin O'Connor gives an interesting interview via UKlibchat: https://uklibchat.wordpress.com/2015/03/31/feature-23-a-recent-interview-with-a-librarian-and-his-experience-of-collaborating-outside-libraries/. More information about the Sir Henry's exhibition via the UCC website: http://www.ucc.ie/en/about/uccnews/fullstory-481342-en.html and the Sir Henry's blog: https://sirhenrys2014.wordpress.com/.

had a firm following from both the dance and rock crowds, during its 25 years of business. The club closed in 2003. A tweet was the trigger for three individuals to come together to organise an exhibition at UCC celebrating the influence of the club on the Cork community: Elaine Hogan, an academic at UCC, Martin O'Connor, librarian at UCC and Stevie G, a DJ and promoter. The efforts of this trio brought together the community, encouraging them to donate memorabilia and stories to the exhibition, which ran from July to September 2014. Like the Hive, this collaboration reached diverse sections of society, not only regular library-goers.

7.   Librarians and other university teams

Learning spaces is one area where there is a lot of movement in terms of sharing ideas across the institution: projects led by the library to manage and develop learning spaces outside of the library, but with collaboration from IT, Facilities, Student Services, the Students Union and the students themselves. Bradford University, University of Bolton, Teeside University, University of Portsmouth, University of Exeter and the University of Cumbria are such examples. The Information Commons at the University of Sheffield represents a joint venture between the library and Corporate Information and Computing Services.

There are various examples of librarians working with Careers teams on employability projects and also teaming up with Academic Support and Study Skills teams.

Bit of a cheat inclusion here, but in my role as an academic at City University London I set about revitalising student induction in September 2015 by collaborating with our Academic Support Advisor. In order to focus students' attention to the importance of academic writing and to give them the opportunity to get to know each other and the local area, I designed six trails around London, each taking in four buildings of legal significance.[9] The students had a basic introduction to writing skills before setting off in groups to find locations, answer research questions and take some selfies of their groups out and about. Later that week they had very interactive writing workshops with us, before writing a short piece based on something they'd been inspired by on their travels. They were given feedback and the 21 winning pieces were announced. Although not library-related, some aspects of this would be really simple to adapt for library induction.

This is an extract from the chapter 'Showcasing outside the library walls: growth through collaboration' by Emily Allbon in Knowledge Management in Law Firms: Expertise in Action, *published by Globe Law and Business.*

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9   See an example trail and student selfies: http://blog.lawbore.net/2015/10/exploring-the-law-with-our-new-llb1-students/ as well as examples of the student submissions: http://blog.lawbore.net/tag/exploring-the-law/.

10   Maria Bell and Jane Secker, 'Transitions from School to Higher Education: Understanding the Needs of Undergraduates at LSE" in *Information Literacy, Lifelong Learning and Digital Citizens – Second European Conference, ECIL 2014*, Croatia, October 20–23, 2014, pp309–318. See also http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsesadl/.