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The Role of the Librarian in the Teaching Library¹

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The title of my paper, 'The role of the librarian in the teaching institution', should perhaps be qualified to read 'The teaching role of the librarian in the teaching institution', as I want to concentrate on the librarian as teacher.

This role is far from being a new one. There is evidence of a librarian lecturing to undergraduates at Harvard in the 1820s.² During the first half of this century the teaching of library skills was attempted in a number of university libraries, with varying degrees of success. In 1926 a paper entitled 'Instruction in bibliographical techniques for university students' was presented at the conference of ASLIB, the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux.³ But it was really in the 1960s and 70s that the topic became an important - and fashionable - part of the role the library profession saw for itself. In the USA the concept

¹ Paper presented at LIBER Annual General Conference 1997, Bern.

² Virginia M. Tiefel, 'Library user education: examining its past, projecting its future', *Library Trends*, 44 (1995) 318-38.

³ H.E. Potts, 'Instruction in bibliographical technique for university students', *Report of proceedings of the Third Conference*, London: ASLIB, 1926.

developed as 'bibliographic instruction' or 'BI'; in Britain as 'library instruction' or, when we decided that 'instruction' was too narrow a term, we adopted a broader term, 'user education'. For much of those two decades, it was the aspect of librarianship that was possibly the most written about, the most discussed and the topic of the most conferences. In a typically acerbic comment, John Urquhart wondered 'whether the growth in user education had been a reflection of the fact that during the 1960s and 1970s librarians were under-employed, over qualified, and keen to improve their status'.⁴ In the 1990s status is no longer on the agenda, and whatever librarians are, they are certainly not under-employed.

What was the result of all that thinking and talking? By about 1980, the overriding lesson that had been learned was that library instruction *per se* is not only seen as irrelevant by most students, but it is also exceedingly boring to them. If we are honest, most of us will admit that at library school we endured some pretty dull classes. And we *chose* to be librarians! Why, then, should undergraduates who have *not* chosen to be librarians find the intricacies of our catalogues, classification schemes and reference tools any more exciting?

Those programmes of library instruction which were generally deemed to be successful avoided this pitfall by integrating themselves into the subject-based instruction. If a student has elected to read Botany, we assume that he or she is interested in Botany. The success of library instruction depends on making it relevant to the subject of the student's interest and on seizing the 'teachable moment' - the time when the learner is ready to learn. 'The teachable moment is a realisation of need combined with the

⁴ J. A. Urquhart, *The information chain: proceedings of the UK Serials Group Conference, 1982*, Loughborough: UKSG, 1983, pp. 164-5.

learner's motivation to meet that need'.⁵ As far as students are concerned, this teachable moment comes at the time when they have to move from the safety of their textbooks and undertake an exercise or project which requires the use of unfamiliar information resources. They suddenly realise that they have no idea how to go about a literature search or how to construct a search strategy. This is the 'teachable moment', the moment when, with collaboration between the academic and the librarian, a class in information-handling skills can be given, so that the student can be shown the most appropriate information sources and how to exploit them most efficiently. We have all, I am sure, encountered the student towards the end of their Ph.D. who confesses that, if only they had been taught how to conduct a literature search, they could have saved themselves six months' work.

So far I have not defined these reference sources as being paper-based or electronic. This is quite deliberate, as I do not believe that, in this context, there is any fundamental difference. An unstructured search in a large database is just as wasteful as a badly-planned literature search in a traditional bibliography. The role of the librarian as teacher is just as important in the age of the ERL-based *Medline* and the Internet as it was in the days of *Index Medicus* and the British Museum Catalogue. In fact it is probably more important, as it is now so much easier to end up with a vast number of largely irrelevant references and the librarian needs to take on the role not just of gatekeeper and navigator but also of guide and educator.

We must also keep reminding ourselves that we live in a far from totally electronic age. Just compare the number of print journals with those published only electronically, or the number of traditional books being published compared with databases and you will see that electronic publishing still represents only the tip

⁵ Carolyn Dusenbury & Barbara G. Pease, 'The future of instruction', *Journal of Library Administration*, 20 (1995) 97-117.

of the iceberg. You might expect me to say this, coming from an ancient university like Cambridge, but it applies also to the Tilburgs and de Montforts just as much as to Cambridge, though perhaps the balance is different. All of our libraries are, to a greater or lesser extent, hybrids, with varying proportions of paper and electronic information. And they will remain so for a long time to come. In this context, much of the teaching role of the library retains its traditional character, though this is now overlaid by the demands of electronic publishing.

In this context, I would like to refer to a report known as the 'Follett Report', produced by the Higher Education Funding Councils in the United Kingdom.⁶ This report, published in 1993, has been immensely important, not only in setting the agenda for academic library development but also for injecting significant sums of money into the system. It has put academic libraries back on the map and raised their profile in a way not done for perhaps a generation. Its success has been achieved largely through a number of so-called 'post-Follett initiatives', many of which are still under way or about to be turned from projects into operational programmes. It has affected all types of library and library activity, with about £50 million being provided over five years for the cataloguing and preservation of special collections in the humanities, as well as the very important eLib (Electronic Libraries) Programme, which has funded exploratory work in testing models for intelligent gateways to electronic resources, document delivery, resource discovery, training, etc. and is now moving into the area of digital archiving. The Follett Report was, on the whole, a sensible one, based very much in reality and making realistic recommendations, but in the context of this paper I want to look at one section where the authors make a leap into a

⁶ *Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group: Report*, Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1993. [<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/follett/report/>]

fantasy world of the year 2001. The section is headed 'The Virtual Librarian':

Meanwhile, the librarian has a meeting first thing with the group responsible for a new course on 'Redesigning the Inner City', for which he has assembled a package of material written within the department, along with a wide range of other resources. These... comprise links to the main library catalogues and the relevant abstracting and news feed services to which the University subscribes, sample sets of demographic data, previous examination papers, and a range of example dissertations from previous years... The librarian enjoyed this close involvement with teaching. Over the last few years he had stopped trying to predict his future: innovation and change had come unexpectedly... the reformists' cry of 'access not holdings' had worked right through the information chain... The actual storage of knowledge - the articles, texts, interactive experiences - had been passed back to its creators in the universities and elsewhere, to be retrieved, reformatted into the house style, and delivered to whoever ordered it... In the afternoon he ran a weekly seminar on 'information discovery and management. He had done this for several years. The discovery elements, knowing where and how to use the many network index systems, had become progressively easier. He had always insisted that academic staff came with their students: it wasn't that the students treated it as an unnecessary side-show - rather they could run ahead of their tutors if unchecked.

There are a number of aspects of this Follett vision of the future which I have doubts about. Bear in mind that the year is 2001 - only four years away. Some of it may come to pass, but, as usual with predictions - at least in the library world - the timescale is too short. At one level the electronic developments described in

this fantasy - indeed the developments we are all already experiencing - might reduce centrality of the library. The user will not necessarily have to visit the library to gain access to these information sources. But what of the librarian? Here I think Follett got it right. His librarian is involved in the compilation of teaching packages and with teaching. Even if the library itself is no longer central - and I have serious doubts about even that prospect - the centrality of the librarian could well increase.

Some of you may be familiar with an article by John Sack, in which the author puts forward the concept of the Ptolemaic and Copernican views of libraries and scholarship. The Ptolemaic view places the library at the centre with scholars circling round like planets; the Copernican is centred around the scholar, with his sources of information (publishers, libraries, colleagues, etc.) as the planets. This represents a fundamental difference in approach. Previously the scholar went to the library to satisfy his information needs. Now the library represents but one of the ways in which those needs are met. This is of course not such a new thought, but Sack's expression of it is a striking one: 'the library is a node in the scholar's information web'.⁷

Previously the library was concerned to provide access to its own holdings and to teach readers how to use those holdings. In Sack's world, and to some extent the world we are now living in, it is irrelevant where the information is. It might be in printed or manuscript form in the local library; it might be on CD-ROM on the university's local area network; it might be available from a database half way across the world; it might be on someone else's Web site. From the point of view of the scholar, it no longer matters. For Sack, the role of the librarian is no longer 'material acquisition' - material accessioning - but 'access to material' however and wherever that material is held.

⁷ John R. Sack, 'Open systems for open minds: building the library without walls', *College and Research Libraries*, 47 (1986) 535-44.

It is now over ten years since that article was published, and things have moved on, but largely in the direction which Sack suggested, towards the Copernican world view. We need now to consider the role of the librarian in this world where the information needs of the scholar are central (and within the term scholar I include the first-year undergraduate as well as the senior professor). The librarian will have, as I have suggested, a major role to play, but it will be a role in which collections become less important and services, including teaching, gain in significance.

This is, of course, not a revolution but an evolution in the role of the librarian. We are trained to organise information in whatever form it appears. As a profession we have been doing it for years and I would argue that we are rather good at it. You only have to look at the anarchy of the Internet to see what a mess things can get into if they are left to computer professionals and enthusiasts without any input from librarians! What our users will look to us for is what they have always looked to us for: assistance in finding their way through the mass of information. Or, to put it a different way, 'information navigation, information access and information delivery'.⁸

Again, this is not a new role. It was important when readers needed help to navigate their way through the card catalogue or needed guidance on which bibliography to select and how to use it. How much more necessary will that help be when the user is faced not just with printed bibliographies and online catalogues but with all the other manifestations of electronic publishing? The virtual librarian might well become rather less virtual and rather more visible than before.

But despite all the changes, the overall strategy for user education remains fundamentally the same. That role falls very broadly into two categories: orientation and higher-level training.

⁸ *Electronic access to information: a new service paradigm*, ed. by Win-Shin S. Chiang and Nancy E. Elkington. Mountain View, CA, 1994, p. 10.

Let us assume for the moment that we do actually get readers coming through the doors of our library and that we are not in the situation where the library is entirely virtual and has been turned into a car park. The first element of user education is now, as it was in the 1970s and 80s, basic orientation to the building - how to find your way around and how to find the material you need, whether it is on the shelves or on a PC.

A major objective must be to reduce the amount of such basic orientation that is needed, by making the library as easy to use as possible. The methods of achieving this are familiar to all of us, but how often do we see libraries which do not meet these minimum criteria?

- clear, comprehensive, well-planned signs
- library guides - printed, video, interactive

Though we are moving towards Sack's Copernican view of the world, we still do have new readers. They still need to be told how to use the library. Readers have generally adapted to the use of the OPAC more quickly than they did to the card catalogue, but the more subtle functions, such as short cuts and Boolean searching, still need to be taught. We also need to remind our users, especially undergraduates, that they will not find all the information they will ever want on the Internet!

This is perhaps an appropriate moment to move on to IT:

- user-friendly IT with common interfaces

All library users are now familiar with features like pull-down menus and icons. We need to make our systems as user-friendly as possible by making them appear as

similar as possible to what the user is familiar with. Obviously, with some proprietary systems one cannot change the interface, but one can in many cases offer easy means of access or clear guidance, either through printed guides or help screens.

Finally, another obvious example:

- enquiry points at appropriate locations.

The self-explanatory library still needs people. The placing of enquiry points is usually determined by the geography of the building and the availability of appropriate staff, but it is always worth looking afresh occasionally at the assistance provided to users and whether it could be improved.

If a library has this basic orientation in place, its teaching librarians can then concentrate on higher-level training. In the past this generally consisted of classes held in the library. There is still a role for these. As I have already indicated, experience suggests that this is most successful when it is given at the 'teachable moment'. Determining when this is to occur requires close collaboration with the academic staff to ensure that the students and the librarian are brought together at the right time.

It is also important to involve the teaching staff themselves if at all possible. Perhaps I can remind you of our Follett librarian. He insisted that the academic staff attended the seminar along with the students, because things were changing so quickly that the students could easily run ahead of their tutors. This is very important and may well be the way in which we can get round some of the problems of the integration of teaching of information skills into the subject-based curriculum, since academics generally do not like giving up teaching time to what they regard as peripheral activities. Twenty years ago it was reasonable to

assume that the bibliographies and reference books which our academics had used when they were working for their doctorates would have been the same as those that we were teaching their students about. Now this is no longer the case, and in many cases academic staff welcome the opportunity to participate with their students in training sessions which incorporate access to the latest in electronic media. They do not like to admit it, but very often their students are way ahead of them in their knowledge of the use of electronic sources.

The truly teaching library also has another way of exercising this role of higher level training: through the provision of tailored gateways to subject resources. In the heyday of user education, librarians saw it as part of their job to produce guides to information resources in a whole range of subjects. The structure was frequently a standard one: lists of bibliographies of bibliographies, then subject bibliographies and reference works, all carefully annotated with full bibliographical details and the classmarks/locations of them in the library. These were given out during user education classes. They might have been useful to some students but personally I rather doubt whether the work involved was justified by the use made of them. Furthermore, when I saw similar guides from libraries all over the world I always felt that there was an element of reinventing the wheel; is a guide to library resources in French studies suitable for a student at Manchester really much different from one that could be used by a student at Cardiff - or, for that matter, at Iowa?

Whatever the value of these publications, there is now both an opportunity and a danger for a similar type of exercise in the electronic age. In the print era, the world was nice and straightforward: with a decent catalogue you could find out what bibliographies and reference works your library had on a given subject. You had to be content with those or try another library. Now the user is swamped with information resources, both those available locally in print and CD-ROM, those to which the local

library subscribes and makes available online, and those which one can find by searching the Internet. The user of these in the Copernican information world does not care where they are - and he is right not to do so. But, as we all know, one can waste a huge amount of time trying to find information on the Internet, coming across all sorts of resources, most of them of very dubious value and quality. In this context the role of the teaching librarian is, as we have already heard in this conference, to help the user to find adequate rather than plentiful information. One of the ways of doing this is to develop gateways to sources. But here too lies a danger: the danger that each subject librarian in each library will develop from scratch a local gateway to resources in the subjects for which he is responsible.

One of the supreme benefits of Web technology is its ability to insert links from one site to another. So each library does not need to develop resource guides *de novo*. A good subject librarian should be able to discover where a suitable guide already exists or, if one does not, to co-operate with colleagues elsewhere to develop one. This can then become a model to which locally relevant features such as links to locally held CD-ROMs and the local library catalogue can be added. This concept is basically behind a number of the of projects in the Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) in the United Kingdom: to develop intelligent interfaces to subject based resources.

I do not have time to deal with these in any detail but I just want to mention two of the projects and indicate how they are tackling these issues. ROADS (Resource Organisation and Discovery in Subject-based services: <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/>) is an umbrella project for some of the more specific subject-based projects such as:

EEVL (Edinburgh Engineering Virtual Library)
<http://www.eevl.ac.uk/>

and

SOSIG (Social Science Information Gateway)

<http://sosig.ac.uk>.

Its objective is to design and implement a user-orientated resource discovery system. By developing a model that can be used for any subject it will help people working in the area of subject-based services to describe the resources they are providing access to, so that they are as easy as possible for the users.

OMNI (Organising Medical Networked Information: <http://www.omni.ac.uk/>) is an example of one of the more advanced electronic gateways to high-quality networked information resources in the biomedical field (note the stress on high-quality). It does not offer vast numbers of resources, but selected ones of known quality which have been evaluated by subject-specialists. It is a national project involving six institutions.

Finally, in this survey of the role of the librarian in the teaching library, what about the librarian's need for teaching skills? 'Netskills', another eLib project, has as its aim to help the higher education community to develop network skills to use the Internet effectively for teaching, research and administration. It does this by placing the librarian right at the heart of the teaching process. The Netskills team is training people in higher education - mainly but not exclusively librarians - in these network skills, so that they are then equipped to train the end-users. The concept is that of training the trainers. Netskills is now fully operational and, over the last two years it has trained over 2000 people.

In this brief survey of the role of the teaching librarian in the teaching library I hope I have been able to indicate that I see this as an expanding role for the librarian and one to which we ought be directing more resources of we are to continue to help our users to use our libraries - whether actual or virtual - more effectively.