

Access, Delivery, Performance: The future of libraries without walls

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Review of: *Access, Delivery, Performance: The future of libraries without walls: A Festschrift to celebrate the work of Professor Peter Brophy*, edited by Jillian R. Griffiths and Jenny Craven, London: Facet Publishing, 2009, 238 pages, hardback ISBN 978-1-85604-647-3 £44.95.

Introduction

It is normal in some subject disciplines to publish volumes of edited papers in honour of a respected colleague, usually to mark a significant birthday or career change. The contributors to such Festschriften are usually made up of former colleagues or pupils of the person being honoured. This volume celebrates the work of Professor Peter Brophy, the founder of the Centre for Research in Library and Information Management (CERLIM), which since 1998 has been based at the Manchester Metropolitan University. This volume contains twelve chapters written by sixteen contributors, many of them colleagues or ex-colleagues of Professor Brophy.

Peter Brophy has had an outstanding career both as a librarian and researcher. Alan MacDougall, Visiting Professor at Manchester Metropolitan University provides an outline in the opening chapter. A career that started at the Library Research Unit at Lancaster University in the early 1970s progressed to professional posts at Strathclyde University and Teeside Polytechnic, before Brophy eventually became Librarian at Bristol Polytechnic. From there, he moved to the University of Central Lancashire in 1989, where in 1993 he set up CERLIM. A selected bibliography of works by Professor Brophy fills eleven pages at the end of the volume, revealing the range and diversity of his research interests over the past few decades.

The contexts of the early years of Professor Brophy's career are sketched in more detail in the opening chapter by Michael Buckland, Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. Buckland was a colleague of Brophy's at the Library Research Unit at Lancaster in the early 1970s. This chapter gives a good flavour of how library and information research was undertaken in this time when the libraries at what were then 'new universities' had an active interest in innovation and when almost all library research in the UK was funded by the Office for Scientific and Technical Information of the Department of Education and Science.

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Libraries and e-Learning

The remainder of the book is organised into four broad themes. The first covers libraries' role in supporting e-learning. The opening chapter in this section is by Gill Needham and Nicky Whitsed of the Open University. It is a series of reflections on a decade of developing library services for distance learners. Starting with the Follett Report of 1993 [1], the chapter identifies three main phases in the Open University's approach to delivering services to around 200,000 students and 8,000 tutors. The first phase was concerned with fairness; knowing exactly when to introduce online services at a time when a majority of Open University students did not have access to the relevant technologies or skills and when many tutors were reluctant to change their traditional ways of working. Responses to this included the development of library-mediated collections of quality-controlled Internet resources, supplemented by an online skills tutorial focused on generic information skills. Despite all of this, actual use of online resources remained relatively low (p. 30). The second phase, therefore, was mainly about integrating online services more deeply into the core learning activities of courses. The focus switched to the training of tutors and the integration of information resources within the university's emerging virtual learning environment (VLE), based on Moodle. In the interim, a pilot project using the open source MyLibrary software was found to be useful in helping to integrate library services into the learning experiences of individual students. The third phase - which Needham and Whitsed note is still ongoing - concerns the embedding of information literacy and resource-based learning concepts within the university more widely. The chapter ends with some comments on the, perhaps inevitable, tension between the 'invisible library' - 'quietly and strategically ... [insinuating] resources and services into all those places where they have the most impact' - and the need to defend library budgets and status within the wider institution (pp. 35-36).

The following chapter, by Professor David Baker of the University College Plymouth St Mark and St John, is a general overview of the development of e-learning technologies in UK Higher Education over the past decade. Starting again with Follett, Baker explains how e-learning concepts and technologies have been taken up, focusing in particular on the facilitating role taken by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in providing a national-level approach to the provision of both infrastructure (e.g., networks, access management tools) and content. In addition, the chapter refers to a number of JISC-funded programmes and initiatives focused on breaking down the barriers that prevent the sharing and re-use of e-learning content. The final sections look at some wider factors influencing the current transformation of learning, teaching and assessment practices. These include the need to integrate institutional services like VLEs with the generic social networking tools and mobile devices familiar to new generations of learners. However, successful integration is not just a matter of technology but of overcoming cultural differences. Baker uses a synthesis of the JISC-funded Learner Experiences of e-Learning projects [2] to note that there might have been 'an increasing "divide" between the needs, expectations and wishes of the learners and the expectations of the teachers, who were more "traditional" and perhaps not engaged with e-learning in the same way' (p. 49).

Widening Access

The next three chapters are on the theme of widening access to information. The first, by Jenny Craven of CERLIM, provides a UK perspective on the development of library services for visually impaired people, a phrase used to refer to anyone with a 'serious sight problem,' including 'total blindness, partial sight or low vision, as well as cognitive impairments such as dyslexia, which may result in a print impairment' (p. 58). The chapter commences with an outline of things that mainstream libraries can do to support visually impaired people, including reading aids and Web sites that adhere to guidelines like the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) [3]. After a brief review of historical developments like Share the Vision and the Revealweb union catalogue [4, 5], Craven returns to the Web accessibility topic, noting that developments in Web technologies in the late 1990s had actually had a negative impact on the accessibility of Web sites. CERLIM projects like REVIEL (Resources for the Visually Impaired users of the Electronic Library) and NoVA (Non-Visual Access to the digital library) had respectively looked at accessibility challenges and attempted to understand the retrieval behaviour of visually impaired people. The chapter then identifies some ongoing activities that aim to support accessibility, including the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), whose four principles of making Web content accessible – e.g. as embodied in WCAG 2.0 – means that all content needs to be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (the POUR principles). The chapter concludes with a look at future prospects, including new accessibility challenges posed by social networking services and other (so-called) Web 2.0 technologies and the continuing importance of education and training.

The following chapter is by John Dolan, formerly Head of Library Policy at the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). This is a set of reflections on how Dolan considers that UK public libraries have evolved over time to meet new needs and challenges, starting from the development of community librarianship in the 1960s. After a few observations on wider political, social and cultural contexts, Dolan goes on to ask whether the intrinsic value of public libraries will be recognised amongst their perceived need to contribute to key policy priorities and targets (p. 78). The chapter describes the heady optimism of the mid-1990s, when initiatives like the People's Network and projects funded by the New Opportunities Fund fleetingly provided an exciting vision of what public libraries might have hoped to achieve with an increased investment in information and communication technologies. However, the remainder of the chapter is an overview of the challenges that face public libraries as they attempt to adapt to current needs. These challenges include the need to develop targeted strategies for particular communities (especially the disadvantaged) and the potential to deliver skills training and other aspects of what is now known as 'informal adult learning.' Dolan also sees public libraries as a useful public space, 'a unique place in the community in being non-judgemental and freely open to all' (p. 87). Finally, the chapter explores how these community-building and community-learning principles might be supported by technologies and the people who work in libraries.

Dolan's chapter had mentioned that the use of Web 2.0 technologies was often 'inhibited by a local authority culture of caution and an apprehension about the

implications of free access' (p. 88). Chapter 7, by Juliet Eve of the University of Brighton, is a more detailed assessment of the use of social networking technologies in public libraries. The chapter starts with some general background on Web 2.0, including the popular definition provided by Tim O'Reilly and the invocation of now familiar social networking services like Facebook, MySpace and Flickr. While Eve is aware of criticism of Web 2.0 as merely 'jargon' or a 'marketing slogan,' she is happy to concede that the term is used as a 'shorthand for a new set of virtual spaces to engage in, as well as potentially new ways for businesses ... to engage with customers, and for those customers to create content as much as they consume it' (p. 98). Eve then turns to discuss the derivative term 'Library 2.0.' Here there is even less consensus, with disagreement even over the extent to which it is a new concept. Eve sensibly comments that similar 'rhetorical flourishes' have emerged before from the library community, not least in the expectations of the People's Network (p. 101). After a brief overview of how selected libraries have started to use Web 2.0 technologies, Eve concludes her chapter with some comments on the so-called 'Google Generation' and the challenges of providing public library services to young people. Eve's measured conclusion is that some of the rhetoric that surrounds the use of Web 2.0 tools in libraries is unhelpful: 'at worst it is technical determinism at its crudest, and at best it is an overstatement of what technologies *may* facilitate, if that is what public library users call for and begin to develop' (pp. 107-108).

Information Delivery

The following two chapters are on a general theme entitled 'changing directions of information delivery.' The first of these is an introduction to institutional repositories by Rowena Cullen and Brenda Chawner of the Victoria University of Wellington. This starts from first principles - the key functions of scholarly communication - and goes on to consider the perceived benefits of institutional repositories, the technologies and standards they are built on (including metadata), and some of the key issues that need to be considered when creating and managing a repository. In these sections, Cullen and Chawner show a wider interest in sustainability challenges than many repository enthusiasts, referring to the RLG's work on identifying the attributes of trusted repositories and the JISC-funded LIFE (Lifecycle Information for E-Literature) Project's attempts to calculate costs for digital lifecycles and preservation. The chapter is honest in admitting that the growth of content in repositories has 'not reached early expectations' (p. 127). On this topic, Cullen and Chawners are well aware of the factors that inhibit the deposit of content as well as some of the strategies that have been proposed to increase deposit rates.

Chapter 9 is on the changing nature of controlled vocabularies and is by Richard Hartley of Manchester Metropolitan University. This provides an overview of traditional approaches to controlled vocabularies, including enumerative classification schemes, faceted classification, subject headings, thesauri and name authorities. Hartley argues that the high cost of maintaining controlled vocabulary schemes combined with doubts about their effectiveness when compared with keyword searching meant that 'through the 1980s and 1990s there was a steady decline in their

use for both indexing and searching' (p. 151). The rise of the Web, however, has seen a resurgence in the potential and actual use of controlled vocabularies, both, for example, as part of the vision of a Semantic Web and as part of social networking tools like Flickr and Connotea that encourage users to apply their own free-form keywords (or tags).

Evaluating Performance and Quality

The final three chapters are on the themes of performance, quality and leadership, topics on which Professor Brophy has written widely. The first chapter on this theme, by Charles McClure and John Snead of the Florida State University provides an overview of the development and implementation of a Web-based evaluation decision management system (EDMS) designed for use by public libraries. The system provides a framework that would help librarians and managers determine the most appropriate evaluation approaches and to match these to local needs and requirements. The chapter concludes with some observations of the challenge of integrating these tools with the Web 2.0 paradigm.

Evaluation is a key part of the following chapter, on measuring the quality of services and resources in academic libraries. In this, Jillian Griffiths of CERLIM provides an introduction to the quality concepts developed by David Garvin in the 1980s and how these had been adapted for use by libraries and information services, not least by Professor Brophy himself. One result of this was a framework of ten quality attributes that were used to evaluate certain aspects of projects funded to support the development of the JISC Information Environment [6].

The final chapter in the book is a review of the role of leadership in academic libraries. Jennifer Rowley of Manchester Metropolitan University and Sue Roberts of the Victoria University of Wellington open their chapter in a provocative way by doubting whether the information professions would be able to offer any kind of leadership. They cite a range of critical opinions, the consensus of which is that library managers focus disproportionately on information skills at the expense of leadership and strategy. Rowley and Roberts then attempt to explain the changing contexts of academic libraries, e.g. the increasing need to work collaboratively with others and to take leadership roles within the wider institution. After a quick attempt to define leadership, the chapter proposes a new 'leadership diamond' based on four attributes: personal qualities, working with others, vision and direction, and managing performance and implementation (pp. 203-204). The remainder of the chapter provides an overview of some new leadership theories, proposes ways of influencing people and dealing with complicated institutional power bases. Rowley and Roberts conclude with some observations on a future vision that incorporates: capacity building for leadership, recognising the importance of innovation and creativity, and the need for a deeper involvement in shaping knowledge management and scholarly communication.

Common Themes

The chapters in this volume are a fitting tribute to Professor Brophy. Their topics range across a number of his research interests, and many of them play direct tribute to him, for example, Brophy being described as ‘an inspiration to all of us working in this field (Needham, p. 23), and an ‘exemplar of the influential leader’ (Rowley and Roberts, p. 198).

There are several common themes. Perhaps the most striking one is the largely uncritical adoption of the concept of a ‘Google generation,’ a phrase that features at some point in most of the chapters in this book. So, for example, Rowley and Roberts say that this generation ‘of students expect fast and straightforward access to information and are intolerant of interfaces that require multiple stages to arrive at the full text of a document’ (p. 197). Reading this volume, one might think that the existence of a ‘Google generation’ was well established. However, the CIBER report cited by two of the chapters is actually rather sceptical about the existence a Google generation, questioning its evidential basis and the noting that, in any case, ‘the demographics of internet and media consumption are rapidly eroding this presumed generational difference’ [7, 8]. Juliet Eve’s chapter considers the changing needs of younger library users in more detail. While public libraries may not feature highly on the ‘image management’ priorities of teenagers, Eve cites a MLA report that suggests that they are still seen to be important in supporting learning (p. 105). She concludes that the provision of alternatives to the virtual spaces that young people already inhabit might be ‘a far better use of the time and energy of public librarians than a reactive, potentially too tardy, response to what may be yet another passing technological fad’ (p. 107).

Another common theme of the book is the ongoing need to integrate both services and personnel with the wider institutional context. This might include, for example, embedding information services within learning or research environments (Needham and Whitsed, p. 32-33) or the participation of library managers in wider institutional roles (Rowley and Richards, p. 199). When discussing the ‘Library 2.0’ concept, Juliet Eve quotes Ken Chad and Paul Miller’s comment about libraries harnessing ‘technological potential and community capability in order to deliver valuable, valued and world-class services directly to those who stand to benefit from them, whether or not they (ever) physically enter a library building’ (p. 99) [9]. In turn, however, this kind of approach has the danger that the ‘invisible library’ may become difficult to defend in times of financial austerity. Moreover, some of the perceived benefits of public libraries outlined in John Dolan’s chapter depend upon them remaining, at least to some extent, physical spaces.

Conclusions

Like others published by Facet, this volume is well produced and the layout very clear and easy to read. Even though the chapters are in the main overviews of work previously undertaken, most of them have some value in providing a wider context and understanding of the topics they cover. The volume should be of particular

interest to all readers interested in the development of library services in a rapidly changing environment, especially those thinking about the longer-term potential of social networking technologies for e-learning. Juliet Eve's chapter is particularly useful in cutting through the hype that surrounds much of the current discourse around Web 2.0. However, there are important topics that are not covered by this volume. For example, apart from Cullen and Chawner's chapter on institutional repositories, there is very little about how academic libraries might need to evolve to support research activities more widely. There is also very little about the longer-term sustainability of content, although there is a level of overlap with the principles underlying Web accessibility discussed in Jenny Craven's chapter. In the end, however, this is a volume that has been specifically designed to match the research interests of Peter Brophy, so there is no need for it to be comprehensive.

As in many edited volumes there are a few inconsistencies, both in detail - e.g. CIBER (p. 36) and Ciber (p. 72), no citation for Cronin on p. 138 - and style. Sometimes this is a matter of referencing style, as in Chapter 3, where it is not entirely clear why some Web references are included in parentheses within the text while others are cited more formally. John Dolan's chapter on public libraries is perhaps the most idiosyncratic, reading at times like a political tract - 'important parameters have to be set ... to protect the needs of the many from the preferences of the few' (p. 87) - while some pages (e.g. p. 79) are almost completely made up of indigestible bullet points. Given recent political changes in the UK, Dolan's chapter also felt as if it was the one most in need of an update. Dolan's focus on a proactive public library delivering content, services and experiences to disadvantaged communities might need to give way to a vision of libraries where there is less co-ordination from central government and more focus on what the present Culture Minister might mean by communities 'determining the shape of the public service and what it delivers' [10].

So it just remains for me, also, to send my own (belated) congratulations to Professor Brophy for his long and successful career at the interface of library management and research.

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