

Viewpoint: Postcards from the Edge: a journey of transition from art librarian to educational developer

Abstract

This short opinion piece offers a personal insight into the shifting landscape of academic and professional identities, as one art librarian reflects on her transition into educational development. The author introduces the ideas of unbounded, third space professionalism (Whitchurch, 2008) and “Mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons *et al*, 1994) as particular forms of professional knowledge useful in educational development and library roles. Rather than positioning the educational developer role as somehow separate or ‘other’, the author proposes new partnerships and collaborations between librarians and educational developers to enhance the practice and scholarship of teaching and learning and to enable active and independent learning amongst an increasingly diverse student community (Levy & Roberts, 2005).

Key words: academic development, educational development, third space,

Main article

‘When it works as it should it’s a proactive way of embedding information literacy into the curriculum, with research and referencing neatly taught by myself and lecturers as part of the course. With some courses what I do is still viewed in the deficit model – see the librarian as you aren’t good at this, but gradually this is changing’

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In reflecting upon my own transition from art librarian to academic developer, I can strongly relate to my library colleague’s frustration in terms of espousing ‘what works’, with ‘earning the right to be heard’ (Land, 2008, in Barnett and Di Napoli, 2008). We know we need to move beyond deficit models of learning support which are not practically, pedagogically or ethically supportable. But, we are compromised in this quest by traditional perceptions of the librarian and academic developer role, which do not always position us as equal with our academic partners or as a key partner in the student learning process.

My own journey into pedagogy began with a similar set of ambiguities and frustrations: in my case, as a library manager struggling to encourage our art college communities to utilize our under-used archives and collections. As I began to review frameworks to embed information and academic literacies in the curriculum, I became fascinated by pedagogy and the ways in which students actually learn. Through Paulo Freire’s work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I was introduced to ‘critical pedagogy’ (Freire, 2000) and the idea that students can become “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 2000: 81). Relating these theoretical constructs to the student experience of information searching and academic writing, I enthused my team with the belief

that we could truly empower students' in their academic literacies. This ethos evolved into an integrated model of learning support (McKie, 2009 '[Mapping the Territory](#)'), where librarians, study advisors and other learning support agents would provide joint workshops to students and staff, using the 'jigsaw classroom' (Aronson, 1978) approach.

Yet, however well intentioned my emancipatory quest to engage new audiences for research and discovery, I was to encounter some curious interpretations of what libraries are for and what the role of the librarian might be. These ranged from traditionalist views of libraries as 'reading list stores' and the role of the librarian to ensure all resources were in stock (no matter how expensive!) through to more expansive understandings of librarians as plagiarism experts, study skills masters, research experts and library spaces as extensions of the studio. Through these encounters I often felt compelled to re-imagine the role and identity of the librarian in order to 'enlist' new followers and advocates. A similar tension has emerged in recent learning and teaching roles, where I feel challenged to constantly define who I am and why I occupy a specific institutional role (Kensington-Miller et al 2015).

We could conclude here that the role of the librarian and academic developer could be seen to be in a constant quest for legitimacy in terms of developing a professional identity that 'talks the talk' to foster and strengthen educational partnerships with academic colleagues (Peacock, 2001). This is set within a shifting landscape in higher education, where the binaries of academic and professional domains are gradually diminishing (Locke & Whitchurch, 2016), and where academics are driven to seek out complementary expertise and specialized guidance to cope with super-complexity (Barnett, 2007; Pilkington, 2016). Could this present us with some exciting opportunities to break down academic-professional support divides and enrich the art education communities we work in? We can embrace the 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2008) and interpret our roles more widely to take on roles as educational developers, educational consultants and learning and teaching facilitators. But notwithstanding the drift away from our core knowledge as librarians, each of these identities comes with a set of challenges. All of these roles are different fields in their own right and 'behind these various names hides a multitude of cultural and symbolic implications' (Kensington-Miller et al, 2015: 281). This can sometimes result in a perceived encroaching on academic territory, rather than contributing to it (Whitchurch, 2010:90), although there are plenty of examples of librarians and educational developers applying the 'magic dust' of academic credibility to gain entry to academic networks (Whitchurch, 2008: 92).

If we put paradox and dilemmas aside, there are also opportunities for both roles to work together to advance and enhance practice in the scholarship of teaching and learning, particularly given the shared repertoire of action words - *innovate, collaborate, connect, explore, build, change, partner, lead, network* - which permeate the literature on librarianship and educational development (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2015: 48). Given this complementary expertise and mutual endeavour, librarians could become 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) helping to build bridges between different disciplinary and departmental micro-cultures, to

assist academic developers in the development of co-ordinated social networks around the scholarship of teaching and learning. Or, is this idealist thinking?

As an academic developer, positioned in a field, best described as 'fragmented, contradictory, disconnected, overlapping, heterogenous and tension filled' (Lee & McWilliam, 2008, p68), I find myself drifting back to those halcyon art librarian days, where I was confident in my professional identity and bibliographic knowledge. I fondly remember my bus trips from Camberwell College of Arts to Zwemmer's bookshops on Charing Cross Road to purchase the latest book art or graphic fanzine, knowing that students would excitedly devour whatever I returned with. I even remember the joy of cataloguing and keywording as I realised the power of metadata to enable students to serendipitously locate material. Recently, I was drawn to an Arlis blog posting, '*In Conversation With*', in which an art college librarian described his role as a 'custodian' or 'gatekeeper':

'...my favourite quote (which I wear on a t-shirt for induction-week) is from Socrates: 'The root of all knowledge is curiosity', and so I see a major part of my role to be that of enabler and mentor: a kind of enthusiastic tour guide, opening the doors wide and saying 'look at all of this inspiration and knowledge, just for the taking!' (Thompson, 2016)

I love this image of the art librarian inspiring knowledge and curiosity amongst a reluctant student cohort who are unaware of the treasure trove and serendipitous delights before them. This after all, meets our information literacy remit, 'to enable active and independent learning amongst an increasingly diverse student community' (Levy & Roberts, 2005). Moreover, the idea of being an enabler and mentor fits my own emancipatory vision for academic development, which is less about notions of expert and novice and more about conversations for learning. Yet I have some reflective doubt here. Whilst librarians must continue to expand their teaching skills and understanding of diffuse pedagogies and disciplines, the organisational cultures in which they operate might also dictate a further diversification of roles and responsibilities. This is particularly the case for colleagues who work in smaller, more specialised institutions. We may, for instance, find ourselves invited to take part in cross-institutional project work, 'performing translational and interpretive functions between different constituencies' (Whitchurch, 2008). This may require us to interpret our roles more widely and to utilise some of our 'Mode 2' (Gibbons *et al* 1994) knowledge, which is:

'transdisciplinary, rather than mono or multi disciplinary..carried out in non hierarchical, heterogeneously organised forms which are essentially transient...(Gibbons et al 1994 vii)

As HE environments expand and diversify to meet the demands of contemporary environments, it will not be so strange to see librarians in less bounded, quasi academic roles to enhance the learning, teaching and research environment. In her research on academic and professional identities, Whitchurch, (2008) introduces the notion of 'third space' as an emergent territory between academic

and professional domains, where individuals may adopt a more 'fluid, provisional approach to knowledge' (Whitchurch, 2008:378); an 'outside-in' stance, and emphasis on 'soft' aspects of organisational change and influencing practice (Pilkington, 2016:19), to cross functional boundaries. But just how comfortable do librarians feel with this hybrid third space professional identity? Do they see themselves as 'librarians who teach' or 'librarians as facilitators', and can they (or should they?) be both? To help in this decision, we might do as well to remember those critical encounters at library school where we discussed nightmarish scenarios of empty libraries, unused resources and a possible inability to connect with our user base. I would suggest librarians (rather like academic developers) have always been seeking a more productive identity in learning and teaching, by refining our skills and conceptual understandings to strengthen and sustain partnerships with academic colleagues.

So, what might be the lessons learned from my own journey from art librarian to educational developer? What sort of guide or map of opportunities can I suggest for fellow art librarian travellers? For inspiration, I include here a comment from one of my library colleagues:

'As teaching is now my main focus, I've also started looking at areas related to this, such as developing screencasts to help students' learning – last Summer I worked with an academic and a Learning Development Tutor to develop screencasts on developing an essay title, structuring an essay and Harvard referencing.'

Partnership and collaboration would be at the top of my 'map of opportunities'. As Levy and Roberts (2005) observe, the boundaries are changing between librarians' jobs and those of learning technologists, educational developers, skill support specialists and indeed academic staff. Instead of feeling challenged by these 'blurred boundaries' (Whitchurch, 2008), why not work together closely to co-ordinate and develop appropriate learning and teaching resources?

Second on my 'map of opportunities' would be to develop your 'Mode 2' (Gibbons *et al*, 1994) professional skills to add value to learning and teaching projects and conversations with academic colleagues. Focus on thinking outside the box, developing social and professional capital, interpreting and translating between interest groups and generally extending institutional intelligence (Whitchurch, 2012: 140)

Thirdly, consider applying for an academic course in learning and teaching and/or make a claim for professional recognition in teaching and learning. This might give you the 'magic dust' of credibility to gain entry to academic networks. It is also possible that the professional learning might inspire you to go further and undertake research into teaching and learning or possibly apply for a National Teaching Fellowship. More practically, it will give you the confidence to expand your own teaching and learning theories to enrich student learning and perhaps even cultures of teaching excellence.

Lastly, I would urge all art librarians to embrace serendipity and happenstance and embark upon a new unbounded identity as 'weak ties', connectors, translators and interpreters. In this way, it will be possible to build new relationships with academics, that transcend the boundaries of discipline and lead to unexpected possibilities for the enrichment and enhancement of student learning.

Don't look back in anger, but embrace the new!

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