The Roving Librarian

The roving librarian project was established at the University of Huddersfield in July 2011. The aim is to offer personalised help away from the traditional library environment in social settings or School resource centres. To facilitate this provision of information on the move, with funding acquired from a university teaching and learning innovation bid android and iPad tablets were purchased for all subject librarians.   The portability and flexibility of these devices allow us to roam around the various university buildings to reach students and help them at their point of need. The idea of roving is not a new one. A trawl through the literature reveals that this concept has been around for the past thirty years with librarians roaming in social spaces; academic environments such as departmental offices and IT labs (external to the library) as well as within the physical library (Del Bosque and Chapman, 2007; McCabe and MacDonald, 2011). It has, however, been the advent of new technologies such as the iPad that have become the key driver in enabling librarians to offer this mobile service.

At Huddersfield we have concentrated on roving *away* from the physical library and move out to the Students Union or one of the seven Schools. In our experience, many students either don't use the library or use it as a computer centre to either word process their assignments or use Facebook.   This observation is backed up by data from the Library Impact Data Project and focus groups I conducted with first year Business Management students as part of this project which revealed that students bought the key textbooks and used the library for group work and to use the computers. Library usage can affect the final grade and the research revealed a consistent correlation between e-resource usage, book borrowing and student attainment across all disciplines not only at this university but across the seven institutions with which we benchmarked our data. We therefore decided to go to the places where the students like to congregate, be it social or academic areas such as resource centres.

We offered each subject librarian the choice of either an iPad or Android tablet. Most chose the Android tablet, the Asus Eee Pad Transformer which offered the added flexibility of an optional keyboard as well as the use of Flash, a tool not offered by the iPad.   We then allowed the librarians time to play with the technology

and encouraged them to use their tablet to make notes in meetings/conferences or experiment with it at home. We also scheduled meetings giving librarians the chance to compare apps and discuss any difficulties they had encountered or share any tips of what had worked well. One of the hoped for outcomes of the project was that by using the tablets, the librarians themselves would be more confident in using this technology and therefore better equipped at supporting staff and students using similar tools.

Much work went into producing an identifiable brand. A librarian out of context may not be recognised and we therefore felt that it was important to create a logo or image that students could associate with the roving librarian. We took as our starting point the concept of the Martini advertising slogan of "anytime, anyplace, anywhere" and asked our graphic designer produce a "Martini librarian" with roller skates and appropriate outfit as in the advert featuring Nicollette Sheridan (YouTube, 2008), but instead of the tray of drinks held out in her hand, it was to be the tablet. This was a little too ambitious, however, and a suitable image could not be found. We did like the colourful roving librarian logo produced by our graphic designer which had a stylish retro look, and also the strapline of "Bringing information skills to you". It was decided to produce stickers of the logo to stick to the tablets, and the graphic designer produced a poster version using the logo and strapline with a space for us to add the location and times of when we would be roving. This could then be placed on the School plasma screens, as well as the library Facebook page. We use these marketing ploys whenever we go out to the Schools plus we also tweet about forthcoming roving activities using the @hudlib account. Staff in the Schools also retweet the message. A tactic that works well is also to email academic staff and students announcing when we are visiting their school and inviting them to come and meet us if they require any help. Very often, students will be waiting for the team as we arrived and we are able to offer personalised assistance. Academic staff sometimes email their students encouraging them to come and see us at the publicised location.

The times set to rove depend upon the particular School. For example, staff in the Business School advised that a Monday or Tuesday lunchtimes would be the most productive times to rove in the main thoroughfare known as "The Street" and also in The Street Cafe as this is when the School experiences its busiest times. Promoting

the roving activities to students in Course Committees in the Computing and Engineering School, revealed that a Wednesday afternoon when no teaching is scheduled to take place is that particular School's favoured time. Half of the librarians chose to rove in social areas such as cafes, or in busy foyers/corridors. The other half preferred to try resource centres where students are completing their work, although if this has not been successful, the portability of the technology has allowed them to move to social areas. The librarian roving in the Applied Sciences resource centre received immediate success on her first outing as she was able to help a student find vital information for his assignment. The student was amazed that such help had been at hand exactly at his point of need and responded with the complimentary line "You must have been sent by God!"

Different strategies have been tried by the roving librarian. The resource centres allow librarians to sit and get on with their work as they wait for enquiries. However, social areas require a more proactive approach in order to catch the students as they pass by. Some librarians feel uncomfortable with this new way of working, preferring the students to come to them. However, as some staff have persisted in roving, experimenting with visiting different locations and trying out a range of techniques their confidence has increased. For example, it was found that having a table of freebies also helps to initiate conversations as students are drawn to the stall. This then attracts other students and they approach the stand to find out what is going on.

Using the opening line "Do use Summon" has proved to be a great way of starting a conversation. If the answer is negative, then there is an opportunity to promote the resource discovery tool. If the student does use Summon this leads to the next question which is to ask them if they have experienced any difficulties or if they have they found relevant information. If students have found information hard to find, then we ask them if they have two minutes and then replicate the search using the tablets. If they say that everything is OK, there is quite often a pause followed by the admission "well there is one thing..." and then you can offer help. It is a great advantage for the roving librarian to have a good knowledge and experience of using the resources relevant to the subject areas of the school in which they are roaming and which the student would find particularly relevant to their assignment as this improves the effectiveness of the help that can be offered. Personally, I have found that approaching students in the Business School Street Cafe has worked well for

me and not only have I been able to give help to the students, but I've also had some great conversations about their experience of using the library and found out titles of books they are struggling to get hold of.   I've found that on the whole, students have been very willing to engage in dialogue with me and I've had many conversations that would not have taken place at the Subject Enquiry Desk.

The roving has also helped establish closer working relationships with staff. For example, an encounter with the Business School placements officer led to the idea of the library producing a leaflet that could be sent out to all placement students advising them on how to access company information relevant to their placement application.

After the student has received help s/he is asked whether their encounter with the roving librarian will result in an increased use of the library resources. They are requested to complete a 3 question questionnaire using the tablet. We ask them questions about how regularly they use the library/electronic resources and whether after receiving help they will use the resources more. Over 80% of the students surveyed say that the encounter will lead to an increased use of resources. We have also experimented with using the questionnaire as a conversation initiator. Our experience is that students are drawn to "cool librarians" using up-to-date technology and are very willing to talk about the frequency of their library use.   This often leads on to more personalised help.

We hope to continue roving in the forthcoming academic year from the middle of October when the students start working on their first assignment.   More thought is needed about the brand. Producing a pop-up banner and badges are ideas that have been muted. There maybe merit in roving within the library, especially as this summer we are moving the bookstock as we change from subject floors to a single sequence. There will be an increase in directional enquiries from September onwards and staff available with tablets to help students find the resources would be a great help. Finally, more work needs to be done in upskilling staff in using the tablets.

To read more about the roving librarian, see the *Sharmana* blog at http://sharmana.wordpress.com/

References

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