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Roving Librarian at a Mid-sized, UK-Based University

Alison Sharman and Andrew Walsh

Abstract

Chapter 5 of Library Technology Reports (vol. 48, no. 8) “Rethinking Reference and Instruction with Tablets” details the “Roving Librarian” project carried out at a mid-sized UK university. All subject librarians have been equipped with iPads or Android tablets and sent out to rove. Regular times and places across the university have been arranged, primarily in social areas and working spaces where students congregate; a librarian takes a tablet computer and offers personalized assistance to students in these varied places. Alongside this, ad hoc support is offered to staff and students in meetings and casual encounters, facilitated by the constant access to the mobile devices. This chapter covers the benefits we have seen with the project and gives the results of a questionnaire carried out to determine whether a student would be likely to use the library more after their encounter with the Roving Librarian.

Introduction

The University of Huddersfield is a mid-sized UK university located in West Yorkshire in the north of England. It has a diverse student population of around 24,000 students and 1,900 staff spread over three campuses in Huddersfield, Oldham, and Barnsley. Each campus has its own learning center with library and computing facilities whose staffing base includes 12.6 FTE subject librarians. The librarians support subjects within seven schools: Applied Sciences; Art, Design and Architecture; Business; Computing and Engineering; Education and Professional Development; Human and Health Sciences; and Music, Humanities and Media. They deliver inductions to most new students and where asked, information skills sessions, as well as purchasing course material from within their allocated library resources budget. Subject librarians also staff the Subject Enquiry Desk at the main Huddersfield campus, an information point that is open 61.55 hours per week, Monday through Sunday. This enquiry service is in addition to the virtual enquiry services, “ask a librarian” and “text a librarian,” as well as enquiries by e-mail or telephone. In common with most university libraries, the library has witnessed a growth in online information resources and in 2009, the resource discovery tool Summon was purchased.

The library has recently engaged in a marketing and outreach activity that has been dubbed “The Roving Librarian.” In addition to staffing help desks, subject librarians have ventured from the physical library building to demonstrate and promote online resources in

nontraditional library settings such as cafés and other social areas to reach students who may be library non-users or to offer support to those who are struggling to use the resources. Instrumental to the provision of this service is the use of tablet computers. Funding awarded to the project from the university's Teaching and Learning Institute has enabled each subject librarian to be equipped with either an iPad or an Android tablet, both highly mobile portable devices with large, clear screens and good Wi-Fi connectivity vital in providing teaching on the move across the university campuses.

Why Rove? What the Literature Says

The concept of librarians offering roving support and providing services away from the traditional enquiry or reference desk is not a new one. Public libraries have long been pioneers in providing mobile library services to customers who, due to physical disabilities or location, may struggle to visit the physical library building.¹ In academic libraries, three common face-to-face approaches to roving have been documented.² They are enquiry support in social environments such as halls of residences, student unions, or cafés; a library presence in more academic-related places such as departmental offices, classrooms, or study spaces; and roaming within the actual library building. It is the steady decline in the number of subject-related enquiries witnessed at some libraries, despite an increase in library gate counts, that has been the main motivating factor behind these approaches.³ This is due in part to a reluctance by the students to leave their seat and risk losing access to their well-sought-after computer⁴ or a fear that by visiting the desk they are publicly displaying their academic inadequacies to their fellow students.⁵ Other influential factors are staff shortages⁶ and the advent of the Internet and wireless networks.⁷

Roving has been instigated by many libraries but with varying degrees of success depending upon the location. Some studies have found that roaming works best in academic or academic/social spaces rather than social settings.⁸ However, there is no doubt that there are benefits to providing information on the move, such as building closer relationships with staff and students, promoting the resources and the work of the library, reaching library non-users, and so on. Technology has become one of the main drivers in enabling librarians to leave the comfort of the library and meet users on their own turf. Not only has there been an increase in information accessible over the Internet, the technology used to access it has become more portable, releasing librarians to offer personalized one-to-one services providing information at the point of need away from the traditional reference desk. Wagner states, "In a sense, the electronic age has allowed librarians move back to the departments with a virtual rather than physical collection in hand, once again providing services in close proximity to small groups of patrons."⁹ This increase in technology could bring with it a threat. Sophisticated search facilities such as resource discovery tools accessible via smartphones could, in these times of financial austerity, pose a danger to the very existence of subject librarians, a threat perceived by Leonard more than eighteen years ago when he claimed, "If librarians and their staffs remain in libraries, they will soon be placed on the list of endangered species." He felt that if librarians are to be "active participants in the teaching and learning process," they need to engage in what he terms "missionary outings."¹⁰

Background to the Project

At Huddersfield, the idea for the Roving Librarian project was initiated from drop-in sessions run in the Student Union Coffee Bar during the early implementation of our resource discovery service Summon. With the use of a pop-up banner advertising Summon, laptops, a netbook, and also promotional material such as bags to give away, a stall was erected around existing benches with the expectation that students would come to visit and ask questions about using the resources. No one came. Students continued socializing with their friends, drinking coffee, or engaging in group work. To encourage interaction, a more direct approach was implemented. Librarians worked their way around the tables engaging students in conversations about their use of Summon and any difficulties encountered. If a demonstration was required, students were asked to leave their seats and go to the stand and explain to the team the difficulties they were encountering. Students did comply, and the outcome was generally positive, but there was a perceived reluctance on the part of the students to leave their seats and possessions. One librarian experimented with taking the more portable netbook, but the screen was too small for showing to a group of students, and it kept tipping over.

It was felt that the activity had been a success and should be continued, especially as research previously undertaken in the library on low and non-usage of library resources had indicated variable patterns of both physical and electronic resource usage across schools and had found there to be a general correlation between resource usage and final grade, a pattern replicated across several UK universities.¹¹ The study highlighted that it was actual resource use that determined final grade, not the number of visits to the library. For example, data gathered over four academic years revealed that students from three of the seven schools were visiting the library just as much, if not more, than their fellow students who achieved an upper second or first class award. The statistics gathered showed that many students are not using our resources.¹² Focus groups supported this evidence. For example, first-year business management students revealed that they were purchasing books and using the library only for group work or to type their assignment on one of the 500 computers. We wanted to extend our roving to take it to social spaces and resource centers within all schools to reach students who may otherwise be library non-users. To facilitate the provision of information on the move, we required small portable devices with larger screens than those on smartphones, but just as mobile. A visit to the University of Queensland provided the answer. Their librarians had been equipped with tablets, and the music librarian enthused about the improved service she was able to give to academic staff and students while outside the physical library, demonstrating online services and solving problems immediately at both formal and informal meetings.

Aims and Objectives of the Project

Aims

- To provide regular access to subject librarians within buildings across campus, including informal space such as cafés and other social areas.

- To reach students who may otherwise be library non-users.
- To maximize use of our electronic resources outside of the physical library environment.
- To evaluate the use of tablets to provide teaching on the move.

Objectives

- A. Set up a series of informal sessions to cover all schools and university social spaces (such as Student Union Coffee Bar, Convivium, etc.).
- B. Equip librarians offering such support with tablets able to access electronic search tools such as Summon, general webpages and training materials, and electronic books and journal articles.
- C. Evaluate the impact of these informal sessions on staff and student awareness of library resources.
- D. Promote the sessions to all staff and students within schools.

Methodology/Approach

- **Objective A:** Develop a timetable of a mixture of information resource drop-in sessions across a variety of buildings, locations, and social spaces on campus. Identify suitable locations and contacts to develop, and promote the scheduled sessions. Identify key resources and skills required to deliver these and map to the skill set of the professional library staff.
- **Objective B:** Select a combination of hardware and software that allows fast, easy use of library resources and materials online.
- **Objective C:** Quantitatively record the use and success of the sessions in the variety of social spaces, buildings, and locations around campus. Qualitatively evaluate the success of the sessions through focus groups with students who have used the sessions. Also use ongoing discussions with librarians about what is working about the sessions in the schools to constantly develop the sessions. Ultimately take results from the ongoing Library Impact Data Project and identify some trends in usage from the groups who had traditionally not been heavy library users.
- **Objective D:** Promote the sessions to students and staff through using a variety of media, from posters, plasma screens, portal announcements, and direct e-mails to word-of-mouth marketing.

The Technology

It was decided to purchase two types of tablets, the Apple iPad and the Android tablet Asus Eee Pad Transformer, winner of *Stuff* magazine's Gadget of the Year award for 2011.¹³ Most librarians selected the Asus Eee Transformer, as the added keyboard gave greater flexibility, but librarians from Human and Health Sciences chose the iPad. This was mainly because some students within the school who had chosen to undertake a placement year had been given iPads as part of a long-running commitment by the school to support their students with new technologies. The tablets are extremely portable and would allow flexible roaming rather

than staff having to be fixed to a desk. They require little set-up, are easily connected to the university network, and thus allow us to roam anywhere but still have access to the electronic resources. They allow learning to be what Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler class as “spontaneous, portable, personal, situated” and facilitate “anytime, anywhere learning.”¹⁴

The Asus Transformer was the default device for most of our librarians, as we wanted them to use the devices not just for roving, but throughout their working day. The keyboard and bundled office software meant that they could be used for note taking in meetings as well as to reduce the number of printed agendas and papers for meetings. They can also be used in information literacy instruction, and there has been some experimentation with them in this role at the university.

Indeed, each librarian was encouraged to use the tablets as much as possible prior to roving and to experiment with downloading apps, making notes, and generally exploring the capabilities of these mobile devices. We, like Cheetham and Gray, found that to have “time to ‘play’ with the new technology is invaluable for staff to get used to it.”¹⁵ To facilitate this preparation, meetings were scheduled for staff to share any apps or tools they had found useful as well as talk about the practice of roving. Common apps and tools downloaded for the iPad included database apps including EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, and PubMed; the university application UniApp; tools to aid with file transfer such as Dropbox and Evernote; referencing apps such as EasyBib and Mendeley; PDF and presentation readers; SlideShark; WordWeb; and Popplet Lite. Android tablet users seem to download fewer apps but again used database apps such as EBSCOhost; the UniApp; tools such as Dropbox; and mindmapping software. Many of these were for use with students, but quite a few were for personal use.

As an additional benefit of equipping staff with tablet computers, our librarians are now better equipped to support mobile learning within the university and have a better understanding of staff and student needs as they use these types of devices themselves.

Getting Started

The subject librarians have arranged times and locations to rove in the schools that they represent. Their choice of location depended upon the school and the available facilities. The space quite often determines the method of roving. Some schools have resource centers that seem to be an ideal place to just get on with your work and wait to be approached by the students. The librarian roving in the Applied Sciences resource center, after successfully helping a student with his work, received the brilliant feedback, “You must have been sent by God!”

In social spaces such as the Business School’s Street Café, students were approached as they walked past the stand and asked questions such as “Do you use Summon?” Some librarians went to chat with students as they were drinking their coffee and talking in groups. Approaching the students with the question “Do you use Summon?” always seems to lead to further discussion, drawing in other elements of using the library’s resources and other issues the students may require assistance with. Usually students had never used Summon, or they had used it and encountered some problem with viewing the retrieved article or not found what they were looking for. In such cases, librarians were able to produce their tablet and

repeat the search previously conducted by the students and then either help them view the articles or, by a series of questions to the students, improve the search strategy to find relevant articles.

Marketing and Branding

For the project to be a success, it needed a distinguishing brand. We felt that a librarian out of context may not be recognized. A logo or strong image that students can associate with the Roving Librarian was required. We liked the concept of “Martini information literacy” with its suggestion of information “anytime, anyplace, anywhere,”¹⁶ which we felt nicely illustrated the roving service we were providing. The original idea was for the design of a female librarian on roller skates closely resembling the woman in the Martini advertisement, but instead of holding out a tray of drinks, she would be balancing a tablet computer on her open palm. However, we could not locate a suitable image but very much liked the retro design of the words *Roving Librarian* produced by our graphic designer (figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1
Roving Librarian logo

It was decided to use this logo and create stickers for the backs of the tablets that students would see when they encountered a roving librarian. The graphic designer produced a poster version of the logo for us to add the location and times when we would be roving (figure 5.2). This was adapted so that it could be displayed on the school plasma screens (figure 5.3).



Figure 5.2
Poster advertising a Roving Librarian session in the Business School

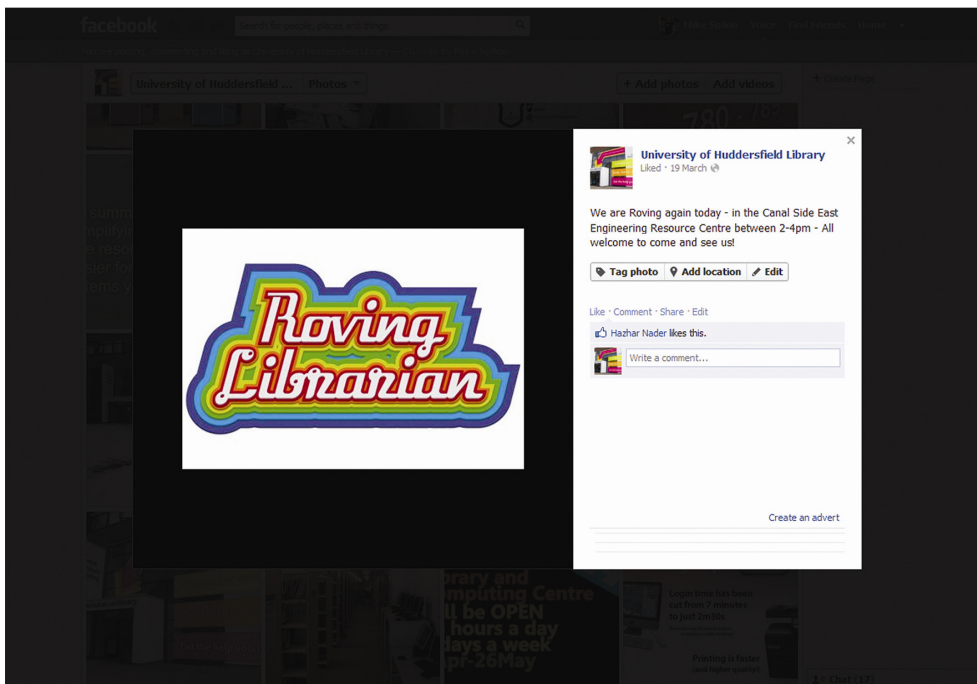


Figure 5.3
Roving session advertised on the library Facebook page

Most librarians e-mailed students via school e-mail lists to announce the date they were scheduled to rove and asking them to come and see us if they needed help and support in accessing information resources. Alongside this, the library's @hudlib Twitter account announced roving sessions, which was generally retweeted by other university Tweeters. This approach has worked, and several times roving librarians have arrived at their post to be greeted by students awaiting their help. Having a student presence also helps to create a bit of a buzz and encourages other students to ask for help. Academic staff were also contacted with an invitation to come and see us and asking them to promote the service to their students. Staff members were generally very supportive and did publicize our services. One Computing lecturer subsequently e-mailed his students:

Do you know what a library is? Did you know we have one? Do you understand the concept of a book, with actual old fashioned paper in it!? So retro!

Only kidding guys, but if you don't use our library you are probably missing out on some pretty awesome services, check out the below, and go see them if you have questions.

The technology is also a draw and hopefully helps the student to build up a cool image of the roving librarian. Hibner noted that "tablet PCs are a boost to the librarian profession. Teenagers, especially, can see first-hand what librarians can really do for them. . . . They see that librarians are technology-savvy people who get to use really cool computers in their jobs."¹⁷

Staff Reaction

There was a mixed response to the call to rove from the subject librarians. Some embraced it and were keen to get started, others were more skeptical about the benefits, and a couple confessed to being uncomfortable with the whole concept. These same librarians are quite happy to staff the Subject Enquiry Desk, a more passive activity that involves waiting for someone to approach them, but were quite out of their comfort zones when the roles were reversed and they were required to actively seek out students to help. There was also the belief by staff that proactive roving in cafés was unsuitable as they felt they were encroaching upon the students' territory, disturbing students, and interrupting their social time.

We dealt as much as we could with this natural reservation by using peer support mechanisms. Meetings were held not only to allow sharing of technical tips and apps that may be useful, but to discuss strategies for approaching students. Initial roving sessions were rarely held by a lone librarian, but two or three were encouraged to go together. As staff became more familiar and increasingly comfortable with the roving process, this could be reduced to one staff member.

Data Collection

Whatever the technique used, it was the building up of customer relations outside of the library that proved to be the most valuable. Interactions with lecturers in the library are few and far between. Pressures on staff time have meant that subject team offices within the library are now less accessible for ad hoc interactions. Academics often do not have the time

to come into the library, especially now that the majority of journal articles are available on their office computers. However, chance encounters with lecturers that happen after their teaching sessions or when they are on their way to lunch in the café have given the roving librarian an opportunity to promote the library and the services they can offer. This exchange with their subject librarian can lead to information literacy workshops being planned, feedback on library services, further roving sessions, or in one case, an invitation to the roving librarian to an after-work event where the students showcase their work. This was an invaluable social networking event where the librarian was able to build relationships with the tutors in a social environment.

We have also built up an awareness of the library habits of today’s students. After every interaction, students are asked to fill in a short questionnaire that comprises three questions we have stored on the tablets. The questions are shown in figure 5.4.

1. How often do you physically visit the library?
Practically all the time! Regularly Occasionally Rarely or Never
2. Do you currently use Summon or any of the other electronic resources we buy for your studies?
Practically all the time! Regularly Occasionally Rarely or Never
3. Are you more likely to use the physical library or our electronic resources (including Summon) after talking to our roving librarian today? (select all that apply)
Yes - I'll come into the library more often. Yes - I'll use Summon or other electronic services more often No - I already use the library too much. No - Google rocks!

Figure 5.4
Online questionnaire filled in by students

Student responses to the questionnaire help us establish whether their encounter with the roving librarian will encourage them to increase their use of library resources. Results so far show that 86 percent of students we surveyed after an encounter with one of our roving librarians were more likely to use either the physical or virtual resources of the library.

Conclusions and Future Plans

Our roving librarians have been well received wherever they have gone. Even students who don’t need any assistance appreciate the effort made in coming out of the library environment to offer that help. We are building awareness of our roving librarian branding, as well as the understanding that we may be found “out and about” to offer support. Alongside the obvious branding of the logo, used on our promotional material as well as stuck to our tablet computers, we need to consider how to make our librarians easier to spot. If we can make our librarians instantly recognizable while they are roving, this may make it easier for them to approach students. It could help reduce the natural reticence of some members of staff in offering this roving service if we could make it less of an effort to approach students. One way we are considering this is through the development of a standard spiel to use when approaching learners.

As our librarians increasingly use the tablets in their everyday work, we expect the

devices to yield extra benefits. In addition to the official planned roving, we expect our librarians to be in a position to offer more ad hoc support to staff during meetings and casual encounters. We also expect the increased familiarity with mobile devices to spill over into our future developments, helping us improve our service to increasing numbers of users who use mobile devices in our libraries.

We consider our use of tablet computers in providing a roving librarian service to be a success. They've facilitated the mobility we needed to take the library resources with us to staff and students wherever they might be. We will be building on these initial successes in future and continuing to work on integrating mobile devices into our everyday work.

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