

## **Paper**

# **Making Life Easier for Academics**

## **How librarians can help staff weather the technological storm**

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### **Abstract**

Academic staff are the key to influencing student acceptance of information literacy. Therefore librarians need to concentrate on academic perceptions and interest in information literacy. There are many reasons for academic apathy and disinterest. There is a need to improve the awareness and skills of academic staff. National and institutional training solutions seek to address the shortfall. Some research shows that academics prefer to be trained individually. The London South Bank University method facilitates this. Originally designed to publicise electronic access, Desktop Library Visits prove to be an effective way of encouraging information literacy to staff and persuading them to enhance student skills. The method is simple, adaptable for the promotion of other services and transferable to other institutions.

### **Keywords**

Academic staff, faculty, information literacy, staff training.

Academic staff have always been the key to student skills development. Their own attitude to information skills has a crucial impact on how important these skills are regarded by their students. This paper analyses why academic staff are so important, what generic solutions are available to improve staff knowledge, and details a simple practical method used by London South Bank University (LSBU) which could be adapted and transferred elsewhere.

### **Academics are the sages**

Larry Hardesty (Hardesty 2004) has written eloquently of the importance of faculty (academic staff) in the United States and concluded that they held the key to student library use. Hardesty (1995) noted that “no matter how hard librarians work, without the cooperation and support of teaching faculty, the BI [bibliographic instruction] program will be unsuccessful or severely limited. This happens because the attitude of faculty is a major determinant in the response of students to the program”. Students still tend to heed the advice of their tutors regarding study skills. Naturally the staff will have in-depth subject knowledge, but they may not be good at helping essay writing, time management, and the best way to find information. Students often get their information from each other, the Web and the sources recommended by their tutors. Consulting librarians or understanding the need to learn how to find and use information to meet assignments is not commonly understood by students. The JUSTEIS (JISC Usage Surveys : Trends in Electronic Information Services) survey concluded in 2002 that academics were “the main influence on students’ decisions to use particular electronic information sources (or not)”. It is doubtful whether many staff realise the extent of their influence. In some disciplines, JUSTEIS concluded that they were aware of their role in helping students evaluate electronic information but saw this as a problem or a challenge. The academic always has the detailed subject knowledge and should be able to teach students to analyse data, and develop an understanding of the subject derived from various sources. These elements of information literacy are usually beyond the abilities or task of the librarian, unless team taught. However, the librarian can still act as the guide through the information maze, and help the student to use and make choices from the best sources.

If academics remain the most powerful influence on student use of information sources, surely the librarian must consider focussing initially on their needs.? This approach has some logic. In practice, librarians have always intuitively considered the students first, and it would unthinkable not to help new cohorts of freshers’ basic searching skills. Nevertheless I claim that the key to getting these skills accepted lies in academic involvement.

### **Why academics are not interested in Information Literacy**

We will consider the reasons for academic resistance and apathy towards information literacy. This may stem from confusion and irritation about exactly what it means. This has been exacerbated by librarians agonising over definitions, and being slow to present clear guidance. There should be a basic level of agreement across the profession based on the Council of Australian University Librarians definition, 2001, the American Library Association, 1998 the UNESCO meeting of Information

Literacy experts in Prague, 2003, the Seven Pillars model developed by SCOUNL, in the UK, and the recent CILIP definition in the UK applicable to all communities. A recent article by Edward Owushu-Ansah (2003) forcibly makes the point that we have to move on from the obsession with definitions.

Then there has been the common confusion equating information literacy with IT literacy. Certainly basic IT skills underpin information skills and the two skill sets intertwine throughout their different levels. However, the assumption by academics that IT skills (using a computer and searching the internet) somehow equip the student to be a competent information searcher is a dangerous error which librarians must seek to correct.

### **Academics' resistance and lack of interest in Information Literacy**

Librarians have sometimes included information literacy in the lifelong learning bandwagon or added it to an increasing bundle of literacies. Nimon (2002) has referred to these confusions of literacies and the acceptance of these new literacies is by no means universal. For example the concept of electronic literacy can seem attractive in its all-embracing scope. Nevertheless, this could have led some academics to lose patience with what may seem to be indistinct skill sets, and render them less willing to accept such specific areas as information literacy.

Some may not appreciate the size and complexity of finding reliable information in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The dangerous myth that information is easy to find has caused librarians a lot of difficulty. There are some academics who think they know how to find information, because they have no trouble finding what they want to know via their peers in discussion groups, a relevant database, and occasional recommended books. Furthermore Hewitson (2002) showed that at Leeds Metropolitan University staff found it hard to tell which of the information sources offered by the library were the best, and therefore tended to rely on tried and tested ones. Only when they needed them for their own research or PhD. were they more likely to use the full range of electronic materials. Both the JUBILEE (JISC User Behaviour in Information seeking Longitudinal Evaluation of Electronic information services) and JUSTEIS projects have also concluded that academic staff preferred to use the internet rather than databases for finding information. Again Hewitson concludes that some academics may prefer to use the internet because it gives up-to-date instant results, which relate to students on vocational courses, rather than using databases which may not fully meet their information needs.

Understandably, academics are interested in their subject, want to teach as much of this as possible in a crowded curriculum and do not want to devote time to skill development. They do not appreciate its significance. From Hardesty's comments this would appear to be as true in the States as it is in the UK. He quotes academics saying that they do not want to give up their subject time for literature searching skills. This can be particularly true of staff who have been in post for many years. There are many pressures on academic staff time. In the UK there is the current obsession with course quality monitoring, and in these competing priorities, allocating time to improve their own information literacy does not figure highly. Hewitson's researches at Leeds confirmed these pressures. The idea that these skills are just as much a part of the course as any subject content has not yet become a reality.

Another manifestation of lack of interest can be deduced from evidence in Boyer's book on the undergraduate experience in the United States, referred to by Zabel (2004) that at some universities students do not go into libraries, using their resources, because their coursework does not require them to do so. This experience may well be replicated in some UK universities. The curriculum and its attendant assignments can presumably be met by other sources, or is not taught in such a way that students are required to integrate ideas and apply ideas learned in class. Of course if subject librarians are actively involved in a collaboration with academics such a situation should not arise.

The pace of change in providing information electronically has led to frustrations over hardware and electronic access problems can jade even the enthusiast. Academics who cannot keep up with the technology become cynical. A quote from Goodman (2001) illustrates this "I am not a technophobe...I resist spending an enormous amount of time forming relationships with technology that I know from experience is likely to leave me...if you learned French, you can always speak French. If, however, you learned DOS, you can only speak to a docent in a computer museum." Annoying database interfaces, passwords, off-campus access and other factors work against acceptance. Price (1999) makes this point appositely, by referring to academics who had experienced technical difficulties, including poor printers, and tricky database interfaces. Hardware has become more reliable, fewer and easier to use interfaces, but the comparison with Google is never far away. Unless information providers can connect their databases into a simple whole with seamless full text they will never be able to compete with Google and the Web search engines. The development of federated search tools like Google Scholar and commercial metasearch engines brings this nearer. This interconnectivity seems to be coming but the challenges of making fast reliable Web delivered services to impatient and weary tutors using older machines in cramped offices should still not be overlooked.

Some academic staff demonstrate a naïve faith that students have the skills and can manage anyway. This can arise from seeing student overconfidence in claiming to be able to find material and not asking for help. An article by Brown, Murphy and Nanny (2003) recently stated "college students perceive their facility with technology to be so thorough that they tend not to be interested in learning the information skills necessary to locate, evaluate, and use information they glean from the internet. Thus, before students can recognise that information literacy skills will facilitate and validate their quest for information they want and need their 'techno-savvy' overconfidence must be moderated". The internet gives so much information, that it can appear much less complicated than it really is. Students who have no idea how information is indexed, how to use controlled vocabulary, differences between an index and a Web search engine, are at present disadvantaging themselves. To put it another way : they don't know what they don't know.

Some staff view this all as a "library thing" and don't want to be involved. Doskatsch (2003) refers to research in the USA and Canada in the 1980s and 1990s which revealed that staff often saw librarians as subordinate to academics, that their contribution to helping the student learning process was negligible, that their teaching credentials were low and that they saw librarians as a cross between school secretary, research assistant and babysitter. Hardesty (2004) notes that staff may listen to librarians "with polite tolerance....thinking 'what does this have to do with me and

why should I spend my limited time thinking about it?” This I suspect to be a common experience for UK librarians proselytizing about information literacy in the various spheres of academia.

Many academics have had bad experiences of being told how to use a library and find information when they were students. They now feel ill equipped to use the modern library, dealing with the mass of information available online and in print, and feel left behind. This leads into one of the most potent causes of resistance: fear of admitting ignorance. Tackling this issue sensitively has been one of the most difficult tasks in advancing information literacy. As we shall see, the LSBU method addresses the problem exactly.

### **How to enthuse academics**

If we are to engage academic interest we need to look at what could fuel their interest. Staff development drivers are included in the JISC Investing in Staff i-Skills document and gives some useful and interesting general pointers. Earlier research in the JISC Study on Staff Development Drivers concluded that the drivers are external, institutional, infrastructural, user/customer, professional or role and personal. The infrastructural and user/customer were found to be the weakest. If at least two factors were involved then success was more likely. For example if external exhortations combined with institutional policy and personal interest then engagement could result. My own experience has confirmed that linking to future employability and career is good, plus getting information literacy onto the University agenda. On a more mundane level, local training initiatives should always include sweeteners like refreshments or lunch, and persistence is essential.

Taking this to the next stage, the need to motivate staff and get them to collaborate and work together with librarians has received much attention in the professional literature. An inspiring poster session from Holtze (2001) at the ACRL Denver Conference in 2001 listed over 50 ways of reaching academics demonstrating that we can build bridges by having shared aims and working together. Christine Bruce's landmark research into the phenomenography of how Australian educators saw information literacy is significant. Sheila Webber and Bill Johnston's Arts and Humanities Board funded project (2002-5) "UK Academics and Information Literacy" is looking in detail at how academics view information literacy. This phenomenographic approach will enable us to understand better where academics are coming from with regard to Information Literacy. At present, librarians may still be making too many assumptions. The result of the research should give librarians the knowledge of how to develop better relationships with academics.

If we accept the problem of information skills acquisition by academics, then we need to consider briefly what these might be and what recent factors should be taken into consideration. The Big Blue Connect project 2003/4 has analysed the skills. IT skills underpin information skills then it is likely that academic IT skills will have improved over the last five years and this will be very helpful. This is certainly the case at LSBU. The national trend whereby the individual undertakes tasks formerly done by specialists is important. Therefore academics use Word for what was Desktop Publishing, use Powerpoint for presentations, and are using Blackboard for VLEs.

New teaching and learning methods are raising new and important social and ethical issues, including copyright and plagiarism. The latter is particularly linked to student use of computers, word processing and obtaining material from the Web. Finally, the need to use the most effective learning methods to deliver course material. All these have an influence on information skills for academics and how they should be delivered in the future.

There can be many solutions. For example : at a national level in the UK a recent survey by a consultation company ESYS (2003) showed training provision was patchy, with contributions by organisation including Netskills, the LTSN, Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (now both part of the Higher Education Academy), and National Learning Network,. The survey found little recognition for information skills in professional qualifications. Another solution could be found in in-house training for staff in HE institutions. This would be likely to concentrate on new services, with erratic attendance. Some staff have viewed such training as remedial. A JISC Staff Information Skill Sets Programme was launched in 2005 to help to raise standards. These have been branded as i-skills and these useful materials are available to assist an institution to assess how well they are coping with these i-skills.

Will all this research lead to the necessary paradigm shift ? The danger with any research or materials is always that they become outdated and need a mechanism for review and update. We must expect continuous change, so large scale upskilling of academics at any particular time is surely an unrealistic objective. A more pragmatic approach was discovered in Level (2003) at Colorado State University in 2003, with their “Find it Fast” training series for academics. They had discovered that academics do not favour long complex sessions. With an emphasis on time-saving and experienced librarians around to advise individually, they found a successful formula. Similar initiatives are likely to have been going on across other universities worldwide.

### **Solution at London South Bank University**

The LSBU model is a pragmatic solution which takes the training to the individual academics, engaging them in their own office. The idea of developing good relationships with academics is hardly new, and follows on from much of the foregoing discussion. In particular Hardesty (2004) noted that the three most important ways to promote an innovation were “personal contact, personal contact and personal contact”. McDonough (2001) gives a comprehensive structure and checklist for making contact with individual academic staff, which may be practical for new staff, but too ambitious to use with larger groups of staff. The LSBU model is less comprehensive, but raises awareness and gives the opportunity to clear away all kinds of misconceptions, ignorance and misunderstandings in a confidential supportive environment. Originally instigated at LSBU to raise understanding of electronic services, it is also an effective way to promote information literacy, by raising the skills of the staff member and hence reaching out to students. The model was inspired originally by TAPin (Training and Awareness project in information and networking) part of the JISC eLib initiative, which was based at the University of Central England, 1995-7. This project discovered that academics value time over training, and that they ideally wanted to be trained individually in their offices. They

had individual needs and abilities and preferred the 1 to 1 approach.. We have found staff reluctant to attend training sessions in groups, and they will not spare the time.

### **The London South Bank method**

We have developed a method which we call Desktop Library Visits. Individual sessions are given in the academic's office using their own PC. The sessions are usually given by Information Advisers, and should never exceed one hour. Although all staff are offered a session in our general publicity, we have targeted particular departments, new staff or senior staff. Originally designed for academic staff, we have extended this to researchers and key administrative staff. Sessions are booked in advance by phone or e-mail. Experience has shown that mailings or advertisements only raise awareness and result in few bookings. Telephoning individuals after such promotion has taken place is invariably successful. In the first pilot initiative with Social Science staff in summer 1998, nineteen staff all agreed to sessions when prompted by a telephone call.

Visits begin with a short interview, based around a standard paper form (see Desktop Library Visit Form at end of this article) which can reveal the information searching awareness, ability and special interests of the academic. This initial interview is crucial and sets the agenda for the session. A careful balance is kept between what the librarian wants to communicate and where the academic's interests lie. The key to the whole procedure lies in building up good rapport and mutual respect from the outset. The sessions are kept concise and relevant. Brief online demonstrations can be supported by printed help sheets, with referrals to Web sites and other training possibilities.

Desktop Library Visits work best for individuals. Group sessions are not as effective. Two staff who share the same office may have different skill levels and subject interests. They may also not be willing to admit what they know and what they do not know. The larger the group the more these difficulties will increase. Individual sessions given in their own office are the ideal, so that the academic will learn that these resources are accessible there. Librarians performing the visits should not be side-tracked into dealing with technical faults, unless minor, and within their competence. Faults can be logged on the form and passed on to appropriate support staff after the visit. It is important to concentrate on what interests the staff member most. However, one of the major purposes of the visit is likely to be draw attention to information literacy. Promotional literature can be handed out or preferably sent out in advance. This may be details of a Web package, or the sessions offered by the library. During the visit the concepts can be discussed, followed by judging when to arrange sessions alongside assignments and course content. Many staff simply do not know that the library undertakes this role. The advantage of a Desktop Library Visit is that it can convince staff that there is something to teach. The old concept of librarians telling the students about the library is now fundamentally the wrong approach. The complexities of finding information may become more apparent to the academic and a useful discussion can arise. This can then lead to bookings being made for sessions with groups of students. Our experience has been that wherever planned approaches to give information literacy help are made they are taken up. Then the challenge is to fulfil all the teaching required.

The form is used to conduct the session, listing what was demonstrated, and any matters to be followed up. These must be pursued promptly after the session. Statistics can be built up from the forms to show penetration of the service e.g. the number seen within a department, percentage of new staff seen. At LSBU we have seen 209 staff since the service started in 1999. We have updated the form slightly five times to reflect changes of emphasis and organisational changes to sites that we wish to promote. (e.g. LTSN has been taken into the Higher Education Academy). E-mail alerting groups based on a Faculty or departmental basis can be built up to maintain contact between staff and the library after the sessions. When sessions began the use of e-mail was not consistent across the institution. We now intend to build up e-mail alerting groups in each Faculty offering refresher sessions to staff.

The method began at LSBU to deliver awareness of what the academics can access from their own desk. Emphasis was at first more toward databases and library catalogues. We now group the areas we cover into general Web searching (an opportunity to give views on Google Scholar), subject databases and Web sites via LIS@ our Library home page, advice to academic staff (including copyright), our Information Literacy services, learning and teaching via the Web and in-house training given by the University's IT Training Centre. However, the Desktop Library Visit method could be developed to deliver other matters. IT elements could be included, provided those who deliver the sessions are trained accordingly. Ethical issues including copyright could be emphasised. A new service such as online print ordering could be promoted. VLE development could be featured so that staff become more aware of how to link from their Blackboard sites to databases or full text journal articles. The form is used to control the elements on offer in the visit and the trainer synchronises those of most concern to the library with those of most interest to the academic.

The method's flexibility allows it to be tailored to the individual. Sheila Webber and Bill Johnston's work is beginning to emphasise the individuality of academics' view of information literacy through the phenomenographic approach of their work. Generic approaches to upskilling academics are hard to deliver. The model can be helpful in providing an individual response and shaped to individual needs. Academics like the individual approach "Put it like this, if somebody said there is an hour...on EIS for sport and leisure management, looking at electronic journals and the like. I'd be there like a shot" (Hewitson, 2002).

The Desktop Library method works because it treats academics as individuals. It raises awareness and interest and can connect to formalised training opportunities. It enhances the librarian's contribution to promoting educational change. Finally it can sow the seeds of information literacy, and the students will be the beneficiaries.

# Desktop Library Visit Form

9/ 2005

Name:		Ext:
Trained by:	Email:	Date:

TOPIC	Knows of	Uses	Demo	Helpsheets	H/S given
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1 WWW Searching				Tick Boxes	
1.1 Surfing				HS24	
1.2 URL's					
1.3 Google Scholar					
1.4 Gateways : RDN					
1.5 Bookmarks					

2 LISA				Tick Boxes	
2.1 OPAC via LISA					
2.2 M25					
2.3 BL & COPAC					
2.4 Relevant databases				Various	
2.5 E-Journals					
2.6 Subject portals on LISA					
2.7 Off Campus Access				HS3	

3 Advice to staff				Tick Boxes	
3.1 Copyright					
3.2 Ordering books					
3.3 Reading List Finder					

4 Information Literacy				Tick Boxes	
4.1 Our Programmes					
4.2 Information Quest				DB38	
4.3 RDN Training Suite					

5 Learning via the Web				Tick Boxes	
5.1 H.E.Academy					
5.2 Blackboard links					

6 ITTC				Tick Boxes	
6.1 Courses & open learning					
6.2 Seminar on a Disk					

*Further Action Needed.*

Comments

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