

Collaboration or Catastrophe: can Libraries and Computer Centres work together?

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Abstract: *This paper presents an assessment of the overlap between Library and IT Service activities, drawing on the authors' experience of developments at University College Worcester (UCW) and gives an overview of the diversity of practice across UK higher education institutions.*

Such areas of over-lapping activity can be seen as emerging from the direct interface between service providers and students. This kind of model suggests that the need for working together arises from a shared 'customer service' approach, participation in learning and teaching processes and contributions to virtual learning. All these redefine the role of the Library and IT Service in the academic process.

The paper identifies key issues related to the management of collaborative activities and implications for management of change in university organisational structures.

Preface

It is widely recognised that Libraries and IT/Computer Services have areas of activity which overlap and that the extent of this is continually increasing.

Universities in the UK have largely coped with this by changing the structural organisation of such departments. Converged services, integrated services and mixed teams have been created in the hope that the resulting structures will lead to effective collaboration. This is not as easy as it looks since library and IT staff come from different professions with distinct professional cultures. Organisational change can be one of the most stressful experiences both for the individuals involved and the institution as a whole. Without skilled and imaginative leadership, change management can lead to conflict and lack of collaboration - even catastrophe!

We will suggest that an alternative response to the management of change would be to focus on the management of service processes rather than institutional structures. Starting from a focus on the student/researcher and an assessment of their needs ("customer focus") leads to identification of just those areas of overlap which are strictly necessary. Managing these areas can of course lead to organisational change but if it does it will be grounded in effective service delivery. The extent of organisational change will vary according to a wide range of factors affecting the institution but in many ways this is not the key issue. What matters is that the student services are of good quality and that staff in the two areas are able to work together effectively.

National framework

Higher education institutions in the UK have responded to the changes in learning, teaching and research processes in a variety of ways in relation to the activity of libraries and computing/information services.

'Knowledge management' has emerged as a concept together with a broader understanding of the centrality of information to successful delivery of a university's mission. This has been underscored by national initiatives such as the UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) requirement for universities to have an information strategy (Rothery [1, 2]) and the implications of the post Dearing higher education agenda. Dearing's [3] emphasis on key skills was embraced eagerly by librarians, who had been sometimes a lone voice within their institutions in calling for the embedding of information skills within the curriculum, and who now found themselves informing a growing recognition of the need for a more holistic approach to the management of information.

A number of organisational models have emerged in the last ten years. In some institutions, a period of convergence has been immediately followed by a separation of services leading to some cynicism among staff and a lowering of morale.

By 1998, around 50% of institutions had achieved a degree of converged or merged management. (Lewis and Sexton, [4]). For an analysis of convergence in UK universities by 1997, see Pugh [5].

Organisation models can be generally located in one of three categories: identified by Lewis [4]

- Fully converged at all levels, with a completely integrated service delivered by multi-skilled staff
- A single senior management, but with delivery and operational management separated into service functions
- Separately managed services, working collaboratively, with each service head reporting into either a Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Vice Principal, or a similar level of Directorate.

In general, the enthusiasm for convergence has been more marked in post 1992 universities (formerly polytechnics) and in colleges of higher education. Whether this is due to progressive, holistic thinking, or in part due to economies of scale and a smaller resource base is unclear. Certainly among research led universities, with a stronger income stream of research funding, the tendency has been to retain separately managed services. Only one of the 'Russell Group' (20 research led universities) had a fully integrated Information Services Department - the University of Birmingham.

Change management

All universities have recognised the imperatives of change in service delivery in response to external drivers and student demand. Each institution will have chosen to manage those changes differently. Where services have completely converged, the process of managing that change is likely to have been challenging, to say the least.

If the most important resource of any institution is its people, then how those people are organised is crucial to the success of its strategic direction. If strategy is formed at the highest levels by the most senior people then the organisational structure which is designed is essentially a 'top down' model of implementation. Operational effectiveness, however, is delivered by individuals operating within and sustained by institutional systems; they need to be engaged with the process and believe in it. Hawkins and Winter [6] characterise the challenge as follows:

'The challenge for universities is not only to respond appropriately to today's changes, but to make this responsiveness a way of life. Only when responsiveness is built into an institution's systems and culture will this continuing change be fruitful. An assumption of stability makes change much more painful.'

One of the issues which Clive Field [7] has identified in evaluating the success and future of the 'root and branch' restructuring at Birmingham is the 'sustainability of the service in terms of its ability to recruit and retain senior and middle managers of the highest calibre and hybrid skills'. This has long term implications both for initial training of staff and continuing professional development. Moreover it may well affect the type of person who chooses to enter either profession within a university. A further dimension to the staffing issue is whether the 'Two Cultures' concept first identified by CP Snow [8] in 1959 on the breakdown of communication between the arts and sciences, still prevails within a hybrid library. CP Snow described this as

'Literary intellectuals at one pole - at the other scientists'.

This could be adapted for the purposes of this paper as

'Librarians at one pole - at the other IT. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension'.

In 'Managing the Electronic Library' (Hanson and Day [9]) there are a number of case studies on institutional experience in various models of convergence and collaboration in which the different professional background of librarians and IT specialists do not always find immediate accord.

Services which celebrated most success were those which were able to recognise and respect the different specialist skills while continuing to develop numbers of staff who are multi-skilled up to an agreed level of competence.

In the end, as Lewis and Sexton [4] pointed out: students 'couldn't care less about how the academic services are organised, so long as the right services are delivered, efficiently and effectively'.

At University College Worcester as two department heads, hopefully not poles apart as in the CP Snow analysis, we have recognised the need to work together to effect change in our service delivery within our areas of overlap. We have chosen to do this within the framework of managing the service delivery *process* rather than the organisational structure. We would characterise this change as 'organic' leading to a redefinition of roles within each department and within the academic process.

When is collaboration needed?

For Libraries and Computing Services the "service users" are students or researchers. They are often called "customers", "clients" or "users".

Taking a service users' perspective, there are four key areas of service provision which involve staff from both Library and IT functions. These are Information Delivery, User Support Queries, Information Skills and Service User Feedback. We will give examples from our experience at UCW to illustrate how overlap occurs and what management issues it raises.

Information delivery

Within Information Delivery an overlap area arises as the result of the technological infrastructure. Many on-line information services are now delivered in the Library or across campus using the internet. IT professionals are responsible for the provision of the technological infrastructure from PCs to systems servers. This has been an area of overlap for many years but in many ways overlap is not substantial since the roles of library professionals and IT professionals are clearly defined and distinct. Collaboration occurs more at the level of joint project management rather than any merging of roles.

User support queries

In contrast, the area of User Support is one where blurring of traditional roles is most evident. Service users sometimes have queries of a technical nature, or technical problems, and sometimes need help with seeking information. We have responded to this at UCW by employing IT Support staff in the Library alongside Library staff - a common approach to meeting this need! However, service users do not readily perceive the difference and will ask library staff IT questions and IT staff information questions. The differences in background, professional culture, training, career path all conspire to make such "cross-over" difficult. Library staff do not readily wish to become involved with IT queries and vice versa.

At UCW we are trying an approach which identifies a "common core" of queries, a mixture of Library and IT queries which both types of staff will be expected to deal with. To achieve this it is necessary to train all staff to enable them to deliver the common core. More specialist queries are then referred to the appropriate professional.

This means that whichever member of staff the service user approaches with a query they will be given a considered response and not just passed on. Many simple queries will be dealt with immediately and only the more specialist ones referred.

An interesting point to note is that this approach to managing user queries can be adopted irrespective of whether Library and IT Services as a whole are merged or separate structures.

Information skills

In the UK, Library staff have developed the concept of "information skills". These are the skills a service user needs to find and assimilate information. The Library organisation SCOUNL has developed a model for the different intellectual levels of such skills [10]. It is now becoming accepted that it is part of the University Library's remit to provide service users with help and training in developing those skills.

IT skills are part of information skills, though universities have in the past seen them as a totally separate entity. Ways of providing student IT skills training in the UK is very varied, even within a single institution. Training is sometimes provided by the Computing Service, sometimes by academic faculties; it sometimes part of a course, sometimes voluntary or optional. A national project funded by JISC called CITSCAPES [11] is currently investigating this variety.

In order that IT Skills training meets the need to support Information Skills development, content must be co-ordinated.

At UCW both the Library and IT Service have developed similar schemes for provision of skills workshops. These consist of a set of workshops taught by Library or IT staff which can be included within an existing course, at the request of an academic tutor. Such flexibility means that the workshop schemes can co-exist with other skills programmes. Having achieved a common means of delivery we are now developing an integrated IT/Information skills programme. A key feature is that groups of students may also request workshops. This is part of our emphasis on developing students as autonomous learners.

An interesting point here is that the provision of training is a teaching role for IT/Library staff. Indeed this means that service staff are playing an active part in the academic process. With the increasing use of on-line and independent learning, service staff are generally finding themselves increasingly involved in academic processes. Information/IT Skills support is another dimension to this new role.

Service user feedback

At UCW we have found an increasing need for collaboration in obtaining feedback from service users. Questionnaires related to the quality of Library provision now include the quality of the IT provision within the Library; and many on-line information services are used in Computer Centres, not just Libraries. As well as such overlap in content, the style and methodology for obtaining feedback is very similar as both types of service share a common service culture.

For example the development in methodology is to match service users expectations with their perceptions of service quality. This is a common approach in the business approach to customer service feedback. Rather than asking if service quality is "good" or "poor" in isolation, this approach asks service users to compare perceived service with their expectations - a truer measure of "satisfaction". We are experimenting with an approach based on a technique called SERVQUAL, and developed by a SCONUL (Standing Conference of National and University Libraries) working group [12].

Another approach to service user feedback is an investigation of users' priorities. Users' suggestions for improvements are useful, but know no bounds! Resource constraints mean that not all users' suggestions can be implemented. So an appropriate tool is to find out their chief priorities. Such approaches are not new, but they are part of "service culture" and in practice operate in identical ways between Libraries and IT Services. A collaborative approach can therefore be adopted in running focus groups, service user questionnaires and in carrying out surveys.

Role in the academic process

Both Library and IT staff are increasingly engaging with the academic process. It has been common practice for many years for services to be represented throughout the formal committee structure. In the

last few years however, Library and IT Service staff are increasingly invited to be core members of working groups on course development and agents of the quality management process: naturally seen as fellow contributors alongside the academics, rather than as merely a "formal presence".

There are a number of implications which we will briefly mention here. There is a requirement for academic libraries and IT professionals to acquire teaching skills and an understanding of the learning process. Staff need to make a personal redefinition of their own role and relationships. There is a need for academic staff to recognise that libraries and IT professions have a key contribution to make in the move from information to knowledge to understanding, and then even here, there are areas of overlap.

Conclusion

The above examples illustrate how collaborative activity can be managed on a local scale. The cumulative effect of such micro-management development is of course an agent for change at a more structural level if appropriate within the organisation. There is a wide range of drivers for structural change of which the areas of 'overlap' constitute only one dimension.

In the end, it is our students and staff who are the most important arbiters of our success or failure. It is a challenge to us all to reconcile the external forces influencing changes in university management with the critical need to follow a service user centred approach.

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