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# A week in the life of a further education partner college librarian



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## MONDAY

There is no time to take off my coat before the first query arrives: one of our curriculum area managers throws me the question, 'Gazelle, Antelope... give me another!' 'Impala', I respond. 'Exactly, I knew you would know', he says, and disappears. I put my bag away and wake up the OPAC and plasma information screens.

As a team we are small but perfectly formed, with me and three library assistants staffing a two-storey learning resource centre (LRC). We are located in the old college theatre, which is not ideal for a library and requires creativity with respect to layout, particularly for accessibility. We have created a reading zone on the old stage, the class texts are stored in the 'wings' and the Christmas decorations live in the old lighting rig!

Today is a one-to-one day for my team, and a chance for them to have my undivided attention to share both their difficulties and achievements. This is a chance for me to go through the post-it notes I have added to their files since the last meeting, with my thoughts for new projects and tasks. Today's meetings present an opportunity to gauge some initial feedback from the team on our 'floor-walking' initiative, introduced for this year. Having attended a Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) regional support centre event at the end of the summer term, I heard tales of success for this model and felt inspired to make it work. It is difficult to implement roving with a small team, as it often leaves no one available to staff the issue counter. We discuss walking in a

star formation to resolve this, with the issue desk as the centre of the star, and the team returning to the counter regularly. In truth, we are a small library, so it is rare to lose sight of the desk completely. I also run through the pack of resource guides that can be consulted and distributed when an opportunity presents. Feedback from the team indicates that floor-walking is tiring, but all have instances of resources having been promoted or additional student support given. Student behaviour has also improved as a result of the roving, particularly the noise levels, and the team have really taken ownership of the space by increasing their presence within it.

After lunch I continue the morning's animal-related theme and spend some time sourcing new resources for livestock handling and farming. This has not been taught at the college before, but animal care is a burgeoning department for our rural college, and I shall clearly need to increase the sheep farming book stock. The vocational elements of further education make my role especially enjoyable – the varied student queries and diverse topics for stock selection really keep me on my toes.

At the end of the day some chocolate arrives, by courtesy of our environmental officer. This is a thank you for a display the team has created to support a fair trade chocolate week. Always gratefully received!

## **TUESDAY**

In addition to my responsibility for the LRC, I manage the college print room and a fleet of print equipment, with a reprographics technician, Shaun, who coordinates on a day-to-day basis. Over the past year the operation of the print room has become increasingly integrated within the LRC, with the reprographics customer service desk now merged with the main LRC issue desk, allowing staff to submit and collect print work during the LRC evening opening. Today we are having a trial of a new piece of print room equipment – a letter folder/insertor for 'stuffing' and sealing envelopes. I am told this will be table-top; however, on arrival it barely fits in the lift. Once the equipment is in position, I leave Shaun to get to grips with it, and go to our weekly management briefing meeting.

Next on the agenda is a training session for some of our higher education students. Further education colleges traditionally offer courses for learners aged 16 years and over, but in more recent

years this offer has changed considerably, with learners as young as 14 attending from schools to study vocational topics. The sector has also extended the levels at which students can study, with entry level courses offered to those with no qualifications, whilst three-year degree courses run for those who wish to build on prior learning. The delivery of library services to higher education learners in a further education setting can be complex. Our facility is not large enough to incorporate a dedicated higher education library, but this year we have created a 'higher education corner', with information packs, study guides and dedicated computers. This has been well received by the learners, who sometimes struggle to find peace and quiet among the group-working further education cohort.

Today's training session focuses on electronic resources, and although this is the most challenging aspect of higher education library support, it can also be the most interesting. I must be fully conversant not only with the college electronic resources, but also with those of the validating universities. I begin with the college e-resources, which are authenticated using federated access management, a development that has served to break down the access barriers for our learners. I then move on to the university resources, which in this instance are authenticated using Athens accounts. For our students, having access to university e-resources is a great benefit. For a foundation degree running with small numbers of students, a college could never afford to purchase the breadth of subscriptions offered by university libraries. However, licensing is such that not all universities are able to offer access to their e-resources and for some of our foundation degrees we must provide everything in-house.

The session goes well, and then it is back to the desk to catch up on some paperwork. I have a few inter-library loans to process for our final year fine art degree students. Luckily I find one as an e-book from the validating university, and talk the student through the access process. She goes away happy as she now has one item immediately; the rest of the requests duly go to the British Library at Boston Spa.

I am on the rota for the evening shift today, and use the quieter time to look at pricing for the college paper supply. We have recently acquired a new print room machine that is capable of printing on glossy paper – favoured by our marketing department. This will allow us to bring more of our printing in-house, and hopefully bring some

financial savings. However, this relies on sourcing the glossy paper at low enough prices. The college belongs to a purchasing consortium, so I start by looking at the tenders available there and put together some comparison figures for our core stock items. I then run through my online budget holder statements, checking that everything is in order and processing book, paper and toner requests.

### **WEDNESDAY**

I devote time this morning to completing ground-work prior to a session with our extended project students, scheduled for next week. This group of advanced level students will research and write an extended essay on a subject of their choice. The process will give them an excellent introduction to the independent study typical at university level, with the added benefit of providing them with a talking point during the university selection process. Resourcing this within budget requires ingenuity, and I start by gathering everything on the shelves and trawling through our electronic resources for background readings. Once the students have refined their topics I can work with them to source additional materials as required. This year's projects range from representation of race in the media to the economic impact of foot and mouth disease, a good variety to test the depth of the LRC resources!

After lunch I examine our presence on the college virtual learning environment (VLE), and update a few dead links. We switched to the Moodle VLE last year, and much time has been dedicated by the LRC team to remodelling our resource pages within this new platform. Moodle is more adept than its predecessor at dealing with SCORM compliant packages, so I have been working on some interactive ideas, both imported from repositories such as the National Learning Network (NLN) and Jorum, and home-grown. The annual JISC East Midlands e-fair is an excellent event for picking up ideas, and this year the highlight was a seminar on 'virtual characters' (<http://moodle.rsc-em.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2286>). As a result, the LRC pages now have a cartoon video of virtual newsreaders introducing the service, developed using text-to-video software called Xtranormal State. At present only a link is displayed, and the student must click to view the clip. I spend some time embedding the video within the page, thus making it more visible. A bit of tweaking is still needed to iron out some odd camera angles, but that will have to wait for another day!

### **THURSDAY**

I make the time this morning to attend a WebEx session for Oxford Art Online, an electronic resource we have subscribed to. With a small team and a busy facility, it can be difficult to find the time to attend external events, and so I am always pleased to find an online one. Much useful information is presented, and the promotional resources are particularly promising. I waste no time in embedding the flashing banner and search box into our VLE pages.

I attend a lunchtime meeting of the college's environmental working group, where the head of the construction department leads a lengthy discussion of the potential of a solar roof. We then debate whether rainwater recycling will be incorporated into our new building, due for completion at Easter. I am able to contribute figures that demonstrate a college-wide reduction in paper consumption, for yearly comparable quarterly totals. In the LRC we have also recycled our unwanted texts – gathered during the annual summer stock edit – and sent them to a specialist company that will donate part of the proceeds to a literacy charity.

Back at my desk I start developing of an interactive learning package covering the topic of citations. I have heard much about Xerte open source e-learning development software but rarely have the time needed to experiment with it. Today I have cleared the afternoon, and am experimenting in the Xerte Online Toolkits JISC TechDis sandpit (<http://www.techdisplayxerte.info/>). By the end of the day I have the skeleton of a short piece on referencing websites, and manage to throw in some information literacy along the way. Students often struggle with the mechanics of website citations, but given their growing inclination to use the internet as a primary information source, it is essential to train them well. The Xerte online toolkits prove easy to work with, and this has been an enjoyable afternoon, with promising results.

### **FRIDAY**

The customary rapid pace of college life will slow down today as we devote the day to staff continuing professional development, and there will be no taught classes. The day starts with a speech from our new Principal, celebrating our success rates and discussing the challenges for the sector following the Comprehensive Spending Review earlier this week.

In the absence of the learners, and without the pressure of maintaining counter services, this is a good time to gather the team together for some tailored training. I have organised a session in the use of our new print room multi-functional device. The team are used to covering in the print room when necessary, and in addition to the vast array of IT and library skills they have acquired over the years, by the end of today they will also be able to create a bi-fold, saddle-stapled leaflet with a glossy 160g/m<sup>2</sup> cover, among other things. When I started in my post I thought there were only two types of paper – white or coloured. How wrong could I be – now I can recognise a myriad of paper types simply by feeling the corner of a sheet!

I finish the week by working on a promotional display for some of our electronic resources. I have added a few new ones this year and need to make sure I sell them well. In further education we have access to a large collection of electronic books – from the JISC ‘e-books for FE’ project (<http://fe.jiscebooksproject.org/>) – and these can go on the display too, alongside electronic journals and various subject repositories. I complete my ‘find it on the web’ theme with a few spiders and a black paper ‘web’ – Hallowe’en is approaching after all! Measuring the impact of our promotions is essential, and so I send an email to one of the featured resource suppliers to enquire about our usage statistics. The resource is one of our new additions – a small collection of electronic journals for childcare – and is proving a favourite with staff and learners. However, without the cold hard figures to support this claim, it may be hard to justify a renewal next year.

The day draws to a close, and it is time to say farewell to a member of the team. Nicola has been with us for a few years now, and although it is a sad occasion for those left behind, she is excited to be leaving for a new life in London. We go to a local restaurant to celebrate with her – a pleasant way to end a busy week.