

A defence of subject specialism in academic librarianship



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Introduction

The practice of moving to a functional approach for academic libraries is evidenced in recent UK library and information science literature. This includes the replacement at some universities of subject-based librarians with functional teams responsible for research support, teaching and learning support, and marketing and relationship management. Although the reasons behind this move are varied and complex, the apparent inefficiency and lack of flexibility of a subject-based approach is often cited (Hoodless & Pinfield 2018). A non-subject-based teaching team can be seen to allow for greater flexibility in covering information literacy teaching, and provide a less siloed approach to service development (Bains 2014).

This brief article employs thought from the philosophers of language and logic Ludwig Wittgenstein and Robert Brandom, and philosopher of education Jan Derry to support the theory that by removing the librarians' immersion in the subject, an approach which may be found in functional teaching and learning teams that have team members trying to cover all subjects, we are in danger of removing the essential value of the academic liaison / subject librarian role (henceforth referred to as subject specialists). References to students in this article apply to all levels of students from foundation to research, and practical examples are given from healthcare subject specialist experience.

Language games

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games' (Wittgenstein 1958) proposes that we can see the relation between an expression and its meaning as similar to that between a piece in a game such as chess and their moves, with the same terms sometimes having different meanings in different games (as found in different sociocultural contexts). Specialists with in-depth subject knowledge can see the shifting rules in 'language games' that vary across disciplinary cultures through time, as scientific and philosophical theories and concepts evolve and new understandings of reality are formed, changed and sometimes discarded. This leads sometimes to the same word / term acquiring a different meaning in a new context; or new words / terms being put into play, but not yet picked up in normative use.

We argue that to be able to answer subject-specific enquiries and to teach and support students' information literacy skill development in a particular discipline, a librarian requires up-to-date knowledge of key terminology and of emerging concepts and how they relate to each other. To give practical examples from healthcare, a librarian may not know that a student who insists they need an article about 'therapeutic touch', should also search for alternative terms such as 'hand-holding' or 'massage' depending on their area of interest. While for a mental health nurse, 'PDA' definitely doesn't have anything to do with book acquisition. Therapeutic touch (Robinson, Biley and Dolk 2007) is a specific pseudoscientific therapy which originated in the 1970s. The term has now begun to be used more generically to cover using touch to heal or comfort, for example in palliative care being with the patient and holding their hand at end of life, or easing pain using techniques such as massage in chronic illness and during treatment. A search which only used the term 'therapeutic touch' would not necessarily find the articles the student was really interested in. 'PDA' in the healthcare context is an abbreviation for Pathological Demand Avoidance.

Inferentialism

The term 'inferentialism' as coined by the philosopher Robert Brandom (1994) is based on Wilfred Sellars's (1956) critique of the view that knowledge of what we perceive can be separated from the conceptual process that results in the perception. As the Jan Derry explains Brandom's argument concerning

A defence of subject specialism in academic librarianship

inferentialism claims that: 'in order to understand, it is necessary to "make explicit" the connections and determinations which constitute a concept' (Derry 2008, p. 60). Within an inferentialist perspective, the rules of 'language games' can be said to be established through normative use in shifting culturally (disciplinary) specific contexts. The following discussion shows how an inferentialist position, engaged with as a theoretical framework grounding the value of subject specialism in academic libraries, can be applied to stock selection and teaching to show how information professionals try to connect students to the most appropriate resources for their studies.

Stock selection

Stock acquisition is one area where subject specialist knowledge is sometimes undervalued. In a drive for greater process efficiency, requests for new stock can be purchased purely on ratios, such as the number of students taking a course and the categorisation of the reading – e.g. core or background, or by PDA (patron driven acquisition). We argue that by knowing what a typical reading list looks like, recognising the usual key texts and the nature of the majority of students, the subject specialist can bring a more tailored perspective. For example, sometimes the three texts listed by an early career paramedic lecturer to increase the students' awareness of patient experience may not be read by the majority of the student cohort, and multiple copies need not be purchased. The inferential facts relating to current student interest and need, built from current subject/ teaching knowledge, along with support and teaching, enable a clearer understanding of resource needs, and can therefore help guide resource spending.

Beyond generalist 'user education'

Inferentialism, as a philosophical position, emphasises the core importance of reason (the giving and asking for reasons) in human intellectual development to understanding the inter-related concepts that are integral to higher order thinking: 'If subject knowledge is represented as 'facts' without regard to the inferential structure constituting the facts in the first place, learning will not be achieved (Derry 2013, p.144).

In information literacy and critical thinking terms, this giving and asking can take the form of trialling new pedagogies and activities followed by critical reflection, including feedback from students. You cannot know the most effective way of teaching an information literacy session to a particular subject group, unless you have seen how different groups of students respond to the evolution of a teaching session delivered over time and are the person students then turn to with questions and problems. Information and digital literacy is not one-size-fits-all – the subject specialist is in a position to teach and support the academics and students in a way that a team of teaching and learning librarians with generic non-subject-based roles cannot. Although someone with a limited understanding of a subject may quickly become familiar enough to deliver an effective presentation and basic search demonstration, more in-depth subject-based interaction with students will be problematic. In a discussion with an academic librarian, where a search strategy is required on a topic, the student's attempt to articulate their information need is strengthened by a corresponding recognition on the part of the librarian of the inferential connections from the current normative use of terms relating to the topic in question (e.g. terminology, abbreviations, procedures, techniques), all within the framework of a particular assignment. The conversation between the librarian and the student requires a patient giving and asking for the reasons behind the information need, leading to a more precise understanding of the information required, which then leads to enhanced advice on appropriate search strategies that can lead to key resources. The initial exploration of concepts and related terms to employ in search strategies can provide a strong foundation for the critical evaluation skills that can underpin a successful student-learning journey.

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A defence of subject specialism in academic librarianship

Research support

Emerging areas of research support could also suffer if subject specialism is removed completely from the service portfolio of a university library, as the support required for the research lifecycle, data-mining, open access and bibliometrics / altmetrics varies considerably across subjects and disciplines. The contextual support needed is subject to fast-moving change that is difficult to track in an effective manner without some ongoing input of subject / disciplinary expertise (even if much of the administrative responsibility is held in a functional research support team). In terms of information literacy support for researchers, subject specialists are more able to provide nuanced help with literature reviews through an exploration of the researcher's own theoretical framework and a shared understanding of the complex, evolving trends in research paradigms and methodologies across disciplines (from quantitative fuelled positivism to interpretive, critical, phenomenological and ethnographic positions). Thus the shared subject understanding between academic librarian and academic enables literature / systematic review strategies to be built, using common knowledge and terminology, into effective search strategies.

Academic liaison

The subject specialist can bring value to subject committees where local changes to course structures and teaching practices are made through their first-hand knowledge and expertise (built from dealing directly with student and staff information needs). For example, in a recent nursing curriculum rewrite at Oxford Brookes University the librarian / subject expert fought strongly for the retention of a face-to-face session with the first-year nurses although the module team wanted (because they had read academic studies which highlighted the pedagogic virtues of the flipped classroom) to move to all online learning with only face-to-face discussion seminars. A hands-on teaching session facilitated by a member of library staff, where the students have the chance to engage with library support from individual perspectives by asking questions and requesting that things be explained more clearly, was retained after discussion. Much of the first module has subsequently been changed back to face-to-face teaching as a response to student demand, as students moving directly from the school / college environment, or into learning for the first time after a long break, were perceived to need more interactive support than could be provided through the 'flipped' learning approach.

Conclusion

Although the temptation from a managerial efficiency perspective might be to simplify the complexity of academic liaison support with completely generic non-subject-based job descriptions that have flexibility across teaching, training and support commitments, we argue this is detrimental to the quality and subsequent value of the service in terms of failing to provide more in depth support.

An inferential approach to the provision of information literacy and collection development introduced here emphasises the need for a strong awareness of current disciplinary language, of evolving interrelated subject-based concepts and of situated course / cohort specific student needs. This knowledge leads to an in-depth understanding of specific student needs based not just on an awareness of current literature, but also an inter-subjective understanding built through dialogue with students and academics in a particular subject / disciplinary context. For the subject specialist / academic librarian, an up-to-date understanding of a particular student cohort's perspectives on emerging disciplinary concepts provides the essential knowledge needed to develop a cost-effective portfolio of the most needed resources, and to help students at whatever level of study with developing in-depth search strategies. This up-to-date understanding also underpins the tailored embedding of effective face-to-face and online information literacy teaching, activities and support materials.

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A defence of subject specialism in academic librarianship

We argue that without being immersed in the subject community we work with, we are as detached from our service users as Google Scholar, but not as constantly available. Thus the dumbing-down of our subject specialist services potentially reduces our future value to less than that of an algorithm.

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