

Title: Transforming a university library into a learning organisation

Purpose: The case study discusses strategies to promote a culture of professional learning within an Australian academic library. As the COVID-19 experience has shown new and evolving roles require skills, knowledge and abilities that current library employees may not have trained for. One framework which supports continuous professional development and employee motivation is the concept of a learning organisation, where staff across all levels of the library acknowledge the value of continuous learning and autonomously engage in activities to keep their skills up to date and relevant.

Design/methodology/approach (mandatory): The article is a case study of a three year period of interventions and outcomes in an Australian academic library.

Findings (mandatory): The strategies discussed provided insights for library managers and leaders about how organisational change can be incrementally embedded through clarity of purpose, aligned leadership, transparent processes, self-determination and social learning.

Originality/value (mandatory): The paper provides practical strategies and examples from the case study of one university library which has successfully embedded workplace learning as a regular and accepted part of staff routines.

Keywords: Learning organisations, academic libraries, professional development, workplace learning, skills, university libraries

Maximum is 250 words in total (including keywords and article classification)

Introduction

During the past two decades, there has been ongoing dialogue among library and information science researchers and practitioners about the skills required for library staff working in contemporary higher education settings. From the traits of 'Librarian 2.0' (Partridge *et al.*, 2010) to comprehensive lists of competencies compiled by various library associations (Leong and Woods, 2018; CARL Competencies Working Group, 2020), the only certainty in the age of constant digital disruption is that library staff must continue to renew their purpose and skills as they engage with the changing needs of their communities (Thorpe, 2017). Librarians must continually update and upskill in order to evolve and remain up to date (Corcoran and McGuinness, 2013). In the pandemic environment, the need for

library staff to be motivated to learn and develop their skills independently while working remotely is the new normal. It is within a context of unpredictability and ambiguity that this article considers how a university library can become a learning organisation, to ensure that staff maintain their skills and abilities and remain relevant to their client base (Limwichitr *et al.*, 2018). The case study presents one Australian university library's journey towards becoming a learning organisation through strategic, operational and practical processes. While the case study review was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the approaches adopted to support cultural change are applicable as distributed, remote working becomes the norm.

Skills for contemporary academic librarians

The transformation of higher education has prompted an examination of librarian roles in university libraries (Jaguszewski and Williams, 2013). Predicting and identifying new, diverse and future skills that staff members need in the ever-changing environment of the academic library is difficult (Davis and Lundstrom, 2011 cited in Decker 2017). As clearly demonstrated in the COVID-19 environment, librarians are frequently challenged to rethink their roles and responsibilities (Ducas *et al.*, 2020). The knowledge, skills and abilities that existing and emerging librarians need to succeed in the academic library are subject to changes in technology, shifts in pedagogy and literacies, changes in scholarly communication and information access (Saunders, 2020). Understanding how students learn, adapting to online teaching, whether by default or in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing practices in scholarly communication and dissemination have all contributed to a shift in focus to what users do in research, teaching and learning rather than on what librarians do (Jaguszewski and Williams, 2013). Reference work and collection management activities may have a lesser role as data management, bibliometrics, digital literacy initiatives, scholarly communication, and user experience are added to the academic librarian's responsibilities (Ducas *et al.*, 2020). Some professional associations have attempted to catalogue and document the breadth and depth of skills required in academic library roles (Leong and Woods, 2017). These lists highlight new roles in research services, teaching and learning, digital scholarship, user experience and copyright which require re-skilling of current staff and creative approaches to increase staff capacity (Jaguszewski and Williams, 2013). Alongside discipline specific skills, roles and responsibilities, a more diverse range of transferable skills have appeared in job advertisements and role descriptions. Required or desirable skills for academic library jobs range from creativity, project management, leadership, competitive intelligence, relationship management, marketing and risk-taking (Jaguszewski and Williams, 2013; Ducas *et al.*, 2020). Saunders (2020) identified ten core

skills for academic librarians, seven of which were not specific to librarianship. They included interpersonal communication, writing, teamwork, customer service skills, cultural competence, interacting with diverse communities and reflective practice. Three discipline skills identified were knowledge of professional ethics, evaluating and selecting resources, and search skills (Saunders, 2020). Chawner and Oliver (2013) argue that a library professional's outlook and disposition are now considered to be more important than traditional skill sets.

New and evolving roles require skills, knowledge and abilities that current library employees may not have trained for. The "shelf life" of initial professional qualifications has been identified as a known issue for graduates entering librarianship (Chan and Auster, 2003). As the COVID-19 experience has shown, library and information professionals are increasingly confronted with novel circumstances that require nimble and agile organisational responsiveness grounded in evidence based practices and processes (Mirijamdotter, 2010). Digital transformation skills have proven to be essential during COVID-19. To keep up with the expectations of students, staff and employers, it is critical that library staff feel comfortable and competent in the constantly evolving digital space (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019). Ducas *et al.* (2020) suggest that existing academic library staff may not be ready to assume new roles. Librarians require additional training and access to learning opportunities that will better enable them to provide the new services and to maintain their professional competencies. Corcoran and McGuinness (2014) argue that the pursuit of professional development and workplace learning should be considered an essential element of the professional life of a librarian. Staff should be offered new and meaningful opportunities to develop the requisite skills that can be used in tandem with their subject expertise (Ducas *et al.*, 2020). Chan and Auster (2003) found that professional librarians are motivated to maintain their professional competence, but more can be done to encourage and facilitate their participation in updating activities. One framework which supports continuous professional development and employee motivation is the concept of a learning organisation.

Academic libraries as learning organisations

A learning organisation is one which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals (Pedler, Boydell and Burgoyne, 1989 cited in Renner *et al.*, 2014). In a learning organisation, learning and development become integral elements of organisational culture and practices, embedded within culture and staff work routines, enhancing the capacity of individuals and teams to adjust and respond to the external environment (Limwhichtr *et al.*, 2018). Peter Senge's (1990) much cited work *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*

states organisations learn only through individuals who learn. While individual learning does not guarantee organisational learning, without it no organisational learning occurs (Senge, 1990). Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008) identified three building blocks of a learning organisation:

- A supportive learning environment,
- Concrete learning processes and practices, and
- Leadership that reinforces learning.

In the academic library setting, creating a learning culture positively disposes library professionals to continue learning new skills (Yu and Chao-Chen, 2015 cited in Decker 2017). By becoming a learning organisation with a competent and well-trained workforce, libraries are better equipped to survive and thrive in the continuously changing information environment. Library staff are encouraged to improve their skills and feel supported to learn and develop as individuals. At the organisational level, libraries benefit through continuous learning, improvement and innovation as well as increasing their strategic agility and flexibility (Limwhichtr *et al.*, 2018). The creation of the library as a learning organisation provides increasing satisfaction and fulfilment to all stakeholders and supports the sharing of common values (Hallam *et al.*, 2014).

Setting the right tone for the library's learning environment is paramount to its success (Decker, 2017). Library leaders need to convince their employees that becoming a learning organisation is necessary to ensure that employees understand and form new values that welcome the learning culture (Limwhichtr *et al.*, 2015). Employers are critical partners whose active involvement contributes positively to the continuing professional development of library and information professionals (Australian Library and Information Association, 2019). Ducas *et al.* (2020) argue that it is imperative for academic libraries to firmly support the professional development efforts of their librarians to develop expertise for the new roles, such as data management and online teaching. Employers have a key responsibility to provide opportunities for learning that support library and information professionals to enhance their knowledge and skills throughout their career in order to meet the changing needs of their clients, employers and society (Australian Library and Information Association, 2019). Library managers have the responsibility for ensuring that appropriate training and resources are provided for their specific setting (Chawner and Oliver 2013). Having a supportive manager who enables practice and experimentation results in higher levels of informal updating (Chan and Auster, 2003).

While leadership is a key foundation, it is only one aspect. Modifying leadership behaviour alone is insufficient (Garvin *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, teams within a library will vary in focus and learning maturity, and may exhibit local cultures of learning. A learning organisation creates a working environment that encourages real transformative professional development at work, supports staff to be creative, curious, courageous, collaborative and clever with their time plus resources and spaces to experiment and fail safely (Lawler, 2016). A learning climate is demonstrated when there is a general attitude of continuous improvement, recognising that learning and self-development is for all (Peddler *et al.*, 1991).

The barriers to developing a learning organisation are frequently cited as lack of time, expense, inconvenience, disinterest, lack of employer support and institutional processes (Sussman, 2002 cited in Chan and Auster, 2003). Professional learning activities often have resource implications of time, money and workload. However, this investment is essential in order to continually improve and develop individuals, organisations and the wider profession (Australian Library and Information Association, 2019). Investing in learning and development demonstrates a library's commitment to encouraging and sustaining their greatest asset – their staff.

While library staff need time, support and resources to engage in learning, they also need autonomy and agency. Autonomy emphasises freedom and the authority to manage one's own affairs. Staff can set their own learning goals and path. In exchange individuals are expected to be responsible and accountable for their autonomous work tasks (Hallam *et al.*, 2014). Library leaders should seek out and give staff opportunities at work that go beyond attendance at traditional formal training events or conferences. Learning by doing, experimenting, and playing with tools and ideas engages staff in meaningful and transformative learning (Lawler, 2016). A study of Canadian academic librarians found that survey respondents acquired skills primarily through individual activities of professional work experience (learning on the job) and self-teaching, followed by external professional development activities and attending workshops or seminars within their library (Ducas *et al.*, 2020). In Australia, the University of Wollongong Library developed a successful program to build library staff's digital literacy skills using the principles of personalisation, flexibility, learning agency and self-directed learning (Shalavin, 2018). McNair (2016) suggests that managers:

- Make room for staff to construct their own learning path about topics that are important to them,
- Find ways to allow different learning styles and ways to share learning milestones,

- Draw on different tools, and
- Provide options for staff to choose topics they are interested in and the flexibility to “follow the white rabbit” when they feel inspired (McNair, 2016).

Professional behaviour is associated with commitment to continuous learning. Librarians who have a strong personal identification or commitment to the profession should be expected to engage in more continuing education activities (Chan and Auster, 2003). The challenge is to create a workplace community of confident, responsive and reflective learners who demonstrate curiosity, engage in lifelong learning, share skills and responsibility for career-long and career-wide learning (Bunker and McPherson-Crowie, 2017).

Building a culture of learning within an Australian university library

University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a multi-campus, regional university in south-east Queensland, Australia, serving more than 27,000 undergraduate students (University of Southern Queensland, 2020). USQ Library supports the learning, teaching and research outcomes of USQ students and staff across three campus libraries and via virtual channels. The Library employs more than 70 staff. Staff turnover is low. Average length of service in 2019 was 11 years, with individual service records ranging from 1 year to 38 years. In 2016, USQ Library underwent a transformational change process culminating in a new organisational structure (O’Sullivan and Partridge, 2016). Through organisational renewal, senior leaders embedded the concept of continuous service improvement as a central tenet of the Library’s new approach to service and engagement. The new workplace structure created opportunities for staff to learn and develop mastery in their areas of expertise, and to share their understanding and knowledge with others in their immediate teams, across teams and across campuses. All role descriptions in the new structure included a common statement about each person’s responsibility to keep up to date with key trends or issues and engaging with opportunities for improving the Library’s services in the relevant area of speciality. The new structure included the role of Associate Director (Quality and Planning) who was given responsibility for leading professional development activities across the Library.

Concurrent with the Library’s organisational change, a review of professional learning needs for the Scholarly Information and Learning Services (SILS) division, of which the Library was a part, was commissioned. The final report recommended that SILS staff should be allowed the time and support required to explore creative new ideas and engage in self-directed

informal learning activities (Hallam, 2017). The report provided suggestions for how this could be achieved. Recommendations included:

- viewing learning as a natural part of the working day
- encouraging enquiry, curiosity and exploration
- promoting independent learning through online resources such as webinars and social media channels
- encouraging staff to become involved with relevant professional/industry bodies to ensure they keep up to date with emerging trends and new developments in their field
- targeting opportunities for disseminate scholarly work (Hallam, 2017).

To address the recommendations in the Hallam report, USQ Library leadership implemented initiatives to influence the development of a culture of organizational learning.

Transforming USQ Library into a learning organisation

Defining the learning organisation and building a common goal

Cultural change can only ever evolve from a shared understanding. To begin the Library's journey to becoming a learning organization, clarity of purpose and meaning was required. The Associate Director began by identifying a preferred definition of professional development that fit the local organizational context, to build a common understanding that was broader than "going to conferences". The definition adopted came from interviews with university library directors conducted by Harland, Stewart and Bruce (2018) that described professional development activities that included formal learning, experimentation, collaboration, problem solving, learning through play and reflection. The Associate Director facilitated conversations with the Library's leadership team to begin developing a common approach to professional development at the individual and team level. McGregor and Doshi's (2015) work on positive employee motivations of play, purpose and potential underpinned these conversations. The strategic intent focussed on leveraging *purpose*, the value staff apply to an activity, and *potential*, building skills for the next achievement or career step, while highlighting the *play* aspect of enjoyment while engaged in learning. Aligning staff's beliefs, values and goals with learning as a part of their work laid the foundations to implement cultural change.

As well as conversations with Library leaders, the ambition to becoming a learning organisation was shared explicitly with staff on the Library's intranet with the following statements:

“USQ Library is committed to being a learning organisation. We see learning as an everyday activity. Professional development (PD) and workplace learning are about improving and increasing skills which may help you in your current role and in your future career. PD can also be collaborative as we share what we have learned with each other to build skills and capacity in our teams and across the library.”

Different ways of engaging in professional development were promoted to staff. These included the benefits of formal, structured approaches and informal opportunities. Active and passive ways to engage in professional development were promoted including consuming content through reading, listening and watching and participatory activities such as writing, illustrating, reflecting, sharing, experimenting and networking. By explicitly articulating the ambition to be a learning organisation and providing concrete examples of professional development in practice, Library leaders gave their teams permission to discuss professional development as an expected part of all roles. As described by Senge (1990), the aim was to make work more ‘learningful’.

Leading and modelling to foster a culture of continuous learning and development

Providing the strategic direction and identifying opportunities for professional development were the first steps towards a culture of learning. To reinforce the strategic direction, Library leaders had to be aligned and supportive. As Chan and Auster (2003) describe, supportive managers are those who provide assign opportunities to develop and strengthen new skills and take an interest in the career goals of their staff. Managers and supervisors have a great deal of influence on the amount of updating that is occurring in the organization. All supervisors were encouraged to allow staff time each week to engage in learning and to model this behaviour themselves. By modelling desired learning behaviour, supervisors and leaders supported the desired organisational mindset of:

- Viewing learning as a natural part of the working day
- Encouraging enquiry, curiosity & exploration
- Promoting independent, autonomous learning
- Recognising and rewarding the effort staff put into their learning and the outcomes they achieved (Decker, 2017)

Supervisors demonstrated support for the strategic direction through their own lived experience, developing their own skills as leaders, coaches and mentors as they also invested in learning for their role. In 2018, an informal community of practice for managers was established as managers saw the need to invest in developing their own leadership skills.

Implementing transparent processes and removing institutional barriers for engagement

The challenges of engaging in workplace learning, such as time and cost, were acknowledged as barriers to the development of a learning organisation at USQ Library. To address the issue of cost, a transparent application process was put in place to support funding applications for staff who wanted to attend paid events or short courses. The application form required staff to demonstrate how the conference, event or course related to their role, their development goals and the Library's annual action plan. The application process asked staff to define how they would share what they had learned with their peers. Applications were transparently reviewed by the Library Leadership Team each month, removing any perception of bias or favouritism from the process. The report back requirement encouraged staff to engage in reflective practice to share their learnings with others. Figure 1 shows how Kolb's learning cycle (cited in McLeod, 2013) was adapted to demonstrate the expectations of staff undertaking funded professional development and to foster reflective practice within the learning organisation.

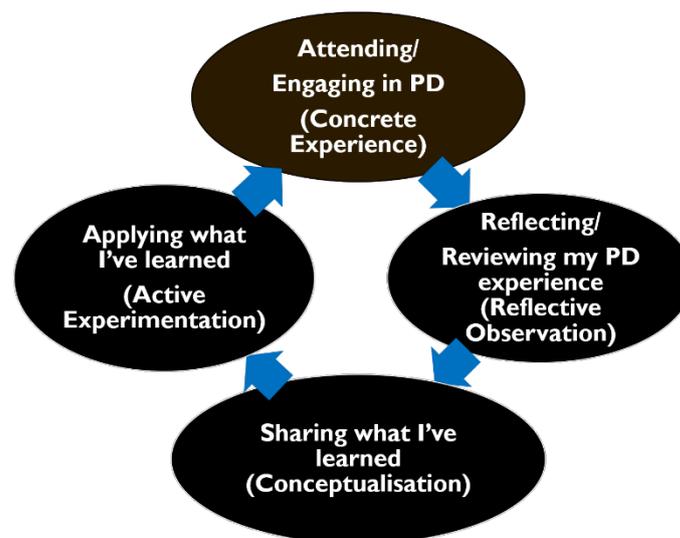


Figure 1: Expectations of staff attending funded professional development. Adapted from Kolb's Learning Styles (cited in McLeod, 2013)

Staff had the flexibility to choose how to reflect on their learning, with webinars, blog posts, reports and magazine articles some of the outcomes produced. Reporting back to all interested staff demystified the application process and established the expectations around the privileges associated with receiving funded learning opportunities. Individual staff understood their responsibility in disseminating information about events, activities and opportunities, and consequently motivated fellow colleagues to pursue professional

development as part of the job (Corcoran and McGuinness, 2014). As they engaged in reporting back, individual staff members built their confidence and developed skills in communicating and presenting to an audience of their peers.

Empowering staff to engage in autonomous learning

Another challenge to developing the Library as a learning organisation was staff awareness of options that could be accessed conveniently at their desk as autonomous, self-directed learning. An understanding that professional development was more than “going away to conferences” had to be fostered. As less than a quarter of Library staff in 2017 used social media for professional learning and networking, the Associate Director began collating a regular email newsletter for staff to showcase opportunities. The newsletter included resources to cater to different learning styles, including short blog posts and news articles, longer academic journal articles, MOOCs, podcasts, webinar recordings and interactive tools, such as browser plug-ins. Chan and Auster (2003) suggest that newsletter notices or postings on the organisation’s Intranet can provide recognition and signal that the organisation values skills development. There are numerous channels through which librarians can seek to engage in professional development, but the onus is on the individual to seek out and partake in these opportunities. The newsletter demonstrated to staff that professional development efforts do not have to be complex, time consuming or costly. It provided easy access to, and awareness of, no cost options that could be consumed in small chunks of time and that appealed to a range of learning styles. The aim was to normalise online learning at the staff member’s desk as a regular activity, rather than, or in addition to, sporadic conference attendance or formal training. The range of options provided made room for staff to construct their own learning path about topics that were important to them (McNair, 2016). Rather than developing a potentially time-consuming formal program of learning activities (Bunker and Mcpherson-Crowie, 2017), the smorgasbord of options circulated to staff each week, encouraged individuals to take responsibility for their professional learning in a way that sustained their own job satisfaction and connected to their personal advancement goals (Corcoran and McGuinness, 2014).

Engaging staff in shared learning

Social or peer driven engagement is an important part of cultural transformation, possibly even more than providing strategic direction, giving permission and removing barriers to participation. A culture of learning will foster an environment wherein librarians and library staff share with each other about their experiences and positively dispose library staff to continue to learn new skills (Decker, 2017). To fully participate in building a digitally enabled learning organisation, library staff need to develop their capabilities alongside their peers

(O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019). Peer support can be a powerful driver of learning. As a multi-campus organisation with staff geographically separated by distances of up to 100 kilometres, technology was a key part of engaging staff in learning and peer-to-peer interactions. Teams were encouraged to find ways to weave virtual and face-to-face learning together using technologies, such as video-conference tools, inclusively. As well as report back sessions from conferences and events, individuals and teams were encouraged to participate in collaborative group learning opportunities. Activities, such as journal clubs and Shut Up and Write sessions, were held simultaneously across all campuses, with participants connecting via video links to discuss topics and to share writing goals and achievements. Some teams chose to hold annual events in person where teams and peers came together to share scholarship outcomes and professional development reflections while other teams used hybrid approaches to foster collegial learning.

Staff who developed skills or expertise were encouraged to share their skills with others. Individuals and teams were invited to curate special editions of the professional development newsletter based on their areas of expertise and interests, providing deep dives into copyright, open scholarship, learning and teaching, and evidence-based practice. By identifying staff with specific skill sets, assessing their abilities in regard to instructing their colleagues and creating a venue in which they can share their skills with others, the Library leveraged in house talent and allowed staff to gain skills and knowledge in a cost effective way (Decker, 2017). Staff were also encouraged to share their experiences and expertise through scholarship, sharing their professional knowledge with industry through conference presentations, webinars, blog posts and journal articles. By contributing to the evidence base of the profession, staff engaged in learning beyond the Library and developed a broader contextual understanding of their work. A number of staff also joined relevant professional associations the during the case study period, with a small group of Toowoomba-based staff launching a new local group for the Australian Library and Information Association for library practitioners in the local area to network with colleagues, stay up-to-date with library practices and attend professional developments events.

Measuring cultural transformation

Evaluating cultural transformation is challenging and relies on inference and observation as much as hard evidence. Measuring how well USQ Library progressed in becoming a learning organisation relied on a variety of sources, including informal feedback from within the Library alongside the formal results of the university's biennial employee engagement survey.

The University of Southern Queensland conducts a biennial employee engagement survey of all staff members with results provided to each organisational unit for review and action. The survey, conducted by an external contractor, includes two questions about training and development. Table I shows the increase in percentage favourable results for USQ Library staff in 2018 and 2020. From these results, a positive cultural change among Library staff can be inferred about the professional development strategies and processes implemented during the case study period.

Question	2018 result	2020 result	Percentage change
There is a commitment to ongoing training and development of staff.	69% favourable	87% favourable	18%
The training and development I have received has improved my performance.	71% favourable	84% favourable	13%

Table I: USQ Library Employee Engagement survey results

The newsletter activity was informally evaluated with a short online survey using SurveyMonkey in late 2017. Two-thirds of respondents indicated they valued the newsletter and engaged with one or more learning opportunities each week. All respondents requested that the newsletter continue with one staff member commenting: “It has broadened by opportunities for PD – a great initiative”. Unsolicited feedback received from staff about the newsletter provided ongoing, irregular support for this initiative during the period 2017 to 2019. Examples of unsolicited staff email comments included:

- I always look forward to receiving the PD newsletter.
- I always find something of interest.
- I find these so helpful!
- I always find something that interests me in your PD newsletter.
- This is just what is needed!

Staff engagement in scholarship provided another an informal indicator of how the Library was developing as a learning organisation. Figure 1 shows the yearly growth of staff presenting and publishing over the three years of the case study. The activity decline in 2020 reflects the cancellation of conferences and fewer presentation opportunities due to the pandemic.

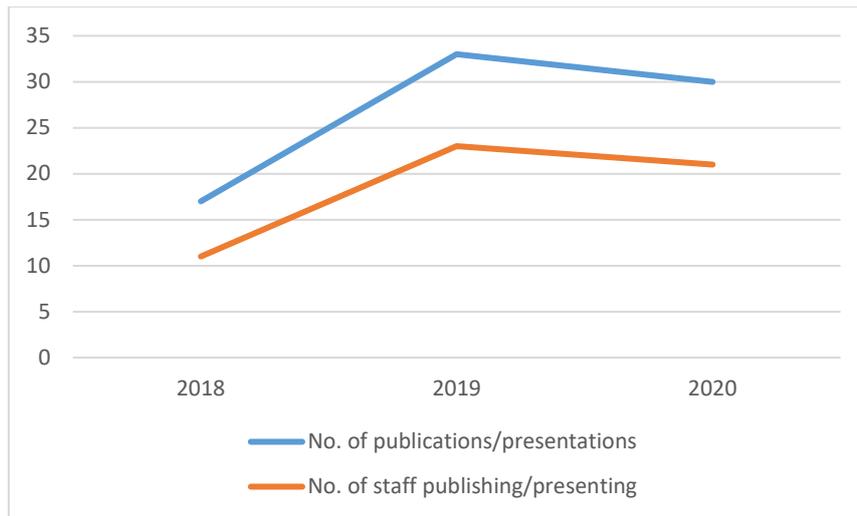


Figure 2: USQ Library publication and presentation trends 2018-2020

Conclusion

A learning culture is one where all library staff members are engaged in learning and can change their work practices and behaviour accordingly (Harland *et al.*, 2017). Keeping up to date with professional developments, developing new skills quickly and flexibly adapting work practices is crucial now more than ever for academic libraries in the pandemic environment. Regardless of the impacts of the pandemic, creating a working environment that encourages real transformative professional development at work will foster a new generation of library and information professionals who are curious, courageous and clever (Lawler, 2016). It is crucial to ensure academic librarians remain valuable to their employers, colleagues and users, sustain their own job satisfaction and professional advancement (Corcoran and McGuinness, 2014). Using Garvin, Edmondson and Gino's (2008) three building blocks of a learning organisation as a touchpoint, the formal and informal approaches to evaluating cultural change indicate that USQ Library is developing as a supportive learning environment, implementing concrete processes and practices and has leaders who model and encourage learning behaviour. While libraries are well down the path of digital transformation, USQ Library staff, like those at any organisation, are at different levels of confidence and capability (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019). Developing a consistent approach to professional development and workplace learning, has created positive culture where staff are engaged in reflective practice, open to new ideas, responsive to user needs and technology trends, and safe to experiment as they identify and solve problems. The lived experience at USQ Library demonstrates that a deliberate, explicit commitment to becoming a learning organisation, modelled by active, aligned leaders and supported by concrete practices and processes, can positively influence cultural change, and embed

workplace learning as an accepted and necessary part of each individual's roles and responsibilities to the benefit of the whole library and the communities they serve.

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