Engaging with our communities: future trends and opportunities for reference services

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Biography: Clare Thorpe is Associate Director (Library Quality and Planning) at University of Southern Queensland and a Distinguished Certified Practitioner of the Australian Library and Information Association. Clare has worked in academic and state libraries since 2001, using evidence-based approaches to develop engaging client experiences. She was named Queensland Library Achiever of the Year in 2016 and received ALIA's Metcalfe Award in 2005. This literature review was completed during Clare's previous role as Manager, Visitor Experience at State Library of Queensland.

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Libraries across the world are constantly reinventing themselves as they respond to changing community needs and the benefits and challenges posed by new and emerging technologies. This literature review was undertaken to inform a visioning and planning exercise in the Visitor Experience team at State Library of Queensland to identify opportunities and trends for the provision of engaging and relevant reference services. Four key themes are discussed in this review: changing community expectations and user behaviour, defining and measuring the impact of the modern library and reference services, offering flexibility in spaces and service delivery, and the roles of library staff and future skills sets. This review confirms that libraries, specifically reference and information services, remain in a unique position to support their communities in learning, work, recreation, creativity and innovation. The challenge for library leadership is to measure the impact of the library in their local community context.

Introduction

Libraries across the world are constantly reinventing themselves as they respond to changing community needs and the benefits and challenges posed by new and emerging technologies. They are reviewing their staffing, service offers, spaces and equipment as they seek to listen and respond to their community's needs. In an age of ongoing digital disruption, it is vital that libraries continually seek to identity their users' changing expectations and aspirations. This literature review was undertaken to inform a visioning and planning exercise in the Visitor Experience team at State Library of

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Queensland. As part of the process an environmental scan was undertaken to identify future library trends, opportunities and challenges in the domain of community engagement and libraries. As a state library, State Library of Queensland provides a blend of both public library and research library experiences for visitors. Public library type experiences include children's activities in The Corner, makerspaces and learning programs in The Edge, lending from our Information Collections and spaces for social interaction, relaxation and serendipitous discovery. Research offerings include the John Oxley Library, the Australian Library of Art, the Australian Pacific Design Library, family history services and support for entrepreneurship and small business in The Business Studio. The Visitor Experience team have the responsibility of welcoming and serving visitors and members at the South Bank building, leading the library in creating an inclusive place for all. The team of thirty staff who are a mix of librarians, library technicians and visitor services officers, provide concierge, information and expert reference services via face-to-face, telephone and online channels. Their goal is to provide outstanding visitor experiences and interactions, with the aim of encouraging repeat visitation and engagement (Hernon & Altman 2015).

As the Visitor Experience team provides the information, research and reference services at State Library, research and commentary related to the provision of information and reference expertise was sought. The literature consulted primarily focussed on the public and academic library sectors from the previous five years. From an extensive review of research papers, opinion pieces and grey literature, four key themes were identified which were relevant to this planning exercise and are discussed in this review:

- Changing community expectations and user behaviour

- Defining and reshaping modern library and reference services

- Offering flexibility in spaces and service delivery

- Reviewing roles of library staff and future skills sets

Changing community expectations and user behaviour

Many researchers focus on the changing expectations of users in relation to contemporary libraries (Queensland University of Technology, 2016; Incling, 2016; University of Adelaide, 2015). It is almost stating the obvious to highlight that the majority of the population does not use libraries to get information (Connaway, 2013). Rather, human resources, including family, friends, peers, colleagues plus the Internet are chosen as primary information sources because of convenience. Pew Research Center (2015) found that in the American experience, people value libraries but do not necessarily visit them. This is not a new trend but rather a sustained pattern over the last two decades - users no longer come to libraries (Maceviciute, 2014).

Libraries, especially reference services, remain under pressure to demonstrate relevancy and face competition from multiple sources (Dickerson, 2016). Some researchers report a decline in the number of reference transactions and a decline of "real" reference questions being asked, that is, questions that are sufficiently difficult to require expert help (Coleman, Mallon and Lo, 2015). This causes in anxiety for many reference librarians, as reference services has long been viewed as essential to what a librarian is and does (Buss, 2016). 'The rapid and pervasive advances in technology and the ability to create, capture, share and disseminate information have radically altered how humans interact with both information and knowledge and with each other' (O'Hehir & Reynolds 2015, p. 318). Additional pressures on libraries include demographic changes in communities, rising urban migration and technological advances (Arup, 2015). However in spite of these pressures, libraries have the

opportunity to take a central role in the knowledge economy (Lineham, 2016). Twenty-first century libraries have the opportunity to foster a sense of belonging and local connectedness within communities as a trusted, safe place (O'Hehir & Reynolds, 2015). Research from the American context shows that libraries are valued for:

- Promoting digital and information literacy – valued as a part of the education ecosystem

- Providing resources for business development, jobs search and enhancing workforce skills

- Providing resources to support civic activism and community participation

- Supporting new immigrants and lower-income communities

- As an important source of health information (Pew Research Center, 2015)

The relationship between librarians and users has evolved, driven by new and emerging technologies (Nguyen, Partridge and Edwards, 2012). Rather than just passive "readers", library users have opportunities to be an active contributor to the library via Web 2.0 technologies that enable participation, personalisation, collaboration and co-creation. The "patron as creator" trend has seen people turn to libraries to assist them and provide tools for skills building and making (Adams Becker et al., 2017). A community's relationship with its library is about stories that document and share experiences, incite better relationships and prove value (Howley, 2015). Arup's (2015) *Future Libraries* report identified four possible features of libraries experiences in 2025. These are:

- Participatory knowledge preservation

- Enabling collaboration and decision making

- Hubs for community wellbeing

- Seamless learning experiences (Arup, 2015)

The role of libraries and museums in improving social wellbeing is a key agenda being investigated by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2016) and underpins the *Universal Offers for Public Libraries* promoted by the Society of Chief Librarians (2016). Sherwin (2015) argues that traditionally libraries were very process-based but that this model does not fit modern users' needs. Today's reference user wants help doing things rather than finding things. "Doing things" may involve technology, such as how to download an e-book. But more than being a technical support destination, public libraries have become a help desk for the community for a range of services from job searching to e-government services (Kenney, 2015). Hopkins, Hare, Donaghey and Abbott (2015) suggest there is a great potential for libraries to play a vital role in supporting people to gain skills and access to technology that will allow them to fully participate in society. This challenge will only increase with 80 per cent of Australian Government services interactions are expected to occur through a digital channel by 2020 (National Commission of Audit, 2014).

Defining and reshaping modern library and reference services

The core purpose of libraries remains unchanged – to provide access to essential resources for those who do not have the means themselves (Arup, 2015). Linehan (2016) proposes public libraries can also be places of exploration, play, performance, creativity, contemplation, reading and research. Creativity is identified as a major trend and measurable outcome, as the library shifts away from being a passive provider to an active participant in encouraging and facilitating users' interests (O'Hehir & Reynolds, 2015). By harnessing principles of participatory culture, libraries can be transformed into transparent, engaged and responsive cultural organisations (Hopkins et al., 2015).

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Innovation creates libraries which ensure their community progresses, thrives and flourishes (Trinity College Dublin, 2015). Rather than lending books, libraries can lend experiences that change individuals and communities (Howley, 2015). Dickerson (2016) suggests that the library of the future is a place where knowledge is created, not just accessed and preserved, where the Information Desk can become a hub of the library, rather than just a desk with a computer. Libraries should provide products and services that add value and cannot be done more effectively than by others (Fister, 2016).

There is a growing trend towards libraries hosting services that juxtapose traditional library services and creative activities to contribute to community wellbeing, such as new business incubators, technology "petting zoos" and music rehearsal spaces (Arup, 2015). Libraries are positioning themselves as community spaces that contribute to personal and group creativity (Bell, 2016). Following the lead of State Library of Queensland (2016) which already offers a start-up workspace and digital creation lab, State Library of Victoria (2016) is following this trend with their forthcoming refurbishment project including space to support entrepreneurship and access to creative technologies like digitisation studios, recording equipment and 3D printers.

By championing openness, bringing people and content together in a safe space to access information, libraries can facilitate discovery and exchanges of ideas. Nguyen, Partridge and Edwards (2012) argue that participatory libraries should allow users to engage both virtual and physical library spaces. It is important for libraries to offer community spaces where meaningful interactions can take place.

Alongside the development of spaces for community engagement, there is a growing awareness of the need to measure the impact of these activities, spaces and

services and to evaluate the diverse range of activities that are enacted in and with them (Digital Media Research Centre, 2016). The Libraries Taskforce in the United Kingdom has launched a five-year project which will include strengthening the evidence base of the impact library services have on the lives of individuals and communities (Libraries Taskforce, 2016). In the academic sector, JISC's learning analytics research and development project proposes adding library data to datasets used to measure student learning. Information, such as students' library visits, circulation record and e-resource access, could be provided on dashboards to teaching staff to show how (or if) success is associated with frequent access to library services and collections (Sclater, Peasgood & Mullan 2016). Observation of library activities, such as coding workshops, alongside qualitative interviews with participants formed the basis of *The Impact of libraries as creative spaces* report (Digital Media Research Centre, 2016). Also in the public library sector, the latest version of the *Guidelines, standards and outcome measure for Australian public libraries* (Australian Library and Information Association, 2016) has identified six impact measures libraries can use to demonstrate their value and proposes using short surveys to measure outcomes. The six measures are in the domains of:

- Literacy and lifelong learning

- Informed and connected citizens

- Digital inclusion

- Personal development and wellbeing

- Stronger and more creative communities

- Economic and workforce development (Australian Library and Information Association, 2016)

As libraries adapt services to provide vital connections between people and information, the need to measure impact with evidence becomes more pressing. Examples of how this may be achieved include:

- Free Library of Philadelphia – uses specific metric provided by partners in its Read by 4th program to track student literacy outcomes (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2016)
- Ljubljana City Library, Slovenia – measures the impact of the library's services to homeless clients, including the number of clients who obtain jobs or receive stable housing (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2017)

Focussing on reference services, Dickerson (2016) suggests that showcasing the tangible outcomes of learning and research projects can highlight the value of reference services. This approach of creating a space for user participation and experimentation reflects what Dickerson (2016) considers the heart of reference services. An example of this participatory approach is the five measurable reference service goals adopted by Pearson Library in California:

(1) Establish an environment of intellectual curiosity and exploration
(2) Raise awareness for research resources provided
(3) Increase number of meaningful interactions at the reference services desk
(4) Increase opportunities for experiential learning
(5) Increase opportunities for the community to share perspectives and experiences (Dickerson, 2016)

Libraries are now expected to be defined by openness, participation and user-driven

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services, through constant and purposeful change to both improve services to current users and reach potential users (Nguyen et al., 2012). To achieve this, libraries may be required to improve their visibility in the communities they serve (Arup, 2015). An example of being visible in the physical library space is the suggestion that librarians go beyond roving, with their desks permanently placed out in public spaces (Dickerson, 2016). "Getting away from the desk" both within library buildings and outside of it has become a call to arms for community-focussed galleries, museums and libraries (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2016). Increasing the visibility of reference services online could include new technologies, such as pop-up chat boxes, Facebook and other social media spaces and mobile text messaging (Connaway, 2013). Transformation in libraries is about evolving purposefully, leveraging existing successful services to innovate, influence and maximise community engagement (Australian Library and Information Association, 2016).

Offering flexibility in spaces and service delivery

A focus on flexibility is recurring theme in the literature. Adaptability and flexibility is fundamental to respond to user needs and expectations (Arup, 2015). Libraries must constantly change to survive (Connaway, 2013). Library spaces need to be flexible enough to stimulate collaboration and social interaction while still enabling quiet reflection and serendipitous discovery (Arup, 2015). The emphasis is on flexibility as a catalyst for collaboration, to enable changing and different styles of learning and research (Trinity College Dublin 2015). For example, the British Library (2015) has committed to opening up more varied study environments to ensure that physical spaces and onsite services meet the changing needs of researchers and users. The library of Trinity College Dublin (2015) is exploring a range of fit-for-purpose spaces including a

mix of quiet contemplative spaces, busier collaborative zones, tech bars, data visualisation spaces, entrepreneur hub and social gathering spaces. Terrell (2015) argues that library users want access to computers, study spaces and alternative venues to home, school and work. The challenge is to avoid libraries becoming passive and expensive study lounges where visitors only interact with their devices, homework and little else (Howley, 2015). There can be a tension between balancing the dual role of providing places for independent study and reflection as well as fostering creativity in collaborative making and co-working zones.

With regards to service delivery, people's expectations of libraries' services are measured against their experiences as consumers (Arup, 2015). In an environment where people choose their information provider based on what is convenient, the personalized service provided by customer-focussed libraries is valued (Connaway, 2013). Research from the British Library (2015) suggests the more screen-based our lives, the greater the perceived value of real human encounters and physical artefacts. Writing for the retail sector, Grundy (2016) argues that customers place a much higher importance on positive customer experience than on price or product quality. He suggests that customer focussed companies share the following habits (all of which are relevant to libraries):

- Make it easy for users to get help from real people

- Obsess over every detail of the customer experience

- Be proactive and do not wait behind a desk for customer contact

- Develop a user-focussed or customer obsessed culture

- Value quality over quantity (Grundy, 2016)

Reference desks have traditionally been the place where librarians connect users to collections and services. Regardless of the wealth of digital information freely available for users to find independently, Bandyopadhyay and Boyd-Byrnes (2016) argue that there will always be a need for human-mediated reference services and reference librarians are in the unique position of being able to provide contextual information to cater to their client's problem-solving needs. Buss (2016) recommends an approach that evolves reference services rather than abandoning them. This may include adjusting service points and hours, enhancing physical services with digital and applying reference philosophies that meet the need of specific user groups. Personalised or tailored offers could replace a one-size fits all approach to service delivery. Kenney (2015) argues that reference services are remaining relevant as they help people to navigate complex challenges of technology, e-government and "doing things", such as finding a job - a radically different service from traditional reference services. Reference has become a multimodal service as librarians seek to meet the needs of users both within and outside the building and give them multiple options for meeting their information needs (Buss, 2016). In an increasing digital service environment, there is a still a significant community need for human-to-human interactions which can be provided by professional, skilled reference staff.

Reviewing roles of library staff and future skills sets

Staff are the heart and soul of libraries. It is their expertise and commitment that makes a library's services so valued to its users (British Library, 2015). Staff are valued by library visitors and seen as enablers, facilitators and short-cuts to getting to the right content in the most efficient way possible (Incling, 2016). In the context of emerging technologies that enable participation, librarians are no longer book keepers but rather

information editors, organisers and advisors (Nguyen et al., 2012). Terrell (2015) argues the domain and workplace of the contemporary reference librarian is wherever the information is, for example, online. Technology has forced librarians to think about what their purpose is (Fister, 2016). The challenge is to continue put users at the heart of everything we do as we also listen, innovate and adapt to a changing world (British Library, 2015).

The focus on librarians having a much closer and more pro-active relationship with users has particular relevance. Staff must develop a good understanding of user needs, as well as having excellent communication skills (Maceviciute, 2014). The role of library staff should be about providing a product or service that helps users effectively, conveniently and affordably (Fister, 2016). Reference services are no longer tied to a desk but can operate anywhere. It is not the desk (place) that matters but the ethos of service, collaboration and partnership; helping users to solve their information needs (Buss, 2016). This requires responsive, creative people who can think in innovative terms and collaborate (Steele, 2014).

In academic libraries, future skills foci for librarians are in developing more partnerships with teaching staff and taking an active role in synthesising and promoting research data (Maceviciute, 2014). This emphasis on developing partnerships is relevant regardless of the library sector. Connaway (2013) suggests librarians embrace new and unconventional methods for delivering services and building relationships and possess a willingness and eagerness to try new technologies for services. Other relevant skills identified in the literature include community publishing, managing big and open data, people management, facilitation, technical awareness and coordination (O'Hehir & Reynolds, 2015). Librarians may find their expertise used in a mentoring approach; working alongside users to support casual or formal lifelong learning, research and

informed decision-making (Arup, 2015). Librarians can also have a role in encouraging self-reflective behaviours focused on curiosity (Deitering & Gascho Rempel, 2017) and have a role as champions of creativity (Bell, 2016). To do all this, librarians will need to gain the skills that enable them to help people engage meaningfully in society through digital fluency and citizenship (Hopkins et al., 2015).

Conclusion

In the age of constant digital disruption, library leadership and staff continue to renew and reinvent their purpose as they engage with the changing needs of their communities. This literature review has identified a number of opportunities for library staff to investigate in their local context. These are:

- Fostering a sense of belonging and local connectedness within communities as a trusted, safe place
- Supporting people to gain skills and access to technology that will allow them to fully participate in society as digital citizens; continuing to support casual or formal lifelong learning, research and informed decision-making
- Providing places for independent study and reflection as well as fostering creativity in collaborative making and co-working zones.
- Offering personalised, synthesised and contextual information to cater to their community's problem-solving needs
- Implementing an ethos of service, collaboration and partnership

Libraries, and specifically reference and information services, remain in a unique position to support their communities in learning, work, recreation, creativity and innovation. The challenge for library leadership is to measure the impact of the library

in their local community context and there are opportunities for future research to be conducted in this area. In spite of the challenges that come with a constantly changing environment, libraries in the 21st century will continue to connect people to information, helping them to find what they need and empowering them to achieve their goals.

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