

Teaching Reference and Information Services @ Sheffield iSchool

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This article outlines how the information school at the University of Sheffield educates students for the realities of reference and information work in the age of Google. Following a short introduction to the department and our programmes, it discusses our core module on *Information Resources & Information Literacy* (taken by around 80 students annually), concentrating on practical tasks designed to develop competence in identifying and satisfying information needs, by giving students practice in teaching information skills, in addition to searching for and evaluating information resources.

The Sheffield Information School

Sheffield was the first UK school to become a formal member of the **iSchools** community, an international group of research-led library and information science departments with specialist interests in the relationship between information, people and technology. The iSchools Charter promotes expertise in all forms of information as a fundamental requirement for progress in science, business, education and culture, noting that this expertise “must include understanding of the uses and users of information, the nature of information itself, as well as information technologies and their applications” [1]. Sheffield has recognised expertise in these particular areas, with a longstanding international reputation for its research in information behaviour, information retrieval and information literacy, all of which informs and enriches our approach to teaching reference and information work.

The department offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that prepare candidates for the full spectrum of information-related careers, including specialist posts as librarians, information managers and information systems professionals, as well as other roles where information handling is central to the job. Our courses have diversified over time to include certificates, diplomas and undergraduate degrees, in addition to the traditional masters and PhD, as well as specialised programmes in areas like Health Informatics, Electronic & Digital Library Management and Information Literacy. We also offer CPD pathways through our programmes and individual modules for practitioners wanting to upgrade or update their learning [2]. Our largest intakes are in Librarianship (MA) and Information Management (BSc and MSc) and all students on these programmes now take a core module that enables them to gain an understanding of information resources, information needs, information literacy and information-seeking behaviour, including practical skills in searching for, evaluating and packaging information in response to a user query, accessing a variety of sources.

Our postgraduate module on information resources has been a central element of our Librarianship programme for many years, but its focus and scope has evolved in line with the changing digital information landscape and the impact of the network revolution on library resources and services, especially the ubiquity of search engines, development of digital reference services (within and beyond the library), growth in the training/teaching activities of library and information professionals, and the application of Web 2.0 technologies. In 2005, we changed the module name from ‘Access to Information Resources’ to ‘Information Resources & *Information Literacy*’, signalling the increased emphasis on this key concept within the module. In 2006, we made the module a compulsory first-semester unit for our postgraduate Information Management students, in recognition of the fundamental importance of the topics covered for all

information professionals. This particular module has also been taken as a standalone course by local public library staff to meet CPD needs, underlining the central importance of this dynamic field to contemporary professional practice.

Relating Theory to Practice

A session in Week 5 on 'Reference and information services: policies and strategies' relates the knowledge and skills covered by the module to current real-world practice. This session defines and reviews trends and developments in reference and information work, including different types and levels of service (from quick reference/referral to consultancy and in-depth research), methods and models of delivery (e.g. helpdesk, roving, virtual and collaborative provision). Students engage in discussion around policy issues, such as charging for research services and whether information professionals should carry out searches for users or help them to find information for themselves. We also look at different examples of digital reference, including the People's Network Enquire service, QuestionPoint and co-operative round-the-clock 'follow-the-sun' models used by university libraries.

The Week 5 session also provides practical guidance on the principles and procedures for conducting a reference interview, which occupies a substantial part of the session, because of its inherent importance in information work and also because students are expected to apply the methods and techniques discussed in the assessed task for this module. We cover the essentials of both face-to-face and electronic/virtual reference interviews, drawing on classic textbook guidelines (e.g. Bopp & Smith [3], Katz [4]), as well as real-world procedures (e.g. QuestionPoint [5] and the Internet Public Library [6]). We also ask students to identify the different skills needed for successful reference interviews and to compare the relative importance of skills needed for face-to-face and digital reference transactions, drawing this time on evidence from a study carried out by a former MA Librarianship student. This class exercise is intended to help them decide what mode of interview to use in their assignment.

The aim here is to provide an overview of service provision in the library and information service sector as a whole, using examples from public, national, academic and special LIS in both the lecture and the related reading list. Students explore service provision in specific sectors in more depth in Semester 2, when they take 3 elective modules, enabling them to focus on one or more sectors (e.g. academic and special LIS, public libraries, services to children and young people) and/or specialist areas of provision (e.g. archives and records management, business intelligence, e-government information, healthcare information or legal information resources). These electives typically include contributions from leading practitioners in the field, who highlight the issues and challenging of service provision in particular sectors. Semester 1 also includes an extensive visits programme to different types of libraries in the region, which enables students to observe and interact with practitioners in operational settings and helps them to decide which modules to take in Semester 2.

Information Literacy Teaching

Although 'bibliographic instruction' and 'user education' have long been recognised as part of the librarian's role, it is evident that the role of information professionals in helping non-specialists to become competent in finding, accessing, evaluating and organising information has expanded significantly in the Web-based world, as a result of the sheer volume of information available – much of dubious quality – which people often find difficult to navigate successfully. Growth in information literacy work has been most noticeable in the academic

sector, where many subject/liaison librarians now spend a large proportion of their time teaching student groups of various sizes, but information specialists in other domains – notably the legal, government and health sectors – have also reported spending more time training colleagues to use information products and systems that are intended for desktop or mobile access, but often need higher levels of information skills than users possess.

Students and practitioners in the field have criticised library and information education providers for inadequate coverage of information literacy in professional curricula and in particular for not preparing graduates properly for future roles as information skills trainers and information literacy educators. Our iSchool includes several staff who are recognised internationally as experts in information literacy and we also host the Centre for Information Literacy Research [7], whose members make up the core team for our Information Resources and Information Literacy module. Information literacy has therefore had a central place in our postgraduate curriculum for some time. The focus in our core module was originally on enabling students to understand the concept of information literacy (from both theoretical and practical perspectives) and to develop their own competence, rather than on developing their abilities as information literacy educators, although we highlighted the teaching/training role by including case studies presented by practitioners (typically one from an academic library and one from an industrial information service).

Recognising the need to strengthen this area of our teaching, in 2006 we introduced a new assignment, the 'search/teach task', in which students work in pairs over a four-week period to create a short instructional guide to using a specific aspect of a particular database (*Emerald Insight, Google Scholar, Library and Information Science Abstracts* or *Web of Knowledge*). As preparation for this task, we introduce students to theories about learning styles and principles of learning design, as well as providing guidelines on designing documentation. In addition to their database guide, students also have to produce a list of links to other recommended guides, tutorials, evaluations and sources of information about their allocated database and publish this using a Web 2.0 tool (e.g. Squidoo or WordPress). The final part of this task involves evaluating one of the guides produced by their classmates.

This unassessed search-teach assignment has given students a lot more confidence in applying for professional roles that involve teaching or training and it has also prepared them better for job interviews, as we have found that candidates for entry-level posts are now often asked to design and deliver a short information skills training session as part of the selection process. However, in 2009, in response to both employer and student feedback, we extended our coverage of information literacy teaching further, by adding an optional 'Practitioners' Seminar' to the module, enabling students to work together on the development of their teaching skills in a half-day workshop session (run twice) with two expert practitioners, Jo Webb and Chris Powis, who are both Fellows of CILIP and National Teaching Fellows, as well as being authors of the leading text on the subject [8].

Assessing Student Learning

Assessment for our Information Resources & Information Literacy module is 100% coursework, with 3 related elements. It is unusual in involving all our academic staff in the assessment process, rather than only the small team who deliver the classroom sessions. Teaching staff take the role of a client with an information need and everyone provides a set of reference/search queries, which are posted online via our virtual learning environment for the students to choose their client and topic. The coursework entails each student doing a literature

search on the assigned topic, selecting the items that best answer the query (which must include several different kinds of publication) and then providing both an annotated bibliography of 15 items and a literature review of 1,000 words (covering at least 10 of the items). Students are expected to interact with the 'client' to ascertain exactly what the information need is and what level of material is wanted. They are also expected to use a range of search tools, which must include Dialog.

The final part of this assignment is a reflective report of 2,000 words, providing a critical evaluation of their experience and development in information literacy during the semester, structured around the SCONUL 7 Pillars of Information Literacy [9]. The report must cover the various stages of the search task undertaken for the assignment, but students can also draw on learning gained from other modules, identifying their own strengths and weaknesses, in addition to evaluating the tools used. The coursework submissions are assessed by the staff members who set the query and the involvement of all academic staff in this activity reinforces its importance to students. The assignment is designed to develop and assess their skills in searching for, evaluating, organising and communicating information; their understanding of information literacy, including the 7 Pillars model; and their abilities in reflective writing. It therefore not only prepares students for practical service-related tasks in the workplace, but also provides practice in the type of report-writing needed to fulfil the requirements for becoming a Chartered Member of CILIP.

This brief account offers a glimpse into how we equip postgraduate students at Sheffield to deliver reference and information services in the digital world. Our core first-semester module lays the foundation for more specialised and advanced work in semester 2, which is then consolidated in the research project undertaken by most students during the final 3 months of their programme.

For more information about courses at Sheffield, please visit our website or contact the author (email s.m.corrall@sheffield.ac.uk).

References

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