An interview with Sheila Corrall

Interview by: Margaret Adolphus

Sheila Corrall is professor of librarianship and information management at the University of Sheffield. Before that, she spent 13 years managing university library and information services, most recently as director of academic services at the University of Southampton. Before entering higher education, she worked in public libraries and for the British Library.

Her current research interests include library, information and knowledge management strategies; information service structures; professional roles and competences; and strategic aspects of information literacy development. She has published three books and more than 50 articles, and has served on many committees and public bodies. In 2002-2003, she served as the first president of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and in 2003 she received an International Information Industries Lifetime Achievement Award for contribution to the information profession.

Web 2.0

The traditional role of the librarian, even after the Internet came to dominate the information scene, was as custodian and organizer of information. How do you think the librarian's role has changed with the Web 2.0 library?

I think there has been a lot of hype around Web 2.0 and Library 2.0. In general terms, I see a continuation of an ongoing trend away from the information professional carrying out searches for others, to people accessing information online themselves. It's the end-user revolution, which has been around since the 1990s when we first started to see databases intended for non-specialist use.

The difference now is that using information online has become the norm, and there's a new generation of "digital natives". And the high use of social media and virtual worlds indicates that some people are actually **living** online. These people are very comfortable searching for information, but they are not always as competent as they think they are. So there is still a very important role for information professionals in helping people to develop effective searching skills and also raising their awareness around the quality of information.

The other traditional role of the librarian, acquiring and organizing information, is equally crucial in the digital world, although the way it is done is changing. It's a question of building quality electronic collections and striking an appropriate balance between print and digital materials. And reminding users that sometimes the most appropriate information source is not online; it may be a traditional hard copy source or it may be somebody they can get information from face-to-face.

Organizing access is increasingly complex because of the expectation that it should be quick, easy and seamless. So one of our challenges is pulling everything together and creating appropriate interfaces which enable people to navigate an information landscape that is much more complex than in the print era.

Take a typical academic search. In the old days, you might conduct a hard copy scan of some current contents or search an abstracting or indexing service and then have to go to the library shelves, find where the periodical was and leaf through volumes individually. Now if you conduct a search in Web of Knowledge, you will get a list of references, you can take something that looks useful, and, if your library has the necessary linking software on its system, click through to that article. You can even, if the journal publishers are part of the same cross-referencing system, follow up the article's references immediately online.

The problem is that if the academics come across something that looks potentially relevant, but to which there isn't quick and easy access, they may be tempted to ignore it and make do with something that is less useful or

appropriate.

There's a need to strike a balance between providing instant, one-stop access and ensuring people acknowledge the range of different types of media, including hard copy sources, and that they may need to make a little bit more effort in some cases.

People also need to be aware of issues of quality and appropriateness. That's where information literacy comes in again: people need to be trained to evaluate both their information needs and the resources they subsequently find, so that they can identify what is most appropriate for their task.

Another aspect of Web 2.0 is that the publishing boot, as it were, is now on the other foot and libraries have also become publishers (of institutional repositories). Some would say that libraries lack the necessary quality control mechanisms that publishers have, of facilitating independent peer review. What are your thoughts on this?

I think there are some misconceptions about the role of institutional repositories. These are really a parallel resource to the formally published material. They can contain different versions, such as postprints – the author's final version after peer review before it was actually turned into the proper typographical format for a journal article – as well as earlier unrefereed versions (preprints).

So it's publishing in the sense of putting information in the public domain, but it's not the same as a peer-reviewed journal, because the two versions of the work may sit side by side. So the repository will not replace formal publication; it's exposing the work at different stages of its creation and in different formats, so that the ideas get wider circulation.

Another interesting development is the possibility of publishing data sets: there's quite a lot of interest now in data repositories as well as information repositories. Take the work done by UKOLN in the JISC-funded eBank Project, for example: here you in effect have a database which stores raw research data. There's a brief description as well as links to the formal publication which uses the data, so you can go from the data to the findings as well as the other way around. This allows the re-use of data to check experiments, verify findings and correct errors, or to ask new questions and stimulate innovations.

One last point on Web 2.0: do you see information sources as now including social media such as blogs and discussion lists?

Absolutely. When I give a lecture on the information universe, these types of informal information are introduced alongside the conventional resources. And, interestingly, the entries for *The New Walford Guide to Reference Resource*s, for which I helped compile some of the entries for the LIS area, now has sections on keeping up to date for each subject, which includes discussion lists and blogs.

I argue that the same principles need to be applied here as to more conventional information resources: "Who was the author?", "Who's the intended audience?", "What level is this written at?".

Hybrid roles

We used to talk about the hybrid library, now it's the hybrid library professional. How does this work in practice, and what are the skills needed to be an effective hybrid professional?

We've done quite a number of studies in this area at Sheffield. My colleague, Andrew Cox, looked specifically at web managers for both his doctoral work and ongoing research. And I've been involved in studies looking at subject librarians in their teaching role as well as at legal information professionals. For a number of years we've been running a health informatics programme, which attracts a very interesting range of people: not only librarians and information technology (IT) people, but also different health professions – doctors, nurses, therapists, pharmacists – all of whom share an interest in health information and the technology used to access health information and data.

All librarians need to surround their core professional technical skills with managerial and business competences; they also need the personal and interpersonal skills to be able to apply their professional expertise in the context in which they're working, and interact with people as in any service profession.

But the difference with these hybrid roles is that they're working on the boundaries of their profession and so need a more in-depth knowledge of the particular domain area, or even areas. Take legal information professionals, for example: they need legal knowledge not as in a law graduate, but rather the special types of legal materials, the particular citation practices and the specialist terminology. In addition, much of their work is actually business information research. So they also need a good knowledge of business information sources and business research skills as well as an understanding of the law firm as the business environment in which they're working. On top of which are their professional information skills, which, increasingly, need to be of a higher order for knowledge management activities if they are to extract and analyse the information and place it in the relevant organizational context.

Another example is the subject librarians who are fulfilling teaching roles. They obviously need to keep abreast of the main information sources in their field, but in order to undertake their teaching responsibilities effectively they need extensive pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Last year one of my master's degree students undertook an investigation into the pedagogic knowledge needs of subject librarians, which has been written up as a journal article (Corrall and Cox, forthcoming). What was striking was how many in our sample of 82 librarians had actually undertaken specialist training. We collected data about the particular competences they felt were necessary. These included an understanding of how people learn, learning theory and knowledge of a different range of teaching techniques, the principles of instructional design, as well as how to design teaching sessions and learning materials, both face-to-face and online.

Many of these skills are the same as those needed by people teaching students on a regular and continuing basis. But the particular challenge for librarians is that they often may only have one opportunity, so they don't have the same chance to build up a relationship over a semester. They also need to be able to take advantage of what is often referred to as "the teachable moment": an informal instruction session at an enquiry point, for example. They've got to be able to think very quickly about the most effective way to introduce someone to a resource or a particular technique if they've just got five or ten minutes with them. And they want to make sure that they give not just the answer, but also the skills to find that answer.

Information literacy

You list as one of your research interests the strategic aspects of information literacy development. How can information literacy become a core goal for universities and their information services departments?

This I must argue is really our professional mission for the 21st century and the information society. My criticism of many libraries would be that few include reference to developing information skills in their mission statement, even when it is in their strategic plan.

Even more challenging is the requirement to embed information literacy at the institutional level. But that's really what's needed in order to get the collaboration of other key stakeholders, such as the students, who are likely to pay much more attention if their tutors tell them it's important.

We have been phenomenally successful here at Sheffield in that regard because information literacy is a key objective of the university's learning and teaching strategy, and is listed as one of the characteristics of a Sheffield graduate.

A number of factors helped us achieve this step change in attitude. One was our unique position in having not only an enthusiastic library, but also an academic department with expertise in information literacy teaching and research which gave the concept academic respectability.

Another was the decision by the university to focus on inquiry-based learning, with our Centre for Inquiry-Based Learning (CILASS), which came about because the university was looking at possible areas it could focus on to make a bid for one of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning. The original idea was research-led teaching, but I didn't think this was sufficiently distinctive and suggested as an alternative information skills and information literacy. We didn't manage to persuade the university to focus the whole centre on information literacy, but it did recognize that it was a key strand of inquiry-based learning. So it was a matter of hitching information literacy to what happened to be the institutional priority at that time.

The Department of Information Studies at Sheffield University

You have a very specific interest in strategic development. How have you applied this to your own department at Sheffield?

Because I'm a strategic thinker, thinking strategically about the department and its development permeates everything I do. So, when I took over as head, I made some changes in our structure and line management responsibilities and recognized that we needed to evolve some of the roles and responsibilities, for example in the areas of learning technology and our IT infrastructure.

But I have also – in collaboration with colleagues – renewed our portfolio of postgraduate programmes. We're developing new master's programmes in information literacy, in electronic and digital library management and in legal information management. These are indicative of the trend towards hybrid professionals that we talked about earlier.

Our information literacy programme has only recently completed the formal approval process, but we have had a lot of interest in it both internationally and in the UK. We are considering the possibility of developing some aspects of the programme in a more flexible mode, such as e-learning, so that people don't have to make too many visits to Sheffield.

We've done that very successfully with our health informatics MSc, which has been running since 2000 but has been completely revamped to reflect the changing demands of the sector. It's evolved from being a traditional distance learning programme with day schools and aimed mainly at National Health Service staff, to being international using virtual classroom software. Interestingly, the new programme has exceeded its targets for UK students in its first year of recruitment.

You came to the University of Sheffield as a senior academic, having previously been a university senior manager, but in a non-academic role. How did you find the transition to academe?

Well, it was certainly challenging. I was lucky in that my last job, as director of academic services at Southampton, I was responsible for the unit developing the institution's learning and teaching strategy, the Quality Assurance Unit, so I inevitably spent a lot of my time on learning and teaching issues, particularly e-learning.

That gave me more confidence about moving into the academic role. But I still probably had a slightly naive view – as many senior service professionals do – of academics having a more leisurely time of it than those of us in senior management jobs, managing hundreds of staff.

What I found particularly difficult was the comparative lack of administrative and clerical support – as a senior manager I was supported by a team of people, but as a head of department I don't even have half a secretary. So, I spend a lot of time doing very basic administrative and clerical things.

And there's the very extensive bureaucratic demands associated with teaching and learning these days: for example, all our teaching has to be evaluated. We ask our students to evaluate our teaching at both programme and module level every semester, we have to analyse the data and summarize the findings and decide on the response. It's necessary and valuable, but it takes up a huge amount of time.

And then preparing a teaching session takes a lot more time than preparing a conference presentation of a similar length because one has to think about the learning aspect in greater depth. To ensure that I was fully prepared I put myself through a postgraduate certificate in teaching and learning, although that was not required for someone at my level.

E-learning and the librarian

E-learning has come up several times in this interview. What do you see the librarian's involvement being here?

Interestingly, another of my master's students is currently looking specifically at subject librarians' involvement in virtual learning environments (VLEs). That is quite a challenging area because, paradoxically, VLEs are often designed to restrict rather than open up access to information. The idea is that you have, in effect, a sort of dedicated internal website with your teaching and learning resources and the module documentation, such as the course outline, the reading list and the instructions for assignments as well as, probably, copies of the PowerPoint slides used in

lectures and group discussion facilities and bulletin boards for messages.

But one of the frustrations is that whereas if we put our resources on our departmental website, they can be seen by all, which means that, for example, I can check what a colleague has covered in a module which they are teaching the term before I teach mine. VLEs, however, are only accessible to those teaching or taking the module. So they really create closed communities. We've tried to get round it here with creating a VLE at a programme level for our MA in librarianship so that our students can look at the modules they're not taking as well the ones that they are.

So you can see that the challenge for librarians is that they have to negotiate access to these resources with the academics teaching the modules within their subject responsibility area. That immediately assumes that the academics acknowledge that the librarian has a role to play in supporting the student's learning. There are still situations where academics see the library as something rather apart from the actual curriculum.

What should the librarian do once he or she gains access to the VLE?

They can provide access to the relevant resources as well as their own information skills tutorials, so that the students see this as integral to their academic studies as opposed to something that's just on a separate library website.

Here at Sheffield, for example, there is an information skills tutorial which is available in our VLE and that has been customized to the needs of information studies students. And any student who logs onto the VLE will all see a different set of resources depending on which programme and modules they're taking as well as a generic information skills tutorial thanks to the collaboration between departmental staff and the library.

Leading the library

In your role as president of CILIP, and in recent writings ("Developing public library managers as leaders: Evaluation of a national leadership development programme", *Library Management*, **Vol. 29 Nos. 6/7, pp. 473-488) you have identified lack of leadership as a problem in the public library profession. What do you see as the short- and long-term solutions here?**

This applies to the academic as much as the public library sector, and has done for some time. Back in the 1990s, I was involved in a project to look at the skills and competences needed for people heading up the new converged library and IT services. And, throughout my time as a university librarian and director of information services, there were continuing problems – which still persist – in attracting people to senior positions. It's not uncommon for these posts to be advertised several times, for search consultants to be used and several iterations gone through before an appointment can be made.

Another of our students investigated leadership in the sector last year and conducted a study where he interviewed three service heads in academic libraries, three in public libraries, a government librarian and some library science academics. And the messages coming from all sectors were broadly the same: there's a lack both of confidence and ambition.

My own feeling is that quite a lot of this is due to the lack of participative management and learning culture. Senior people may bemoan the lack of talent of those lower down, but don't seem to understand that it's partly the way they manage the services. They need to give people challenging assignments and the opportunity to manage projects, which can be a good way of developing management capabilities for people without line responsibility. It's a matter of creating a learning culture where people can develop, and we need more people modelling the sort of behaviour that's appropriate in a strategic leader.

Are there any other areas which you are working in currently, not covered above, that you would like to discuss?

You've touched on my main research interests – various aspects of strategic management, and the emergence of hybrid professionals. The other main area I've been doing some work on is knowledge management.

I've been looking particularly at knowledge management strategies in higher education: although higher education institutions are knowledge organizations par excellence, there's little formal recognition of this and few institutions have a knowledge management strategy.

The term "knowledge management" is about a recognition that knowledge is informal as well as formal, tacit as well as explicit. There's a whole debate as to whether you can manage knowledge, but you can put arrangements in place that enable people to share it more effectively. Michael Koenig of the Palmer School of Library and Information Science, Long Island University, has done a number of studies where he's traced and compared the bibliographic progress of knowledge management with that of other management "hot topics" or business enthusiams, such as total quality management and business process re-engineering, along with other sorts of things and argues that it's here to stay, and not just a fad.

And I'm also interested in how knowledge management strategies, both implicit and explicit, relate to other strategies in the same arena, for example, information or library or information literacy strategies. You need to be information literate to share, use, and re-use knowledge effectively.

If you could have your career again, would you still become a librarian, and why?

Yes I would, because I have hindsight and know that I've had an admittedly very challenging, but ultimately very rewarding and exciting career. I qualified as a librarian over 30 years ago, completing my postgraduate diploma at what was then the North London Polytechnic. I've picked up a number of other qualifications along the way, such as an MBA, and an MSc in Information Systems as well as my most recent learning and teaching qualification.

In that period I've had ten different jobs: I started out in public libraries, I spent ten years in four different roles in the British Library and the last part of my career in the higher education sector. And that's one of the great attractions of the profession, you can do a qualification and it takes you into all sorts of different areas, as varied as being out in a mobile library in County Down, which is where I started off before I went to university, and then chief cataloguer in a London borough, which is what I did after I qualified, and then, in the British Library, a very specialist job as information specialist for library and information science and then heading up the revenue earning services in science, technology and business, then through to the various jobs I've done in the university sector. And the core skills which carried me through all that are really valuable – it just underlines the fact that this is fundamentally a very useful skill set that you can take into a number of different environments.

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