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Practising What We Preach: Developing a Professional Reading Group for the Library Academic Support Team

Alison Park – Academic Librarian

Erin Nephin - Library Academic Support Team Manager

Leeds Beckett University

Abstract: This paper briefly considers the value of reading or journals clubs for the continuing professional development of library staff. It suggests that a reading club is not just a mechanism for keeping up to date with developments in the sector but can also be used to facilitate the development of a more robust and proactive culture where librarians perceive themselves increasingly as research active to inform and develop their own practice. It considers the Academic Support Team within Libraries and Learning Innovation (LLI) as an example.

Reading groups or journals clubs have long been a feature within academia, most notably within the health sciences disciplines (Hickman and Allen, 2005). They usually involve groups of students and/or academic staff meeting regularly to discuss articles and research published on a particular subject or theme, the key aims being to facilitate debate and critical analysis and to keep up to date with current thinking and research within a subject. Whilst a review of the literature does not reveal a great deal published on the subject of professional reading groups in a library setting, an increasing number of articles and blog posts cite case studies and examples of such groups and their value to library staff.

Within LLI at Leeds Beckett University, the Academic Support Team is comprised of Academic Librarians and Information Services Librarians. The team provides academic liaison support to undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses as well as researchers and academic staff. In addition to managing subject resource collections and information skills teaching, the team contributes to core library services by providing enquiry desk support and contributing to other project work. One of the key aspects of this type of role is to encourage students to actively engage with a wide range of

quality research published on their subject or topic; to read and critically evaluate this material in order to further their knowledge and understanding to inform their own ideas and practice. Yet, as the literature suggests, librarians often seem to find it very difficult to engage in such activities themselves. Lack of time, having to focus on dealing with day-to-day tasks, a lack of a research culture and formal meeting structures are all cited as reasons why librarians often struggle to 'practice what they preach' (Hickman and Allen, 2005, Barksy, 2009, Pickton, 2016). In some ways the experience of the Academic Support team is not dissimilar to other case studies in the literature; colleagues are split across two sites with staff working on different days so it is often difficult to meet. Team meetings are more formal and structured in nature with a number of standing business items on the agenda so it is not always feasible to have a longer, perhaps more esoteric, discussion on some issues.

Less tangible constraints are possibly that the team perceives it performs more of a research support role to academic colleagues, for example providing training on literature searching and information sources or raising awareness of the institutional repository and Open Access issues. Within the wider institution, research activities

such as networking, training or funding opportunities tend to be aimed at early career or more established research staff for whom this activity is an integral part of their job, as well as their professional development. Whilst professional reading to inform and develop individual work and service development is considered good practice, there is no formal remit to be research active within the role at present. Colleagues in the team often present at internal and external conferences or publish short papers in publications aimed at the library and information management sector. However, evidence-based practice does not really extend beyond these activities and there is no requirement to have or be working towards a doctoral qualification, as there is with academic staff.

The idea of a professional reading club for the team came about from having looked at material published on the subject. Fostering a more research active and informed culture and encouraging greater team collaboration were chief drivers of its formation. The reading club additionally supports the development of reflective practice and work towards professional recognition (Chartered Librarian status/revalidation from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and fellowships from the Higher Education Academy) - two important continual professional development goals of the team. The group aims to meet on a monthly basis with some flexibility of date and location to allow as many people as possible to attend at least one meeting over a period of a few months. The style of the meetings is deliberately informal to encourage discussion and differentiate it from other forums, for example, a team meeting. A theme is chosen, which is in some way relevant to the team, and two readings are selected - they may be articles, blog posts, conference papers or something else entirely, but usually include one item from a peer-reviewed publication and one less formal item. Previous themes have included library space, developing a culture of assessment, the impact of the authentic self and fostering a research culture. At the end of each meeting (or shortly thereafter), a theme is selected for the proceeding meeting and a facilitator is nominated.

The group facilitator opens the meeting and guides the discussion to ensure it stays focused on the emerging themes and that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. However, the facilitator is also an active participant in the discussions and is able to contribute in the same way as the other members. The facilitator records the spirit of the discussion in the group's professional reading group blog (<https://leagueoflibranauts.wordpress.com/>), providing a summary of the discussions for those who are unable to attend, as well as recording details of the specific readings for each meeting. Although some colleagues have not been able to attend due to other commitments, the majority of the team have participated in one or more meetings, and there is the hope that some may choose to use the blog to comment upon or expand the discussion as the group becomes more established.

Feedback from participants has been mainly positive. One of the key benefits in setting up the group is that it has provided an opportunity for colleagues from both sites to regularly meet together on an informal basis. It has also signposted opportunities for colleagues to read around a range of subjects relevant to their profession. Having a meeting request and a deadline to work towards has encouraged people to make some time to complete the reading activity without it impinging significantly on their workload. It has provided the opportunity to brush up on the academic skills of active reading and summarising for discussion, which some colleagues may not have done for some time or at least since they last completed an academic or professional qualification. Additionally, it has developed confidence amongst group members in facilitating discussions.

Interestingly, the choice and style of some of the reading matter has prompted discussion in itself. In one recent meeting, a colleague spoke about how the more formal nature of an article had made it more difficult to engage with, which led on to a further discussion around confidence. This suggests that colleagues who are perhaps less confident or experienced feel more comfortable discussing such issues in an informal setting. In this example, the colleague felt empowered to take the lead for the next meeting by selecting the discussion theme and the related readings. It also

served as a timely reminder about having empathy with students who can often struggle with the more formal aspects academic life, such as reading journal articles and contributing to seminar discussions. On the theme of developing a more proactive culture of practitioner research, it is perhaps too early to tell what impact the reading group is having as yet. However, one practical outcome from reading group discussions has been a more detailed analysis of National Student Survey (NSS) results for some subject areas, which has helped to better inform discussions with course teams to embed further information skills teaching. Additionally, the formation of the group has increased discussion of publication, and has encouraged several participants (including the authors) to consider how best to share good practice in journal articles and to participate more widely in academic practice.

Initially, there had been discussion over whether “rules of engagement” needed to be laid out in advance of the meeting, both to ensure that all participants had read the articles prior to the meeting and to ensure that it was a safe place for people to talk. However, it was determined that these were likely to be unnecessary as attendance at the group was optional. Our initial feeling proved correct, as all participants came with discussion points prepared and the facilitators made sure that all members had an opportunity to talk. There was also concern that facilitation of the group (and selection of the month’s readings) would not be spread amongst participants. However, so far there has been no sign of this taking place.

The group is not closed, however initial invitations were only extended to those in the Library Academic Support and Skills for Learning teams, as the primary mandate of the group is to provide an opportunity to discuss research specifically in support of teaching and learning (as opposed to wider topics, such as leadership and management). At its core, it remains an off-shoot of the Library Academic Support Team; however, membership is open to all staff who wish to participate in the discussions. A brief “peta kutcha” style talk at the annual Library and Learning Innovations Staff Conference has provided a brief introduction to the group’s

purpose to the wider Service and invitations will now be extended to all those expressing interest.

In conclusion, the experience of setting up a reading group has been a very positive one, helping to improve team collaboration and encourage individuals to be more proactive in their professional reading by allowing some time and space to do so. There is still much more work to be done in developing a more proactive research culture, however the seeds of knowledge seeking, sharing and understanding have been sown.

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