No penguins required: personal reflections on CILIP’s Umbrella conference

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CILIP’s Umbrella biennial conference draws together librarians from every sector. Held at the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield’s De Havilland Campus the 2009 edition was slimmed down to a packed two days (July 14-15th). I’ve always tried to attend this event as it’s an excellent opportunity to meet a broad spectrum of librarians. It does us all good to come out of our silos and Special Interest Groups (SIGs), and, for me, Umbrella is paramount among these opportunities. Tragically it’s never heavily populated by higher education librarians, although with the next conference in 2011 there’s plenty of time for you to give some thought to attending, especially if you’ve never done so before.

De Havilland is a surprisingly green campus, with some excellent conference facilities to be enjoyed by the almost 700 delegates, and compares extremely favourably to the former venue. Umbrella is a big conference, with 9 parallel tracks as well as keynote sessions, which means it’s impossible for any one person to attend it all. Thankfully this year a plethora of bloggers and tweeters attended, which means a little web searching should unearth a wealth of reports.

I hope this article will provide an overview of the sessions I managed to attend and a taste of the variety on offer. Maybe it’ll sway you towards attending in 2011.

Tuesday

While there was a Monday pre-conference day, featuring a CILIP council meeting, I wasn’t able to get to that. My conference began with the drive down south, just in time to register for the 10am kick off. To a packed (though not full) main auditorium the conference was officially opened by the former CILIP President Ian Snowley and followed by the keynote. As a conference veteran I find conference keynotes tend to fall into two types – the inspirational but light on the practical, and the more practically focussed. Umbrella’s keynote embraced both types, which was a pleasant surprise.
Charles N Brown: Learning the Way: the transformation of an American Public Library

Charles is the Director of Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (Chicago), regarded as one of the leading public libraries in the US. His talk carried the subtitle not evolutionary - revolutionary! He talked about public library services and their aspirations, and how they met them in terms of improving library services. His library service was rated 5* but on joining he saw his role was to shake things up and get staff to move out of their silos. Staff engagement was a core part of the effort towards the organisational transformation and resulted in about 20% of the whole staff being directly involved in the process. Charles stressed that their buy-in to the process was critical for real transformation. It had to tap into their knowledge and experience of what had worked and what hadn’t in the past, so that previous mistakes were not repeated.

Part of the process of change involved looking towards the retail sector (e.g. supermarket chain Target) for customer satisfaction, service delivery, marketing and opening new markets models. They also recognised that there was untapped organisational talent already in place. Using a process called STAR Behavioural Interviewing they found and promoted these exemplar staff into key roles, even if standard requirements for the post were not met.

Keeping the staff engaged, involved and informed with the change process resulted in many weekly updates, brown bag lunches with the director, intranet pages as well as formal meetings about what was going on. While this didn’t totally defeat the rumour mill, it did minimise any confusion. He ended the talk with some personal favourite quotes "Change should be as common as breakfast cereal” and "If you want to make enemies, try to change something.” I can certainly agree with both of those aims.

Susan Tailby, Eastleigh College: Captive audiences – adding value in FE audiences (out of my silo)

This session focussed on FE students and attempts to enhance their college time experiences. Taking ideas from the retail sector surfaced again, with lessons learned from book shop operations. It examined ways to engage readers with virtual or physical discussion groups. Initially target groups for interaction were identified and then the scheme was rolled-out with a number of small groups. For reading groups the key was building reflection into engagement activities, which I thought was excellent - too much of what librarians teach is delivered without follow up. Libraries can be scary for those with poorer English but librarians can build the self-esteem of students by engaging them in these ways. Trying different things led to a need for new media equipment which wasn't available in sufficient numbers. Storage and maintenance of this equipment was also an issue. Susan admitted these groups utilise space which can
cause disruptions for other users, but in part this helped recruit others who might otherwise not have joined.

Kathryn Harrison and Judith Robinson, Kirklees Council Library Services: Reading takes the biscuit

This scheme, piloted in 2006, aimed to get new readers into libraries to meet informally with the staff. The focus was on group activities and allowing natural networks to form between new readers from throughout the community. The focus wasn’t solely reading but also crafts and other shared experiences perhaps outside a library’s traditional remit. The watchword was adaptability to the readers’ interest. Sponsorship played a part (including a local biscuit factory) for outreach and revenue generation for the scheme. This twofold approach has been time consuming, but the individual and corporate partnerships developed have been long lasting and effective. The message for higher education is that if you want to engage with the users you need to go out to them and engage at a time and place that suits them, don’t always expect them to come to you.

Gareth J Johnson, University of Leicester: Weaselling your way into your student’s hearts: screenwriting & movies for education and training

My workshop focussed on visual communication and was a very hands-on affair for the delegates. See the Umbrella programme for a fuller description of the session.

Wednesday

Angela Horrocks & Davina Omar, Kingston University: Maltesers mean answers: a sweeter service for students based on user feedback

Kingston University talked about their annual survey run every March for many years with Maltesers for every respondent and a big prize for a few. A small incentive but effective. The survey is in addition to the National Student Survey, providing additional insight and getting students thinking about key service issues. A clear survey focus is vital, and Kingston’s is on how students learn and the routes they use to access information. This helps shape how and what the students are subsequently taught. While the Priority Research software was highly adaptable most students (~90%) didn’t respond. Reaching the silent majority and even non-users of the library remains a long term aim. Setting targets and quotas and then focussing marketing of the survey to those under-represented in previous returns has been useful.

Questions used are open so students are not driven to particular answers, but there is still the need for transparency and responsiveness. To this end comments and responses from the previous year’s survey are included in the following year.
demand is visible from the survey the library needs to be able to respond. Having run this survey for so many years there is now decades of evidence, from which rising and declining trends in student demands can be charted. Focus groups and interviews are beginning to be used to augment the return, partly as outreach and partly as hypothesis testing. However, the lack of benchmarking with external comparators and potential survey fatigue for the students remain issues.

**Tim Leach, BDP : The changing landscape of libraries**

This session took an architectural standpoint of library refurbishment, stating that while readers’ core needs of space and light to work in haven’t changed for centuries, new technologies are changing their working habits. With users increasingly at a distance libraries have to be not just fit for purpose, but accessible and welcoming from the moment you enter. Architecture should promote working, although it does limit the functions of some areas. Using the rebuilding project at University College London, Tim demonstrated how technologies and architectural developments are helping both readers and libraries to work, interact and curate collections into the 21st century.

**Andrew Cranfield, IFLA Library Buildings and Equipment Section: The great good place**

The Library as the third place was the theme of Andrew’s talk, and the links between physical structures and staff working practices. Libraries remain conservative in their design, and need to reconsider their look and feel to compete with other information and third place providers (book shops for one). Merging these functions, like the Idea Stores, of café and books is one that readers have increasingly come to expect. Readers should be almost unaware that they are entering a library. He also advocated moving away from stark corporate black and whites, as readers find them off-putting and they are hard to maintain.

**James Smith (Sunderland Libraries) and Nick Stopforth (Newcastle Libraries): Building a successful library Web 2.0 service**

Nick and James shared the seven lessons (five, as they overran) they learned through using Web 2.0 resources. They demonstrated an interesting mashup they had developed linking World War II bombing maps of Sunderland to eye witness accounts. Surprisingly the audience were mostly operating from a very low level awareness of Web 2.0 and how it might be exploited, three-quarters of them had not even heard of Twitter, for example.
Best of the rest

As well as the formal workshops, there were other events going on; the conference dinner, tea breaks, informal networking and the Group Annual General Meetings; as well as Web 2.0 exchanges. All of these made for a lively and engaging, if a little exhausting, couple of days. Personal highlights would have to include my session, the networking and the updating of professional knowledge.

I would have loved an extra day post-conference to more fully digest everything that had been discussed; perhaps forming an unconference, with themes and discussions arising organically from the participants? I’m hopeful that this might be something that the organisers consider for 2011, when I would hope to attend again.

1 'Weaselling your way into your students’ hearts (Umbrella intro movie)', Available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1456tNsHYw [Accessed 25 November 2009]
3 Twitter (http://twitter.com) hash tags from the conference were #cilipumbrella #umb #umbrella09 #umb09