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Research active

Miggie Pickton *et al* talk about how the library and learning services team at the University of Northampton are promoting practitioner research. This included staging a conference – one of the first to feature a whole programme of research activity from a single academic library.

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IT has sometimes been said that librarians are better at doing research than they are at sharing it. Whatever the reason, it seems that a large proportion of practitioner research is used internally, but not then further disseminated.

Here in Library and Learning Services (LLS) at the University of Northampton we were determined that this would not be the case. In this article we describe how the research culture that has gradually been developed at Northampton has led to an upsurge of interest from practitioners, and ultimately to our first ever LLS Research Conference.

Practitioner research at Northampton

Senior managers in the library have long recognised the value of research in solving specific problems and underpinning the development of better services and have encouraged staff to engage in research projects.

Initially the province of a cross-departmental 'Research Strategic Team', since 2007 the task of coordinating and managing practitioner research has fallen within the remit of the department's first Research Support Librarian. At the same time, new job descriptions for professional staff have obliged them to engage with research; both to do it and to disseminate it.

Research training

In support of this requirement, a tailored research training programme has enabled LLS staff to brush up on old skills and learn new ones.

A workshop on writing book reviews served as an introduction to writing for many of us. It had an immediate impact, with a number of colleagues experiencing the thrill of having something accepted for publication for the first time.

To improve our chances of winning funding, we invited the Library and Information Research Group (Lirg) to run a 'Writing a research proposal' course at Northampton.[1] Bidding success soon followed when Academic Librarians Hannah Rose and Gillian Siddall won the Lirg Research Award for 2011. Several other colleagues won internal 'URB@N'[2] funding to employ undergraduate students as research assistants on their projects.

A Research Summer School, held in June 2011, has been our biggest training event so far. Over the course of two days, speakers from Northampton and further afield covered the entire research process, from defining the research question to disseminating the results. Open to all LLS staff, the summer school inspired a number of colleagues to start researching.

With a wide variety of research projects underway, it seemed a shame not to showcase some of our work to our colleagues and service users. A research conference was proposed.

The LLS Research Conference

We envisaged three main purposes – and audiences – for the conference. First, we were aware that colleagues often knew little about each other's research areas, especially if the work was being undertaken by other teams. LLS comprises the library, a Learning Technology team and the university's Centre for Academic Practice. Although the teams work closely together in delivering services, communication of research findings can be weaker. So our first audience was LLS staff.

Our second intended audience were academic staff. LLS enjoys a good reputation among university staff, especially in its role of supporting learning and teaching. However, although many academics recognise the professionalism of LLS staff, we are generally not seen as being 'research active'. This we wanted to change.

Finally (but equally importantly), we wanted to share our findings with professional colleagues. Since all of our research activity is predicated by a desire to develop and improve our services, it follows that our work should be relevant and useful to other academic

libraries. We had something to say and we wanted others to hear it.

A team of four volunteered to put on the conference. None of us had experience of planning and organising a full conference, but we looked on it as another opportunity for professional development. We each took responsibility for an aspect of planning. Charlotte Heppell managed marketing and promotion; Fiona MacLellan took charge of conference administration; Nick Dimmock created and maintained the conference website, while Miggie Pickton took charge of the conference programme and coordinated the group.

The conference programme

In planning the programme we were keen to involve as many members of LLS as we could. The options for participation were a 30 minute 'research presentation' for projects substantially completed; a 15 minute 'work in progress' for projects at the design or pilot stage; a 'minute madness' presentation (just one minute to describe, explain, promote or otherwise share ongoing or completed work); or lastly, a research poster. We soon decided to run a poster competition alongside the conference, encouraging colleagues with the offer of a (no expense spared) chocolate bar for the winner! Since many staff had no experience of producing academic posters we laid on training in poster design and invited the tutor, Simone Apel, to be the competition judge.

In total we attracted nine presentations,[3] 12 minutes of madness[4] and 12 posters[5] involving 28 people from all parts of the department.

Design and promotion

We were particularly keen to have a powerful 'brand' for the conference; something that would be instantly recognisable and would convey the message that LLS staff are research active. Charlotte produced a design brief and commissioned HeppDesigns[6] to produce artwork suitable for posters, leaflets, banners and web pages. As Charlotte said of the final design:

'The essence of the conference is beautifully conveyed in the final artwork; the boldness and simplicity of a multitude of intertwined neurons give an infinite sense of connecting, sharing and networking which is, after all, our raison d'être'.[7]

Conference branding

References

1 http://bit.ly/Qwpi1R
2 http://bit.ly/RuQwcf
3 http://bit.ly/W8utJc
4 http://bit.ly/LM7lP5
5 http://bit.ly/RuQL78
6 http://heppdesigns.com/
7 http://bit.ly/KkvGa8
8 http://bit.ly/L1wSns
9 http://bit.ly/SuZLWL
10 http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/
11 http://bit.ly/R7mTvp
12 http://bit.ly/PRXJBs
13 http://bit.ly/uj8Wg4

Printed conference leaflets were taken by the handful to meetings and university events. Posters were distributed across both university campuses. LLS colleagues were exhorted to promote the conference at every opportunity.

At the same time, Charlotte's promotional campaign had us sending emails to professional mailing lists; to our own Schools and Departments; and of course to our colleagues in LLS. We all exploited our professional networks to raise awareness of the event.

The conference blog

The artwork provided a strong design lead for the conference website and blog. We decided that we wanted a conference web presence that we could use not only to promote the conference, but also to archive presentations and reflect upon our experiences. We hoped that others might learn with us as we progressed along the conference learning curve.

Nick opted for a WordPress blog.[8] This would let the team create, upload and collaborate in a single, dedicated location. The standard hosted blog option was chosen, this was free to use and allowed enough customisation for our needs. The chosen theme was supplemented by a custom banner and a handful of widgets to pull in our Twitter feed (https://twitter.com/llsresearchconf), provide a countdown and post links.

Conference website
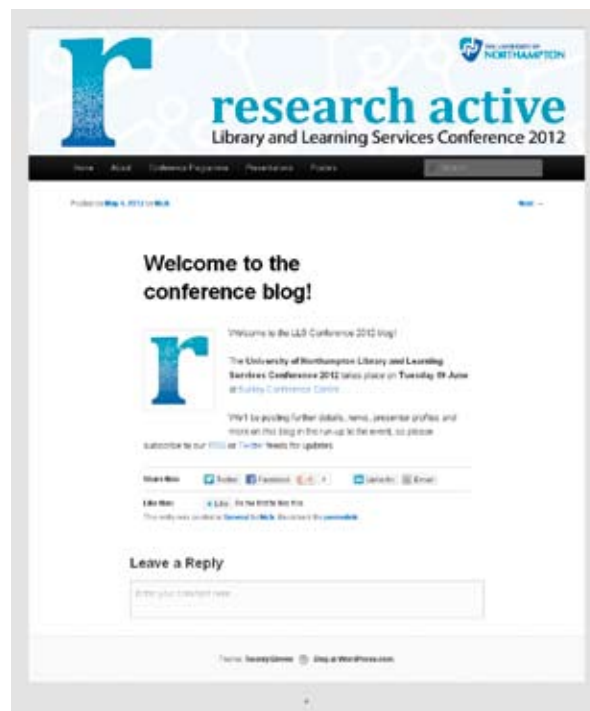
The team produced a list of possible blogging topics and designed a schedule of posts to keep visitors interested in the run-up to the conference. We aimed to post two or three items per week.

Elsewhere on the blog, Nick created static web pages for the conference programme, presentations and posters. Given that a key objective of the conference was to raise our research profile, each presentation was supplemented with extra information about the presenters and the project.[9] Since all of the featured presentations had either been presented at a national or international conference, or won funding, or both, we felt this was something our audiences should know.

Conference administration

In the meantime, an early task for Fiona, as conference administrator, was to devise a means of managing

bookings, ideally something web based. The Eventbrite[10] event management software seemed to fit the bill. It was flexible enough to allow us to apply our own branding, it would collate delegate lists, keep track of all the bookings, and allow us to print delegate badges.

With the bookings system in place, the team turned their attention to the practical details of putting on a conference. Posters and banners were printed and put on display. We collated comprehensive lists of departmental publications and professional contributions. The resulting 'wall' of outputs seemed to impress our audiences.

LLS Research outputs and professional contributions.

On the day and afterwards

In the end, the delegate list exceeded our wildest expectations. Our 30 expected delegates turned into 86 and we had to move the event to a larger space. The buzz on the day was amazing, with a number of visitors deeply envious of our enthusiasm and teamwork. LLS colleagues were heard repeatedly claiming to be proud of their department.

Feedback on the conference was overwhelmingly positive, and its impact felt immediately. As a direct result of the conference, the university's Vice Chancellor has taken the lead in promoting improvements to reading lists; the British Library has asked to preserve our conference website in the UK Web Archive;[11] several more LLS staff have shown interest in engaging with research and we have heard that academic colleagues have been encouraging others to follow up some of our work. It seems that we have hit the target for all of our audiences.

What we need to do now is to capitalise on the success of the conference. In addition to writing about it, the team have already spoken of the LLS conference at two events: the Darts3[12] and Dream[13] conferences.

We have been asked whether we will repeat the conference next year. At the moment we have no plans to. Rather, we would prefer to consolidate our progress as practitioner researchers by focusing on developing our research skills and conducting further research projects.

For 2014 though, watch this space! [U]

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