

## Release Your Inner Superhero – a new approach to professional development

Information Professional, February 2018

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‘Thank you for breathing life back into librarianship’. Some of the feedback following one of our practical hands-on superhero workshops – designed to encourage librarians to get out there and engage as scholars – actively looking for opportunities to publish papers, present at conferences and use social media. Because, let’s be honest, it’s no secret that information professionals are not renowned for being loud and proud. Used to promoting our library services, but when it comes to marketing ourselves? Not so much. The *Superhero Librarian Roadshow* is now touring the country empowering library colleagues in all sectors to shout about what they are doing. To challenge the typical librarian stereotype. To surprise themselves.

### Zero to Hero

So how did it start? Elizabeth Malone (Head of Content Development/Co-director Library & Learning Services) at Kingston University wanted to encourage more Kingston library colleagues to have the confidence to present and publish. She invited Leo Appleton – from the University of the Arts, London to lead a workshop entitled *Librarians engaging in scholarship*.

Wendy’s story:

I will be frank – I was a less than enthusiastic attendee of this original session. But I needed some recent CPD to add to my upcoming annual appraisal form. I was (and still am) your average bog-standard subject librarian and I had never presented at a conference or published an article. But as a result of attending the session I realised that actually this was do-able. Not only do-able but fun. Catapulted into action and fired up, in the space of 18 months I have published 5 pieces in various journals and spoken at 12 external events, culminating rather alarmingly in being asked to speak at an international conference in Texas in 2018. I have come rather late to the party - and I wanted to encourage other library staff to wake up to the opportunities out there earlier in their careers. It also occurred to me that there was a superhero analogy between the self-deprecating persona we routinely adopt on the library helpdesk and the self-publicising role we should be aspiring to. We need to get our capes on and emerge from the LRC in our alter ego forms to rescue library services everywhere. Batgirl’s day job really was working as a librarian. It’s true. Google it if you don’t believe me. Suffice to say the *Superhero Librarian Roadshow* was born. I joined the team and we re-jigged Leo’s original session with suitable branding. Then taking our own advice we spoke about it at UKSG Forum 2016 and at the annual M25 conference in 2017.

### Caped Crusaders

So far we have run workshops for library staff at University of the Arts London, Kingston University London, Cambridge University, Birkbeck, University of Essex and Royal Borough of Kingston Public Libraries. We are refining the content each time based on detailed feedback and evaluation from the participants and are gathering additional new superhero presenters as we go along. Claire Sewell from Cambridge University Library has now joined the regular team who deliver the workshop and we happily masquerade as Captain America, Black Widow and Wonder Woman for a delicious three hours of focussed library revelry. (No costumes in case you're interested but occasionally the odd T-shirt.) It's a tremendous blast but it has a serious undercurrent and is beginning to show real impact with attendees finding the confidence – often after experiencing a lull in their professional lives – to showcase their special projects or achievements by pitching to conferences and submitting pieces for publication.

## Loud and Proud

So what do we cover in the workshop? We start by asking our delegates how proud they are of their profession. We have a 'Superhero Scale of Professional Pride' running from Antman (no.1) to The Hulk (no. 10) and our fledgling Justice League have to position themselves – metaphorically – on the scale. So the Antmen tend to keep their professional calling a secret and the Hulks are prone to constant librarianly banter. The cohort then rises to its feet and each level sits down as the roll is called. We end up with just the Hulks left standing. Guess who usually ends up joining the presenting team? But it's always interesting to see how many points our attendees have climbed up the scale by the end of the session.

We then talk about individual achievements – starting with personal goals (which may be something as simple as passing your driving test or something as life-changing as becoming a parent) and then move onto significant things in their professional lives that our participants are particularly proud of. We deliberately make people uncomfortable by asking them to big themselves up, to demonstrate that everyone has pride in something they have achieved. We then try to transfer this into the work context.

We go on to talk about *why* we should involve ourselves in scholarship and we list various opportunities to present. We suggest starting small, showcasing in-house research projects by speaking at internal events, then moving onto local professional networks. We talk about selecting the format for the talk – would a plenary session, a workshop or perhaps a lightning talk be best? We then divide into superhero-themed groups for a practical exercise in writing a conference abstract and a personal biography. Each group agrees on a current project (or fantasy project which is often even more entertaining) and writes a pitch to the imaginary conference organisers which is subsequently read out to the room. In addition each delegate produces a personal biography to accompany the abstract. Reading your bio is optional and not popular to be fair – but an invaluable exercise in proving that you can always find engaging and interesting things to include. The delegate pack provides multiple examples of conference abstracts and biographies to use as a template and kick-start the process.

We move on to opportunities to publish – looking at the pros and cons of peer-review journals and how to get an initial foot in the door through blogs. Each group is asked to think about where they might publish the research that they have just spoken about at their virtual conference – will it be

*Information Professional (!), UKSG eNews, Insights, Sconul Focus, Journal of Information Literacy or the New Review of Academic Librarianship?*

Our final section is quite possibly the most important. Presenting or publishing on a topic is just the start and today's information professional needs to be immersed in the world of social media if they want to promote their work proactively. We acknowledge this in our social media section which looks at both the how and why of using social media to promote both yourself and your professional work. Although the basics of social media aren't new to some of our attendees several people have commented that they have learnt at least one new thing. The section finishes with a case study of Altmetrics – alternative metrics used to measure the impact of individual work in the networked, social media world. This case study grounds the theory in a practical example and really helps to bring home to attendees how beneficial social media can be.

## Unexpected Item in Bragging Area

So what has been the impact of all this superhero-branded fun? With each workshop we have gained another 'superlibrarian' to join the presenting team – and other colleagues have signed up to individual goals written on superhero trading cards which are then followed up by an email from Wonder Woman to check on progress at a later date.

These reminders are sent a month after the workshop, prompting attendees to either congratulate themselves for completing the goal or to give them a gentle nudge. This seems to be an effective approach as it encourages people without being too strict or judgmental. Some attendees have responded that their goal has long since been met and they are already on to their next whilst others really appreciate the prompt after real life has overtaken them after the initial enthusiasm of the workshop. Interestingly some attendees have replied telling us that their original goal was too large but that they have since started to break it down into smaller, more manageable tasks.

At Cambridge library staff have gained a greater awareness of the range of projects that they can publish on and the value of sharing smaller successes with the wider library community. At least two of the projects mentioned during the initial workshop are currently underway and we hope to see some of our other attendees showcasing their work at the annual in-house library conference in January. Impact at Birkbeck and Essex has been similarly significant. Two Birkbeck workshop attendees have had pieces published and two from Essex have had papers accepted for conferences.

### Claire's story:

I've joined the team which is great for getting out and meeting people at other institutions and understanding their concerns about being superheroes. I've brought a lot of this information back to Cambridge and fed it into my work which has helped me to continue developing my colleagues as they work on more formal research projects. As we start to build up more of a research culture at Cambridge then I hope this will continue to have an impact into the future.

The project has also had an impact on me personally. I was already engaged in presenting and writing for the professional press as part of my role but taking part in the initial Cambridge workshop forced me to think about the messages that I wanted to get across and to really assess my goals in terms of being active in the profession. More than that it encouraged me to take more pride in the work that I do outside of my day job. I present at a lot of events and write a lot both in print and online which is something I really enjoy. Attending that first workshop forced me to stand up and be the Hulk in terms of professional pride instead of pretending that I was further down the scale.

## To Infinity and Beyond

Through our feedback sheets it appears that delegates at our superhero workshops have been inspired and fired up to shout about the things they want to promote. A growing list of pieces published, blogs uploaded and papers delivered, not to mention new converts to Twitter. What we want to do now is to collate some detailed impact for the project – and to continue delivering it across all sectors of the profession. Any takers? We have gigs planned in Edinburgh early in 2018 along with a plenary session at The British Library for CPD25. So where to now? We strongly recommend being loud and proud. Buck the stereotype. Don't dream it, do it. Get your capes on.