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Using technology to explore new ways of working

On 4th July, cpd25 hosted an event entitled "Mobile Technology: Lending It, Using It And What To Do Next". The event provided an opportunity to hear how some academic libraries are making use of a range of technologies in adding value to the services they provide. The speakers focused particularly on the operational management issues associated with the implementation of such technologies, exploring the issues that need to be overcome in utilising them.

Oliver Bridle, from the Radcliffe Science Library, described how the library took the decision to use some unexpected additional funding to invest in an iPad for lending to students. The iPad was loaded with £100 worth of applications, covering everything from basic productivity tools such as word processing and spreadsheet programs, to a number of specialist science apps. It was also set-up to ensure that it could access the library's electronic resources, including databases and e-journals. Amongst the apps they added to the iPad were an interactive periodic table of elements, a chemical formula editor, a viewer for 3D macromolecules and a PDF viewer to ensure that journal articles were able to be downloaded and read on the go. In advance of the launch, Subject Librarians at the RSL collected suggestions for appropriate apps from academics and subsequently promoted the iPad lending service to their individual departments, helping to generate interest in the scheme.

To facilitate the borrowing process, a record was created on the library catalogue, ensuring the iPad could be reserved by students if required. When the iPad is available to borrow, students are required to sign a "loan agreement" outlining their responsibilities and holding them accountable for any damage or loss caused whilst it's on loan to them. The iPad is then checked out via the library management system.

There were, of course, concerns regarding the return of the iPad, particularly as there is only one for the students to borrow. As a result, the decision was taken to apply a £10 fine for late return of the equipment – £10 being the point at which students are prevented from using the library. The policy certainly seems to be effective as to date the iPad has not been returned late or subjected to any damage.

Once the iPad is returned, staff check it over for any visible signs of damage before wiping all data from the device to ensure it can be passed onto the next student.   Whilst this process can be quite time consuming, it is an essential part of the process to ensure data protection. Overall, the entire process can take up to half-an-hour to complete. After the item has been returned, the student is sent an online survey to find out more about how they used the device. Survey results to date reveal that whilst students used the iPad for social networking and browsing, the majority claimed to use it mainly for work or study.

As well as the provision of an iPad for students, staff have also found that the use of an iPad has had a significant positive impact on the completion of day-to-day duties. For example, they have found it particularly useful for dealing with stock management issues. By having the information they require on their device, staff do not need to keep referring back to a fixed computer and conduct all the required work at the stock shelves. For both staff and students, iPads appear to have been a profitable investment for the Radcliffe Science Library.

The somewhat contentious issue of QR codes was also explored by Andrew Preater of Senate House Libraries. Described as either "over-hyped" or "powerful", there has been some discussion about the value or otherwise of QR codes in libraries. At Senate House they decided to explore their potential, going beyond what libraries are currently doing, and seeing if they added value to the student experience. Their plan wasn't on doing anything either particularly revolutionary or spending an awful amount of money on utilising the technology. It was simply an opportunity to explore their potential. Whilst they were keen to do so, they were also conscious of some of the criticisms levelled at the use of QR codes. Consequently, they wanted to be sure that they were being used in a way that would add value rather than doing it for the sake of it.

One of the ways in which QR codes have been utilised at Senate House is in speeding up the registration process. A signpost was placed at the main desk with a QR code on it which, when scanned, directs users to the "quick registration" form on the website. Using the QR code in this way, the registration process becomes far quicker and more efficient, reducing waiting time for students and thus having a positive impact upon their view of the service, a crucial factor when universities will be competing like never before for students.

They have also used QR codes on the library catalogue to assist students in locating items on the shelves. The use of the code in this way enables students to scan the code on a catalogue entry which then directs them to the catalogue record on their smartphone. Having scanned the code, the data is then on their device, making it easier to locate the item without continually returning to the OPAC.

As well as implementing QR codes at the main desk and on the catalogue, they have also been used as a replacement for paper subject guides. Before the introduction of QR codes, the decision had been taken to cease printing subject guides. As they began to examine the possibilities for QR codes, they decided to explore their potential as a way to access the digital version of the subject guide. As a result, QR codes were placed on the ends of bays where the print guides were originally situated, ensuring that some can access guidance on the spot, rather than needing to return to a terminal.

Furthermore, QR codes are also being used to enable users to download vCards for staff members. So, for example, a student can scan the code on a staff member's office door and download all their contact details directly onto their mobile device. A distinct advantage over scrabbling around for a pen and a few scraps of paper!

Augmented Reality (AR) is currently being explored by Jo Lambert and the SCARLET team in order to bring students closer to materials that otherwise exist only in very controlled conditions. The SCARLET project is working with copies of Dante's Divine Comedy (all published from 1555-1742) to enable students to gain additional information about the work. The principle objective of the project is to "provide a model that other Special Collections libraries can follow, making these resources accessible for research, teaching and learning." Alongside the core team, a number of third year undergraduates were also involved to ensure that the project provided value for the end user.

The use of AR has the potential to open up access to resources that were previously out of the reach of students, or at least held in controlled conditions making it difficult for the students to

utilise. This is particularly important with precious items as it is not possible to move it to another area of the library and neither is it practical to leave the material whilst seeking out additional, complementary information.

In terms of the educational benefits that AR brings, according to Matt Ramirez, [lead technical developer on the project](#):

"AR promotes active learning and critical response by encouraging students to engage with the rich, visual content."

As a result of their findings to date regarding the project, they have concluded that the use of AR is particularly useful for introduction to a subject and, therefore, more suitable for usage with first and second year students rather than final year undergraduates. Indeed, when the team gathered together a [focus group of first year undergraduates](#), they found that they were "interested and intellectually engaged with the use of Augmented Reality and its implications with using it in Special Collections." Furthermore, the majority of the focus group members stated that they would "recommend a course which uses AR" and also recognised that it has "potential in learning more about a subject, a text, or a discipline."

As with QR codes, the key point is to ensure that any AR project should add something to the user experience and not just be employed simply for the sake of appearing to be ahead of the curve. Consequently, an AR project should be contextual and closely linked to the object it relates to, offering a unique user experience. In doing so, it has the potential to add substantial educational benefits for both first and second year undergraduates.

Overall, the event itself provided a number of interesting insights into how mobile technology can be utilised in a library setting, as well as highlighting some of the operational management issues that arise from their use. There was certainly much to consider and I hope people were inspired to go away and begin investigating new and valuable ways in which to utilise the many tools at our disposal. It is, after all, through experimentation and innovation that we find new ways of working and continue to evolve and develop the service to meet the needs of our users.