

## **BREAKING A LEG : GOING ON STAGE WITH THE EDUCATORS**

Nora Hegarty, Tina Hurley, Ted Lynch

### **The authors**

Nora Hegarty and Tina Hurley are members of the library's Learning Support Team.

Ted Lynch is Head Librarian at Waterford Institute of Technology Libraries.

### **ABSTRACT**

This article is a sketch of developments to date in the area and is, more specifically, an account of the experience of the library staff involved in Learning Support at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The article examines the background to the educational experience in libraries, and major trends and resources in the area of library education. It also considers emerging strategies, making particular reference to how they are being translated into practical activities at WIT.

### **KEYWORDS**

Academic libraries, Information Literacy, Information Society, Learning Support, Library education, Lifelong Learning, Online learning, Training programmes, WebCT.

## **Introduction**

The impact of the modern academic library is not coterminous with the materials it holds and it cannot be limited to a context of support services for staff and students. It is widely accepted that the library has a central place in the educational experience of its institution, underpinning the institution's role in the intellectual formation of students. According to Kuh and Gonyea (2003) the library actually represents "*the physical manifestation of the core values and activities of academic life*". It follows that successful libraries will assume a responsibility for education and discharge that responsibility effectively - and the mission statements of the majority of academic libraries reflect this type of aspiration.

However, translating these generalised development trajectories into realisable goals and purposeful activities makes it necessary for the academic librarian to have a fundamental understanding of the educational needs of students and their information saturated environments. Providing a response on the part of libraries to stated and implicit *needs* of students is a debate and a challenge. Kumaresan (2003) :  
*Unfortunately, this role (educational formation) is often neither readily recognised nor accepted by the individual academic or the broader university and there are a number of barriers which exist beyond the control of the library which inhibit a librarian's ability to fully participate in and contribute to the teaching and learning of the university. (2)*

This article is a sketch of developments to date in the area and, more specifically, is an account of the experience of library staff involved in Learning Support at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The article examines the background to the educational experience in libraries and major trends and resources in the area of library education. It also considers emerging strategies, making particular reference to how they are being translated into practical activities at WIT.

## **Background**

Raftse & Saetre, (2004) describe the parallel life of the library running alongside that of the classroom. The picture of the traditional academic library as a self-contained entity providing a support service to users is broadly true. The picture includes the librarian acting as a mediator between users and sources, facilitating individual access to materials, and ensuring that the library is adequately resourced and managed. It is a commonplace observation now that electronic technology has given a new profile to the library. Librarians have been identified as information experts, whose

ability to manipulate electronic resources, has earned them, in some quarters, at least, the title of the *ultimate search engine* (ALA, 2001).

However, contemporary students are well equipped to use technologies without much necessary mediation by library staff or even computer staff. In fact, it can be argued that the technical aspect of retrieving information is no longer a priority for the user. Librarians will readily accept that it is far more important to possess the ability to understand and evaluate information itself. Thus, most academic libraries today aspire to be more than just another support service for staff and students, and it is often stated that libraries are to be “arenas for learning” whose relevance lies in a mission to prepare users for success in a society that requires information literate individuals.

*--- the academic library has a responsibility to provide a comprehensive range of teaching and learning experiences, which develop the information literacy knowledge, skills and understanding of all students and staff. It also has a responsibility to ensure that it can deliver quality learning experiences, guidance and support.* (Kumaresan, 2003, 1)

While the traditional values of the profession are still upheld, it is a commonly held view among librarians that their roles have expanded, over time, to incorporate new aspects: a shift in emphasis, for instance, from the librarian as service provider and information specialist, to what will become the focus of this article, the librarian’s emerging role as educator.

### **The Evolution of Training Programmes**

Most academic libraries provide a range of training activities and the majority of these operate at two levels, which we describe as instructional and educational levels. The instructional level is the ‘which button to press next’ mode of training, the objective of which is to offer a quick introduction to the process of information retrieval. Tutorials on the rubrics of the library catalogue, a broad range of databases and Internet searching are common features of these programmes.

This type of programme is very useful, but its fundamental limitation is that it does not in itself strengthen the librarian’s bid for an educative role because it is purely instructional. In the context of education, these programmes do not in themselves draw out [*educere*] a response from the learner and libraries operating at this level of instruction forego many opportunities for the librarians (usually highly educated people themselves) to fulfil the educational mission of their institutions. At WIT

Libraries, a clear distinction is made between this type of programme and longer-term library education in critical thinking and information skills.

The library's educational level programmes emphasise that information retrieval is not an easy task either to teach or to learn. To paraphrase one commentary, learning and teaching information literacy requires patience, practice, and most of all, a critical eye, an ability that is to develop a set of skills that enable one to become information literate, to recognise a need for information, distinguish ways of addressing that need, construct strategies for locating information, assess information, compare and evaluate information, organise, apply and communicate information, and use information to synthesise and create new knowledge.

(Webber and Johnston, 2000)

Ideally, the students who attend their academic library's training programmes will be encouraged to embrace such a set of skills so as to equip themselves for lifelong learning. Becoming information literate means mastering a new subject area, one that is accepted as highly relevant to the lives and education of modern students:

*'the overarching literacy essential for 21st century living'* (Bruce, 2002, 1), *'a pre-requisite for participative citizenship, social inclusion, creation of new knowledge, personal empowerment and learning for life'*. (Bundy, 2003, 2).

### **Collaborative Partnerships**

This acknowledgement of information literacy as a subject area in its own right can be viewed as a considerable step forward in establishing a role for librarians as educators because it confers on librarians a specialised area of knowledge and expertise and, in this sense, places them on a par with other discipline experts.

Moving beyond mere user instruction in information is a major opportunity for librarians to partner with academic colleagues as agents in the educational development of students. Farber (1999) describes it as representing the beginnings of a beautiful friendship, an ideal co-operative relationship,

*'where both the teacher's objectives and the librarian's objectives are not only achieved, but are mutually reinforcing – the teacher's objectives being those that help students attain a better understanding of the course's subject matter, and the librarian's objectives being those that enhance the student's ability to find and evaluate information.'* (Farber, 1999, 233).

Farber's commentary on the area does not, however, emphasise the importance of the institutional Strategic Plans in supporting library educational activities. It is our experience at WIT Libraries that the Institute's Strategic Plan underpins the library's objectives because it not only emphasises the importance of professional development, but also reinforces the requirement that, regardless of job description, the primary responsibility of all WIT's employees is to the students they serve if WIT is to

*“create an inclusive, ‘student-centered’ teaching and learning environment which considers all dimensions of a student’s needs and development”* (WIT, 2003, 9)

The visualisation of the Institute as a holistic unit empowers its members both as individuals and as a whole and facilitates the development of collaborative partnerships between academic and support staff. In the library, these collaborations are the key to successful inter-disciplinary information skills programmes at WIT. As Loertscher and Achterman (2002) contend: *“when two professionals are delivering a quality learning experience, the odds of success are doubled* (12).

### **Teachers & Librarians**

Educational institutions and their libraries will often express the aspiration that teachers and librarians should work closely together with the aim of enhancing the educational experience of students. The reality, particularly in control-based institutions, is that a rigid differentiation between librarians and academics operates and the development of pro-active partnerships is rarely realised.

Such inter-departmental co-operation as exists is frequently limited and of short-term duration. The fact that librarians are most usually employed as support or administrative staff is problematic if teaching roles are to be assumed by librarians. Our experience at WIT suggests that a holistic mission statement, which emphasises the contribution of all employees and which is effectively communicated and monitored, is a catalyst in breaking down ‘them and us’ perceptions.

For most institutions, the status-quo is that while academics are naturally viewed as educators, and while it is taken for granted that their primary role is one of research, teaching and learning, librarians have much to prove if they are to be viewed as anything other than information managers and go-betweens. The process of re-definition is complicated, requiring what Fulton (2003) describes as “a shift in professional identity”. It is also a potentially contentious issue that may need to be

addressed sooner rather than later, especially if the modules taught by library staff are to be fully integrated into academic courses.

The establishment of a Learning Support Unit at WIT Libraries in 1996 was our first step towards that end. The purpose of the Unit was to give practical expression to the library's aim of making sure that all WIT students become information literate individuals, that is individuals who *'have learned how to learn, and who know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organised, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them'* (ALA, 1989).

### **Learning Support Development**

From the beginning, at least 25% of all library staff were committed to the area of Learning Support and this allowed the library to operate classroom-based modules for students, postgraduates and staff. Since 2000, the Team has offered a three-hour module for first year students, and a two-hour research skills course for second to final year students, postgraduates and academic staff. The Learning Support Team has always aimed to teach information skills at two levels, at the level of basic instruction and at the level of education in information skills.

Students are not only instructed in the foundational skills and competencies traditionally associated with library education, the 'which button to press next' mode of training referred to earlier, but are also taught higher research skills – how best to discover, appropriate, evaluate and use information for lifelong learning. Teaching at both levels is based on classroom contact in the library's Learning Support Centre.

In its early years, the Team had little practical knowledge or training in the area of large group teaching, but its members did have experience of once being students themselves. The Learning Support Team, therefore, opted for a structured classroom based approach at the new library's classrooms and seminar rooms, which were timetabled for user-education classes each morning. The benefit of classroom or laboratory based instruction was that students perceived that information skills needed to be taught and understood rather than experimented with or assimilated on 'a need to know' basis or haphazardly.

The initial classes were an opportunity for library staff to get high quality feedback from students and this has been important in other service areas in the library. The

classes prepared students to see that information skills have a conceptual basis, which is helpful in other disciplines and in critical thinking and which sets the scene for a lifelong learning experience.

For Learning Support staff, it was daunting, at least initially, to stand before a group of learners in a classroom setting but the benefits in terms of job satisfaction and acquiring an understanding of how to fulfil the mission of the Institute have been considerable. The experience of instructing students has enabled the Learning Support Team to better understand the thought processes and learning styles of students and has allowed the librarians involved to visualise the research process from a student point of view.

The development of information skills programmes has had a measurable effect on the confidence of *all* library staff because it has served to remind them of the importance of their roles to the teaching and learning process all across the Institute. Participation in the Unit's activities, whether direct or indirect, allows library staff to visualise the library, its mission and services as a structured, cohesive entity and makes them aware of the relevance of their input to the overall scheme of things.

Library staff believe that as a consequence of the Learning Support programme, the quality of the entire library service has improved. A basic example illustrates the point - efficient shelving policies keep the bays tidy and mean that books are re-shelved promptly, thus allowing students to use their newly acquired research skills effectively. It would seem pointless teaching students the intricacies of using the library catalogue if no semblance of order could be found on the shelves.

### **Educational Development Centre (EDC)**

From the outset, Learning Support staff were conscious that self-contained development without reference to other initiatives in the Institute was a poor strategy for success and a very important factor in the development of the Unit, therefore, has been its link with the Institute's Educational Development Centre (EDC). The EDC was established with the aim of providing teaching staff with skills in teaching and research. Library staff were welcomed as participants in these courses and, have in turn, provided instruction in advanced information skills for academic staff users at the Centre.

Participation in the EDC courses gave Learning Support staff insights into how students learn, how to plan training sessions more effectively and how to address individual learning styles. The fact that the EDC workshops are open to all academic and library staff is highly beneficial. Participant groups are mixed and in the case of library participants, attendance at the workshops has given them the confidence to see themselves as educators in their own right and to market themselves accordingly.

### **Learning Support Today**

Today's Learning Support Team draws on a mix of professional librarians and senior library assistants, who are equally involved in the preparation and delivery of training initiatives. The current series of programmes includes introductory information skills sessions for undergraduates, refresher courses for second to final years, and research support sessions for postgraduates and staff. The ultimate aim of all programmes is to equip participants with a transferable set of information skills, so as to improve the quality of users research output and ensure lifelong learning.

Learning Support staff liaise with WIT's academic staff to integrate these information skills sessions into mainstream courses and to tailor the content according to the needs of specific groups. First-hand contact with lecturers inevitably exposes the Team to course concerns, delivery issues and student needs and provides them with an important insight into the academic's pedagogical mindset. There is a process of continuous improvement here in that Learning Support staff constantly 'tap into' these insights to enhance their training programmes.

The undergraduate sessions form the basis of the library's education programme and in order to make the training as beneficial as possible for students, and to allow for a variety of learning styles, a number of teaching methods are incorporated. These include group discussions on topics such as information and knowledge, practical online experience and traditional face-to-face learning.

Hour One introduces the concept of Critical Thinking and includes a short group discussion on the meaning of "Knowledge". Issues surrounding Referencing and Plagiarism are considered. The session also contains simple, interactive exercises, which illustrate the difficulties of solitary research and which can be carried through to real-life assignments. An interactive Story Game (Kirby, 1992), for example, looks at the unconscious inferences one makes while reading text and serves to make students aware of their own inherent biases.



The skills acquired are practically applied in further training sessions on the Internet and Databases, where students are given the opportunity to use their newly acquired critical thinking skills to evaluate websites and to formulate effective database searches. The Internet session, which focuses on searching and researching using the Internet, places much emphasis on planning flexible Internet searches and on website evaluation. Students are advised to make informed choices when searching the Internet and are instructed as to how to critique a selection of websites based on the following criteria: reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness and bias. The session directly involves the learner through a mixture of group-work and open-ended discussion.

The Database session deploys a search strategy approach, which encourages students to actively participate in the learning process. The approach involves presenting students with an overview of how a database works and the type of materials commonly found on databases. This is followed by a practical hands-on session, which involves examining the features of three or four databases within particular subject areas and challenging students to conduct practical searches themselves. The session concludes with a discussion on how to evaluate the search results. The importance of referencing electronic sources is also stressed and support material in the form of practical guidelines/handouts is provided.

### **Objectives of Learning Support**

Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) view that researchers should centre themselves in their research by using what they call "mindful inquiry" and that students should see their research projects "*not as disembodied, programmed activity but rather as part of the way in which (they) engage with the world (5)*" is validated in the Learning Support Team's experience. Everybody in the Team believes that the training programme empowers students by encouraging them to become independent, self-directed learners who can find and use information effectively and efficiently for both academic success and in support of lifelong learning.

The ultimate aim of all sessions, according to the Team Co-ordinator, is the development of self-reliant library users. The training sessions are conducted from the student's perspective: they assume that the individuality of the person should never be lost in the research process and they strive to educate users to that end. The sessions also aim to convince learners that being information literate is not only relevant to

their experience as students, but is a skill that will benefit them for the rest of their lives.

The Learning Support Team is particularly conscious of the need for lecturer involvement and support in the area of information literacy. Lecturers are encouraged to accompany their student groups on the training programme and are invited to actively participate in the class. This helps students to see how skills learned in the library can be applied at a practical level throughout their courses. The Team feel that the sessions effectively illustrate to lecturers that it is possible - through a suitable mix of classroom based activities, research quizzes and online tutorials - to provide a framework for learning so that independent lifelong learning becomes possible. A key component of this framework is the library online education programme delivered through OLAS, WIT Libraries' online, self-paced, information literacy tutorial.

### **OLAS – Online Information Tutorial**

OLAS consists of nine online modules, each of which covers a particular aspect of information literacy, and each of which can be accessed on a 'need to know' basis. It is place and time independent, available to all learners 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. By offering greater flexibility and convenience to each learner, and by complementing, and where necessary, replacing, our existing face-to-face offerings, OLAS aims to reach every user in a way that our face-to-face training cannot.

OLAS was created according to international best practice. Its overall structure accords with SCONUL's Seven Pillars Model of Information Literacy, while its learning outcomes are based, with permission, on those produced both by CAUL (Council of Australian University Librarians) and by Peter Godwin (South Bank University, London). OLAS developed partly as a means of realising the library's aspiration to provide independent lifelong learning because it can be accessed anytime, any place by individuals. It also developed in response to the percentage (now a minority) of students who do not attend the classes and who are not encouraged by their lecturers to participate in our programmes. The take-up percentage of the library's classroom activity is in the region of 60%, whereas the hit rate on OLAS is a higher percentage. This is an inevitable consequence of the fact that our Learning Support programmes have not until recently been compulsory components of any academic course.

OLAS has a very simple interface, which leads the student incrementally to encounter the complexities of information gathering quite quickly so that even where students do not attend a class-based session, they have at least participated in a form of library education. Overall the value of OLAS in complementing and enhancing library classroom activities is considerable.

### **Participant Feedback**

From the beginning, informal feedback from the lecturers whose students attended the information skills sessions was positive and encouraging. Many lecturers reported that their students submitted better assignments after they had completed the Learning Support programme. Research and referencing skills had improved and students were using a wider array of resources than before.

Student response has also been good. A number of students have realised the benefit of the first year programme and have opted to attend follow-on training in their second and subsequent years. A significant improvement in the range and depth of queries at the library's main Information Desk reflects this with students who have attended the course displaying a good grasp of how the library works, types of resources available etc.

The popularity of the Learning Support programme among lecturers and students is evident in the statistical records (available on the library website – <http://www.wit.ie/library/>) which show a steady increase in attendance figures from one academic year to the next. OLAS has also been well received with many lecturers and students commenting favourably on the online tutorial.

### **Evaluations & Surveys**

The ACRL (1998) Task Force on Academic Library Outcomes Assessment Report defines the outcomes measures of library services as “the way in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources and programmes”. The impact of the Learning Support service on student academic success is very difficult to quantify. Qualitative approaches, such as user surveys are, however, a useful general means of measuring the impact of library services on student achievement.

A comprehensive Student User Survey was conducted in WIT Libraries in 2003, which provided direct feedback from student users on a number of library services,

including Learning Support. The results were generally informative from the Learning Support Team's point of view, providing a useful yardstick from which to measure the success of the undergraduate programme.

Results revealed, for instance, that only one third of the undergraduates surveyed had attended library tutorials, 75% of whom rated the tutorials as helpful or very helpful. On-campus, face-to-face library training does not, it seems, cater for every student's requirements. The need for full course integration for the information skills programme was also underlined with some respondents requesting compulsory library tours and database training (WIT Libraries, 2003). The Team concluded that a more comprehensive approach to training was required.

### **Course Integration**

In 2004, after eight years in operation, the Learning Support Team decided as part of the formulation of the Library's Strategic Plan and in response to the results of the Library Survey to set out a development path for library education, which would integrate the principles of information skills across all curricula and educational programmes of the Institute. The purpose of this was to position the library as an active partner in the educational process at WIT.

It is worth admitting that this was, at least, in part, an attempt to deal with the reality that library education relies on lecturers arranging classes and giving up class time for library education: although a percentage of lecturers are strong proponents of the library, our experience was that a loose approach resulted in some students receiving comprehensive information skills instruction throughout their time at WIT, while others are obliged to use their initiative, seeking individual instruction. A non-integrated approach in this area would continue to lead to inefficiencies and make for an overall unevenness of information literacy skills among graduates.

WIT's Librarian, Ted Lynch, had for some time argued that the non-integration of information skills in the curriculum lessens the library's strategic importance for the Institute and makes the library seem like a less than active partner in the educational process. The Learning Support Team had, as a consequence, begun to campaign for campus wide policies to embed information literacy into the curriculum as a subject in its own right.

## **Pilot Courses**

Based on the success of Learning Support, its innovative programmes and its authority in the area of online education at WIT, the Institute proposed that information literacy programmes would be offered as part of certain courses in the 2004/5 academic year with a view to full curriculum integration in all curricula thereafter. This posed a tremendous opportunity for WIT Libraries to advance the teaching and learning of information skills by embedding these two pilot courses into the undergraduate curriculum.

The first course was to be part of a yearlong Bridging Studies course for international students. It was envisaged that this course would comprise mainly of students from China, Russia and Pakistan. The library course would be part of a Critical Thinking and Research Skills module, which would be taught in Second Semester and would involve about 40 teaching hours in total - 14 contact hours and 26 hours self-study for students. The second course would be an elective module in Library and Archival Studies that would be offered as part of the Institute's Music Degree and would involve about 15 contact hours.

Of the two courses, the most challenging was the Bridging Studies course involving as it did the teaching of international students. This course provided the librarians involved with a first hand insight into many of the issues involved in teaching international students - different learning styles, intellectual property law, lack of participation/debate in class and English language difficulties. Other issues include problems with library terminology and lack of familiarity with academic libraries, as many libraries in Asia are closed access.

As regards both courses, Learning Support staff are currently in the process of developing a set of learning outcomes that will reflect the student population. The framework of these learning outcomes is modelled on the information literacy standards as developed for OLAS and the Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Bundy, 2004).

## **The Future**

The development of comprehensive integrated programmes for all the Institute's curricula is a major objective of 2004/5 for the Learning Support Team. An important first step is the establishment of a Memorandum of Co-operation between academic and library staff. This sets a working agenda for the staff involved and defines the

roles and responsibilities of individual personnel. A very important technological tool, which will be key to providing a technological framework for this development, is WebCT and the Institute has in a series of internal memoranda, determined that WebCT is to be systematically and seamlessly integrated into institutional activities. The library has been an important partner in developing a strategy for the use of WebCT and it is a measure of the Institute's confidence in the instructor abilities of the Learning Support Team that the Team was chosen to pilot WebCT integration with existing online programmes.

Both library and academic staff involved in the process of integrating information skills in curriculum development have instructional design and curriculum development knowledge, awareness of professional development strategies and of information and communication technologies. The library's involvement has served to raise our profile among academics and has also reinforced the image of librarians as educators in their own right.

OLAS, operating with WebCT serves as a template from which discipline-specific information literacy tutorials are being created. Applying the principles of OLAS on a discipline-by-discipline basis is a challenging task, but library staff involved, have in their undergraduate and Masters degrees an understanding of a range of disciplines. There is a further possibility that the information literacy module can be combined with OLAS to offer students an accredited Information Literacy module whose learning outcomes will take into account the Bologna Agreement and be in line with international standards.

### **Conclusion**

The activities of the Learning Support Unit show that it is possible for a comparatively small unit\* to advance library education in its parent organisation in practical, achievable steps. The success of the Learning Support initiative also shows that it is possible to position the library over a comparatively short timeframe as a major strategic asset for its institution simply by drawing largely on the skills and experiences of library staff.

The Unit's achievements have allowed WIT to see library activities as adding tangible value to the student experience, thus providing the institution with competitive advantage. Because it draws largely on previously underused skills of *existing* library

staff and on the desire of existing academic staff to improve outcomes for students, the model is cost efficient.

Learning Support activities tie in with many of the aspirations expressed in the library's mission statements by showing the relevance of the library in its mission to prepare students for the information society. The initiative articulates the library's eternal mission to facilitate expression and understanding of acquired knowledge and it provides the library staff involved with real opportunities to achieve active pedagogical roles in the educational mission of their Institute in partnership with lecturing staff on curriculum related projects. Thus, for library staff at WIT, it is, to quote Bierman (2000), *an exciting time to be in the profession*. (13)

\* The Learning Support Unit at WIT comprises five to six individuals in an institution of 6,000 full-time students.

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