

Five hundred into 4 won't go – how to solve the problem of reading list expectations



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All of us who have worked in academic libraries over the past few decades and have seen the huge increase in student numbers, not just across the board but on particular courses, will bemoan the 'not quite enough multiple copies' syndrome. In an article in *Relay*, last year, Chris Powis¹, an ex-colleague from the University of the West of England, wrote about 'overcoming poor funding and combating ... a less than adequate collection' by 'a deliberate attempt to compensate through service excellence'. This is our tale of how UWE Library Services is attempting to address a situation where the collection is perceived to be inadequate by some, but that the library believes can be made to work more effectively.

THE PROBLEM

The library has been trying to cater to the needs of large student numbers (up to 800 on some modules within the Business School) by using traditional mechanisms. These have included

buying multiple copies of some key texts, allocating some to reference only status, placing some in short loan, beginning to use the HERON service for digitisation of odd chapters and articles. However, short loan collections are not helpful for part time students. Even 20 multiple copies of a text are not likely to satisfy the needs of 1,000 students who have an assignment to complete within a month (leaving aside the effect it has of reducing the breadth of the collections). Many library and academic staff have been put off by the costs of permissions to digitise, although the new trial Copyright Licensing Agency's (CLA) blanket scanning licence offers potential to remove this deterrent to a certain extent.

One of the authors (Malcolm McEachran) has devised a multiple copies formula that helps to illustrate the problem. He fears that it may already exist under another name, be wrong or be perfectly obvious... but here it is anyway:

Imagine that 100 students are given a reading list with 20 titles on it and are expected to read a quarter of these titles. Each student will need to take out a quarter of 20 = 5 books, so there will need to be 5 x 100 = 500 books on the shelf. As there are only 20 titles involved, this means 25 copies of each title. In general terms:

$$m = \frac{s \times i}{r}$$

- m = multiple copies needed
- s = number of students
- i = number of items to be read
- r = number of items on reading list

McEachran's formula enables you to demonstrate very quickly the futility of multiple copy provision. The proportion of the reading list that students are expected to read (i divided by r) multiplied by the number of students gives you the number of copies you'll need to provide (almost always ridiculously large). This works irrespective of the length of the reading list. For example, if 30 students are expected to read half their reading list, the number of copies you'll need is 15 (half the number of students).

The formula assumes that the students all need the books at the same time. This may seem a little pessimistic. You might suppose that some copies would reach more than one student during an assignment. But we doubt if this is often the case as our students work to fairly tight deadlines. [The idea that access to resources can be facilitated

by encouraging some students to do their reading before writing their assignment and others to do it afterwards has so far proved too radical even for one of the UK's newer universities!]

THE CONSEQUENCES

If students are given a reading list they expect copies of the books to be available within the library and not to have to beg, steal or fight to borrow them. If the copies are not easily available they become dissatisfied. When they are asked to rate the library service as part of UWE's annual student satisfaction survey they rate 'availability of core books/course materials' very poorly.

Despite glowing reports about other parts of the library's services, e.g. 'telephone service renewals' and 'inter library loans' this seeming lack of access to required readings drags down the ratings and consistently shows the library to be failing to meet one of its key objectives, namely to 'expand and facilitate easy access to library materials'². Not only this, but the library spends over half a million pounds per year on electronic resources – including full text journals and e-books. Surely these could be helping to meet that objective?

THE SOLUTION

If students are expecting something the library cannot easily provide, then we need to address and manage their expectations. In order to do this, we need to change the approach adopted by academic staff to resource provision for their modules/programmes. In order to do that, a culture shift needs to take place. Library staff are critical agents to effect this change. But how to articulate this?

Two of our faculty librarians put pen to paper in 2003 and coined the term 'reading strategies'. As a working title, it aimed to draw attention to the fact that reading lists are only a part of a wider 'reading strategy' that should include consideration of not just **what** students should read but how they will get **access** to it. If a recommended item is essential reading for a particular module, then the module leader should ensure that all students can access it, either by using the traditional methods, e.g. short loan (but only if appropriate in terms of student numbers, mode of attendance, etc.), or by maximising the use of 'newer' options. These options could be to exploit the CLA's blanket photocopying licence or to find out what useful articles are already available in full text electronically through library subscriptions and then provide (legally permitted) links to them.

The strategy might also include selling photocopies to students or making it clear that they are expected to purchase particular key texts.

The strategy might be different depending on the level of the students, e.g. more direct help with texts in the first year, but an expectation that students will find their own support materials in their final year (although not without ensuring they have been offered appropriate information skills sessions). This raises another issue with which academic librarians have been grappling, that of ensuring the timeliness of information skills (IS) seminars, i.e. an appreciation that one session at the start of a student's degree does not necessarily meet all needs. Although at UWE the faculty librarians offer a large number of 'reader instruction' sessions per year (1,221 during 2003/04), the promulgation of reading strategies can still provide the opportunity to encourage a rationalisation of IS teaching across a programme. It can reduce duplication of effort between modules and also avoid the situation where each module leader believes/hopes that another module leader within the wider programme has asked the librarian to cover IS (there being no separate 'study skills' modules at UWE into which such teaching might fall).

One particular document, entitled 'Reading strategies in a nutshell'³ has been devised to encapsulate the essence of reading strategies succinctly for the busy academic.

READING STRATEGIES IN A NUTSHELL

As well as outlining ways in which academic staff can address the effectiveness of reading lists, the 'Nutshell' also aims to clarify the distinction between 'essential' and 'further' reading. It had become obvious, in discussions with academic staff, that a variety of vocabulary was in use across the institution with respect to readings, e.g. 'indicative', 'core', 'essential', 'additional'. This all added to the confusion and miscommunication of expectations to students.

The reading strategy approach therefore proposes that, where possible, **essential** reading should be limited to material which is available electronically or which will be provided for students as a printed study pack. The advice to academic staff is based along the following lines:

- Make use of the increasing number of journals that are available electronically via the library catalogue

- Utilise the university's CLA blanket photocopying licence that enables you (within limits) to make as many copies of a journal article or book chapter as you have students
- Consider requiring students to purchase a set text for particular modules
- Liaise with the programme management team to ensure that students are not required to purchase an unreasonable number of books
- For smaller cohorts, consider putting books in the short loan collection

To some academic staff this involves little change to their current practice except perhaps to articulate the expectations more clearly. However, for some this may seem like a lot of extra work.

The reading strategy approach proposes that **further reading** is ideally also limited to materials that are readily available. Where this is not possible, access strategies should be suggested to students thus managing their expectations and avoiding frustration. Such strategies might include:

- Explaining to students that you realise access may be difficult unless they are prepared to purchase copies. It is important to avoid giving students the impression that the faculty, or the library, has failed to understand their needs
- Encouraging students to make use of the library catalogue, bibliographic databases and other electronic resources to identify further reading for themselves.

With respect to the latter, the following is also suggested in terms of meeting the students' information skills needs:

- Liaise with the programme management team and the library to ensure that students have developed their information skills to a level which enables them to make full use of the electronic resources available.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

The processes by which we steered the reading strategies proposal through the university's formal committees, and are implementing RS across the university, is the subject of another article and will probably have to wait until next year when we have more fully evaluated the effects of the initiative, so far.

What the library has done in practical terms in order to aid academic staff with the adoption of reading strategies is to provide a service that offers:

- To help to identify material that is available electronically
- To provide photocopies of material to be sent to the printing and stationery department
- To obtain a copyright cleared photocopy from the British Library if the item is not held in any UWE Library
- To facilitate use of the library's digital media archive and the HERON digitisation service
- A centralised scanning service taking advantage of the new CLA trial licence⁴.

For further information about reading strategies, please do not hesitate to contact the authors, and/or check out the web sites mentioned below. We should certainly be pleased to hear of other initiatives that have been established to try to address the reading list problem in academic libraries.

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- 1 Chris Powis 'One copy for three hundred: collection management on limited funds', *Relay*, May, 56, 2004, pp 8-9.
 - 2 <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/library/info/about/docs/plan-section3.pdf>
 - 3 <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/library/info/academic/toolkit/nutshell5.htm>
 - 4 <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/library/info/academic/digitise.htm>