Library support for teaching and learning History in the UK

Abstract
This will be a personal overview of library support for teaching and learning History in UK higher education from a librarian's viewpoint. Using examples from other librarians around the country, this talk will look at what libraries and academics can do to support each other and promote the learning experience for their students.

Intro
I don't want to draw up any battlelines, but before I begin, am I talking to any Librarians? Feel free to jump in if there's anything you think needs elaborating, or be prepared to share your experiences at the end.

 As far as academics are concerned, I'll assume I'm preaching to the converted - if anyone feels that all I do is stamp books, let me know now!

To introduce myself – a very potted biography. My first degree was in History, just along the road from here at Trinity College. After a brief diversion to the Courtauld Institute of Art to get an MA in medieval manuscripts (lots of fun, but not that useful in getting a job!), I ended up working in their library, and eventually went to do my library degree in Aberdeen, where I found 80% of my fellow students had History degrees. When I graduated, I got lucky and spent the next 6 years working for a publishing company in New York – not as glamorous as it sounds, it was in the Bronx! I came back to Britain in 2000, and got a job as a liaison librarian with the University of Reading Library.

So, what this isn't - considered response from someone with many years' experience in the field, or someone with the time or funding to do a national study

What this isn't - theory of library support - Scottish pragmatism, plus I've always found actual experience more useful
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So why did I decide to do this talk? I'm on the committee of a regional branch of the University, College & Research Libraries group and last summer we had an event about liaison librarianship. A high spot was a talk by one of our academics, about what liaison librarianship meant from his viewpoint. Around January, emailed Nicky Wilson and suggested it would be a good idea to have something about the role of libraries at this conference. Enjoyed the last conference and found a lot of useful practical tips. Bad idea - offered me a slot! So I ripped off the title and here I am.

Structure
- Why do we need the library
- Information skills
    - Levels – what we should expect students to achieve
    - Methods – electronic, traditional
    - Assessment
- Liaison between academics and the Library

Why do we need a library?
Could quote mission statements at length here, but I won't. To express things more graphically, if you looked at Reading University web site, you'd find the Library listed as part of 'services and facilities' on university home page

Facility - somewhere quiet to work (or would be if they turned off their mobile phones!), a place to pick up books and journals, a place to use computers. If a library were just this, it would still be useful, but that would be a little like saying the History faculty is just a collection of lecture halls and classrooms.

The whole idea of **service** implies a more proactive role. The Library isn't here for the Library staff – if we weren't needed there would be no point in us being here. You can condense it down and say the library teaches students how to locate, use and evaluate relevant resources. Unfortunately, while most libraries have some information skills <u>teaching</u>, how much information skills <u>learning</u> students come away with is still open to question. More on that later.

Part of the problem, of course, can be the need to prove we're needed. Not that I'm trying to take all the credit, but I'm sure most academics are successful because using the Library comes easily to them – so easily they may forget they ever needed to learn those skills. I mean, can anyone actually remember learning to read – it's automatic for us now. Yet I've heard from academics who are amazed that students can't tell the difference between a book and a periodical. To put it another way, a student who came to a library session recently, wrote on his evaluation form that he'd found the session useful because "it explained all the things academics assume you already know and you don't".

Students make assumptions too, especially about electronic resources. Most of them now surf the Web quite happily, though we still meet a few technophobes every year. However, while they may be happy with what they've found, it would help them to learn how to construct more effective search strategies, or to discover more effective places to search than just the Web.

Different skills at different points
The truth is, as I'm sure you're aware, that there is no level playing field as far as information skills are concerned. I'm not talking now about the increasingly diverse student mix we accommodate – part-time or mature or international or special needs, etc, all of whom may need more support – but about the 'average' 18-21 year old doing a first degree. Some students quickly grasp how to use periodicals indexes, many don't. Which brings me on to the question of what students need to learn. You wouldn't teach the same history course to a Fresher as to a finalist. At Reading we're drafting learning outcomes divided into three key levels.

- Awareness and familiarity with Library services (first year)

Borrow, return and renew books, Use our Unicorn catalogue to find books. – possible, although not desirable, to go through a degree with just these skills
Use short loan collection, use Unicorn to check own record – partial success. While short loan collections are designed to help students, by only allowing the most important books out for short periods of time, academics are always amazed at how little use it gets when we give them the statistics at the end of every term..

- Ability to recognise and articulate their information requirements. Ability to construct strategies for locating information (second year – looking beyond reading list)

Plan a subject search
Use the library catalogue to find periodical titles
Cite simple bibliographic references
Extract appropriate information

- Ability to locate, access and evaluate information (second /third year - dissertation)

Search databases (e.g. Web of Science, Historical Abstracts)
Select relevant articles
Construct a personal bibliographic system

So, that sounds pretty organised and well thought-out, doesn't it? Now for the downside! At Reading, information skills sessions are not compulsory – the Library has to compete with finishing that essay, or having a lie-in or the bar, to suggest a few options, so we're really dependent on academic support to push students our way. And when they do turn up, we can't assume we've seen them before and that they've already reached a certain skill level, so we end up covering the basics just one more time. I don't think we're unique in this, but I think it's an area we're going to have to improve on.

Electronic information skills teaching
Fortunately at Reading information skills is a very high profile activity – there's a university commitment to transferable skills, of which information skills is an important part. The Library has just appointed a Learning Support Co-ordinator in addition to an already strong subject liaison network. One of her responsibilities will be to compile a database of information skills material. There are sessions on the library catalogue and some of the major databases which are not subject-specific, but the majority of subject-based teaching depends on the individual liaison librarian. I'm in charge of History, the European Documentation Centre and the Rural History Centre, and I'll be taking over Art History in the Autumn. For History, I do a basic introductory lecture for first years in the Autumn term, then do more detailed subject-based sessions after their Part I exams at Easter. Up to that point, first years study 3 different subjects, afterwards they decide on whether to do joint honours or just History. I also run sessions for students planning their dissertations in the second year, other sessions are run whenever staff request them. I also write online worksheets and guides for History resources. So far, I've just been involved in traditional sessions, involving lectures, demonstrations and hands-on tuition, but I hope to include a Blackboard information skills course in the near future. Electronic information skills teaching is becoming more common, and I've a couple of examples of this.

In addition to her subject-based work, Helen Hathaway, one of our senior librarians, is heavily involved with SCONUL's information skills programme (Standing Committee of National and University Libraries). In May she's going to be trialing the MOSAIC course with a group of students. This is a 10-week web-based course produced by the Open University to provide a curriculum for information skills, its subtitle is 'making sense of information in the connected age'. It isn't subject specific, but looks at the strengths and weaknesses of different types of information and how they should be used. . Students are assessed through interactive exercises. I understand that if this trial proves successful, the OU are thinking of marketing the case shell to libraries, who would then be able to customise it to their own requirements.

A similar project is in preparation at Sheffield Hallam University, where they've been working on an electronic introductory information skills package called Infoquest for delivery in September 2002. Aimed at first year students, it has different modules of information skills development – the Learning Centre catalogue, literature searching, information databases, etc. Like Mosaic, the emphasis is on interactivity with exercises to work through and live links into the catalogue. However, they're taking things a step further – each area is customised according to the subject by Learning Centre subject teams in conjunction with academic staff.

So, are electronic information skills programmes the best way to support teaching and learning? There are definite advantages. One of the reasons Sheffield Hallam are going this way is the problems they've had with the attendance and timing of more traditional sessions. It's undeniable that electronic instruction is about as close to point-of-need teaching as you can get – always available just when the student wants it, they can repeat any section as many times as they need, they can dip in and out of sections depending on their skill level. Hey, they don't even need to be in the Library, which some students would see as a definite advantage.

There are, of course, some drawbacks. Some of these are technical, such as slow connections, or the fear that the whole system may go down (but then again, library staff can get sick too!). For all the promised ease of access, students need a computer to use the course – I don't know what the future will bring, but computers are probably the highest-in-demand items in our library at the moment. – and the IT skills to use computers comfortably. As one student put it 'Virtual guides are no good when you aren't sure where the computer room is or how to access the guide'.

More importantly, by losing face-to-face time with students, librarians lose opportunities as well. In any traditional session, students probably absorb a staggeringly small percentage of what's covered, but at least they come away knowing there's someone they can come back to for further help. More importantly, during a session, I always include some hands-on work, so I can do some on-the-spot trouble-shooting. We can't assume that students will come and find us if there is a problem doing an electronic course, they're more likely just to give up. Basically, just providing information isn't enough for some students, whether in print or electronic format. An example, every Fresher who comes to Reading is given a Library Survival guide – it's a leaflet giving answers to all the most frequently asked questions about the Library – no member of the library staff has yet to meet a student who's read it!

You may have noticed both my examples are still at the development stage – I'm afraid I couldn't get detailed information on any programmes that were already up and running in the History field. If anyone has any experience of such a programme, I 'd love to hear about it afterwards.

Relevance and integration
So how do we encourage students to value library support? Well, this is my pitch to academia. When I began researching this talk, I emailed several library list servs asking for some help – I got lots of success stories, but also some areas for discussion. (I'll talk about reading lists later). And I am talking very generally here – I'm sure we all know some academics that are shining examples of library co-operation, whereas other colleagues are perhaps less enthusiastic. The main buzzwords I want to emphasize are **relevance** and **integration.** Whether we're using electronic or traditional means to help students learn, we have to time things so that students can see how what the Library is showing them relates directly to their course. So at the most basic level, library staff need to know what assignments students are working on, and when interest is likely to be highest. For example, I was offered a ten-minute slot at the end of the Autumn term to point out what the Library could do to help students with their dissertation. However, topic choices didn't need to be made until the end of February, so anything I went into then was likely to be forgotten by the time it needed to be used. I ended up running a couple of workshops 2 weeks before the deadline, and got some very positive feedback from them. This, of course, won't do a lot for students whose attitude is, and I quote 'You only come into the Library the day before the essay is due so it is useful if books can't be taken out!'

This issue of relevance is particularly important at the start of students' courses. Until recently at Reading we've timetabled lectures to around 200 Freshers at a time to explain the basics of using the Library. Other libraries use, for example, tours or just leaflets. However, as one Fresher put it 'The library is not your priority in Fresher's week – you wait until you need to use it'. It's important to listen to each year's intake

to find out how we can improve relevance for the next year One of the more interesting suggestions I heard from another Fresher was that the Library hire second and third year students to act as guides for the first couple of weeks..Hopefull something we'll follow up.

Relevance has another aspect besides timing – content. The more relevant examples and exercises are to the course students are on, the more obvious the value to the students. In the Summer term at Reading I run workshops to introduce second years to some of our electronic databases and Internet resources and try to customise each one according to the audience – American history, medieval history, etc.- with old essay titles as practical examples. There is, of course, the danger of spoon-feeding them by answering too specific queries, instead of teaching them to think for themselves, but that's something we run into every time we get an enquiry at the information desk. For example, if someone says they can't find books on the Black Death, should you just show them where the books are, show them how to find the books on the catalogue, or start showing them alternative sources of information? How much help you give really depends on the individual situation. (and occasionally on whether it's 5 to 5 on a Friday afternoon! – for some reason that's always a peak time!)

The level of integration possible varies from academic to academic, and department to department. As I've said, information skills training at Reading is currently not compulsory, and therefore is not timetabled for History students as part of their course. It depends on academics to donate an hour of their course, or finding a free spot on the timetable – I've taught a lot of sessions on Wednesday afternoons, and last thing on Friday, which doesn't help attendance!

I mentioned timing and content when I talked about relevance: the same concepts are important when discussing the integration of information skills. Well, that was my plea to think about information skills as part of your students' courses. Now I'd like to move on to the whole thorny question of assessing those skills. Traditionally, though I'm sure there are now places where this doesn't hold true, students' information skills have not been assessed explicitly when studying for their degrees. This has unfortunate consequences. Students can assume that if something isn't important enough to be assessed, it should be classed as an optional extra – and optional extras often get ignored in favour of more pressing concerns. To use another example from Reading, a few years ago the university introduced an IT Basics prerequisite for first years – students had to complete a few basic exercises in the most common software programmes in order to progress with their degrees. Most didn't need any training to pass, help was available for those who did need it, and everyone was able to put IT skills down on their CV. Now most of these students would probably have acquired these skills anyway in the course of their work, and there were no subject-specific elements, but this explicit assessment raised the profile of IT skills. It's also been of great use in evaluating existing IT training. Evaluation of information skills training is an area where a great deal of work remains to be done.

So why assess, other than to make students think our work is important and turn up at our sessions? Well, no-one at this conference would advocate imparting historical skills purely through lectures, would they? It's a truism that people learn through doing, so students need to practise their information skills. Now, some people might argue that students would practise them anyway compiling bibliographies for their

essays, but a recent study has shown that academics can rather overestimate the thoroughness of their students.

The motivation of this study was that old favourite – a cut back on history journal subscriptions. The librarian, with the co-operation of her academic colleagues, conducted a citation analysis of student assignments to see what students were actually reading. The information in the pie chart show the percentage of periodical titles held by the library that were cited by students – since I'm not sure how important research is at this institution, I won't draw too many conclusions about the fact that half of them were not used by these students. More disturbing is the lack of awareness of periodicals demonstrated by the statistics on the left. In most cases, libraries don't have the resources to catalogue down to article level on their library catalogue, so students need to be aware of, and actively use, the various print and electronic indexes in order to access them. One of the aims of this study was to target information skills teaching more precisely, but there was some friction with academic staff when the results were produced. As I understand it, being heavy users of the periodical literature themselves, they weren't pleased to be told more than half their students weren't using periodicals at all.

 I mentioned earlier the sessions I ran for students preparing for their dissertations – a couple of weeks after the sessions I sent out a short email survey to those who attended. I wanted to know what they found useful, what they didn't, etc. My last question was simple – had they used any of the databases since the sessions? Well, 9 out of 10 students who expressed a preference hadn't! This was despite the hands-on time I had included in the session to give them a little practical experience. Maybe the only way round this is for academics to be a little less thorough when producing their reading lists, and make students work a little harder – I have regularly checked 20 pages of references, just for one term-long course.

Academic liaison
So far I've been concentrating on information skills as the main source of library support for teaching and learning. While this is perhaps the most visible aspect for students, there are many other areas of library liaison work.

My library produces a detailed guide for our academic staff, which is also available on our web site if anyone wants to have a look. It explains what liaison librarians and library representatives do, then has lengthy sections on what the library does to support teaching, and to support research. This lets academic staff know all the services we can provide.

Possibly one of the key areas is collection development – after all, if the library doesn't have the resources in the first place, it can't support academic teaching. There used to be a tradition of the scholar librarian, an expert on everything published in his or her field. Nowadays at Reading, responsibility for what items are purchased has largely passed to the academic departments. Each department appoints one of its academics as Library Representative for that subject, who controls the book fund for that department. As a liaison librarian I therefore do comparatively little stock selection, although I occasionally select works for the reference collection on our subject floor. What occupies a great deal of my time during vacations is checking reading lists against library holdings, and suggesting purchases based on my findings.

Reading lists were another 'area of discussion' mentioned by my colleagues that I'd like to talk about in passing. Rightly or wrongly, most students view reading lists as an essential component of their courses, although I have known academics that dispensed with them. I normally start to receive reading lists about a month and a half before the start of term, most arrive much later, some never make it to the Library at all. I haven't yet had a reading list where every book specified is in stock, and I doubt this is unique to Reading. The problem is that, according to our Acquisitions department, a safe margin, between ordering the books and putting them on the shelves, is two months! This may seem strange when you can go to a bookshop, and have the book in your hand in a few minutes, but the library has to do a lot of preparation before the book gets on the shelves – cataloguing, classifying, sometimes binding, triggering, etc. More importantly, we're dependent on when our suppliers send us the books. This is particularly true of items that come from overseas or out-of-print items that we need to search second hand booksellers for. Yet despite all this students still insist, with a touching faith, that because a book is on a reading list it must be in the Library somewhere. This is mainly why we keep a stack of annotated reading lists by the enquiry desk. This is also particularly useful when the lecturer forgets to alert students to typos! Library staff from other universities have also pointed out the problems which occur when key texts are not put in short loan, but remain on loan periods as long as 4 weeks.

With the advent of electronic resources, one of the key phrases in the library world has been 'access versus holdings'. Well, access has been largely applauded by the academic world – why wait for Interlibrary loans, when you can download the full text of an article instantly? However, it's the 'versus holdings' part that can cause friction – many people seem to want access to electronic versions as well as print, instead of 'instead of'. This has been seen at Reading when we gained access to the JSTOR archive - academic outrage was such that we had to operate a two stage withdrawal – removing print volumes from open access first, then withdrawing them a couple of years later when lack of demand for them was proved. In this case, the University still ended up with the print volumes, the academic departments in question ended up taking them in – still, they were no longer the Library's problem! Because, despite the many new HE libraries built recently, for the rest of us space is a major problem. Here electronic resources can add pressure as well as relieve it, since students need PCs to access them. At Reading, we have the Student Access.to Independent Learning or S@IL centre – by the Summer this will mean one entire floor of our 6 floor library is dedicated to PCs. Since this wasn't an empty space before they arrived, it means even less space for the rest of our resources. Academics keep producing more books, libraries, despite shrinking budget, buy as many as possible. Is weeding library stock the answer? This is a particular problem with History, rather than, for example, a science subject, since it is much harder to define when a work is no longer useful. About a year ago, when I began to look at weeding our collection, I ran a report to see what percentage of our stock in the Dewey call number range 940-999 had never been borrowed in the last 10 years. The answer was over 50%. However, this couldn't tell me what was being used within the Library, so wasn't much help. Academic staff tend to be most vocal about material needed for their own research interests, as I have occasionally discovered when trying to relegate what seems to be little-used items to the basement. Another problem with history is its interdisciplinary nature – students and staff use material throughout the library, since

you can have the 'History of' virtually every subject. This can cause problems when, for example, the Law or Sociology librarian decides to weed stock no longer useful for their subject.

Good communication is vital; within the Library and between academics and librarians. I have been using this talk to highlight what librarians need from academics. To reverse that for a moment, there are areas where the impetus has to come from the Library. I've mentioned weeding stock as one area, another would be the promotion of new electronic resources. It is possible to concentrate too much on the students and ignore the staff – I'm sure there are technophobes within every faculty. Since libraries rely on academic support to encourage students to attend information skills sessions, we need to keep academic staff informed about new developments. At Southampton, for example, staff in the Faculty of Arts are sent a regular online newsletter about useful developments called Arts Update – the most recent issue covered, among other things, the latest update to the OED, Project Muse and new subject pages for electronic periodicals. We're planning something similar at Reading starting this Summer, I'm one of the editors. We've also run a number of events specifically for academic staff in our faculty, where they can attend demonstrations of specific databases, or just drop by and ask questions. Unfortunately the take –up suggests it's not just students who see us as an optional extra, though those that did attend have found it useful. More successful have been visits by library staff to academics' offices, where we've conducted short informal sessions on, for example, setting up a ZETOC Alert service.

Once everyone is aware of what the library has, another important liaison role is to make access to our resources as easy as possible. This includes the technical presentation, moving where possible from stand-alone CD-ROMs to networked resources or web access. Web access, of course, has the added benefit of allowing off-campus use. For example Historical Abstracts was a stand-alone CD-ROM a couple of years ago, and this Summer we'll be getting the web version. We do a lot of work providing quick links via our own website, such as for subject-specific resources, reference sources or providing access to the catalogues of other libraries, or relevant organisations such as the PRO. While the Library relies on academics to select books, as I mentioned, the selection of Internet resources relevant to students has largely remained the responsibility of Library staff . Libraries, such as that at the University of the West of England have tended to provide access to subject gateways, rather than trying to provide sources relevant to individual courses, and the same is true at Reading. It is likely that as Blackboard, Reading's preferred managed learning environment software, gets more popular, our academics will integrate more Internet resources within that. However, the Library still needs to do a lot of promoting to make its online resources known – a recent focus group said they used the web pages for accessing the Library catalogue and not much else.

As far as academic staff are concerned, it's obvious that not everything they require will be found in one university library. At this point, the best support the library can offer, apart from a good Interlibrary loans department, is through a network of links to other libraries. These can be national, such as the UK Libraries Plus scheme, regional, such as the M25 consortium, or entirely local. The University of the West of England for example, runs a cooperation scheme with Bath and Bristol Universities, which means that staff and higher degree research students from one university can join the

library at the other two universities. Comparison with other university libraries in the same grouping can also be advantageous in securing funding, to ensure that similar resources are being made available.

Conclusions

So what are my conclusions? I've spent a lot of time talking about the formal ways academic libraries try to support teaching and learning – mainly through information skills, but also through their liaison with academic departments. This has been very much a personal viewpoint, and you're welcome to disagree with me, but to return to one of my original points, the strength of university libraries lies in the personal service staff provide. Our customers are both the academic department and the students of the university, and while we might dispute that the customer is always right, we should always ensure that we're putting the customer first.

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