

Outreach, networking and advocacy—adding value or just chatter?

Christine Urquhart

Department of Information Studies

Aberystwyth University

SY23 3AS

cju@aber.ac.uk

This article presents some of the ideas explored in a revised module for the Aberystwyth MSc (Econ) Health Information Management programme on 'Client-led Information Services'. If you are working on changing behaviour in your organisation, or you are working across different organisations or department, then it may be advisable to know the type of beast you are dealing with. If your organisation was an animal, what type of animal would it be? Perhaps you are dealing with a very well behaved dog, that does what it is told, and pants appreciatively when you give it something to do – go fetch that bit of information, or gnaw on that really juicy bone of a database search. On the other hand you may feel that you are dealing with an elephant – usually dependable, very slow moving, but occasionally can show a bit of speed but not in the direction you intended? The first section of the article shows how you could categorise your organisation, or the department where you are, and discusses why you need to think about the characteristics of adhocracies when involved in outreach work. When it comes to assessing how well we are doing with outreach activities, we often only look at lessons to be learned from other libraries. There are probably some lessons to be learned across the museums, libraries and archives sector, and the second part of the article introduces you to some of those ideas. Finally, there is an outline of an IBM report on people and innovation, which has some ideas on how to support an innovative and outward looking culture – and some of those building blocks need to be in place, and maintained for ongoing successful advocacy.

Categorising your organisation or department

Organisations, like animals, have their good aspects and their bad aspects. One major study of the structure of organisations was done by Henry Mintzberg (1979) who synthesised the

theory, the empirical research, and devised a way of looking at organisations through five co-ordinating mechanisms (mutual adjustment, direct supervision, standardisation of work processes, standardisation of work outputs, and standardisation of work skills). He also noted that there were five basic parts of the organisation (strategic apex, operating core, the middle line, the technostructure and the support staff). It is very debatable where library services fall in this – one assumes that they should be in the operating core – or would you prefer to be in the technostructure? But you should avoid the support staff as Mintzberg's definition of the support staff suggests that these activities could be outsourced, as many public sector support activities have been over the years. Mintzberg suggested five main structural configurations, and in his later work the five configurations these were presented as:

- entrepreneurial
- machine
- diversified
- professional
- adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1994).

For thinking about outreach and partnership activities, the adhocracy is the type of structure that interests us most, as this is the loose, new and informal organisational structure. There are two types of adhocracy. The *operating* adhocracy is more concerned with problems related to customers or clients, the *administrative* adhocracy is concerned with problems related to the organisation itself. The adhocracy is almost the opposite of the bureaucracy. Whereas the bureaucracy has lots of rules, regulations, and fixed roles, the adhocracy is more organic, with fewer specific roles, less well defined job descriptions but with job specialisation dependent on formal training. One study (Jordan, 1999) has proposed that the generic information system for an adhocracy should be the network (the LAN for small size units, and larger networks for larger groupings). Mintzberg's theories concerning the 'non-regulating technical systems' were tested against several business units which were deemed to be operating as adhocracies. To some extent Mintzberg's propositions concerning the type of information system that should suit these business units held, though it might be difficult to test these propositions properly. End-user computing was a dominant theme in these business units, but

the adhocracies used a wide variety of IT solutions to their problems. Although this fits the 'non-regulating' system ideas, Mintzberg did make a distinction between the administrative adhocracy (which should use sophisticated, automated systems) and the operating adhocracy (which is more likely to use unsophisticated systems). It may be that the ideas about the types of adhocracies need to be revised slightly, particularly when we are trying to make sense of adhocracies that involve library outreach units. Perhaps the Specialist Libraries of the National Library for Health are examples of administrative adhocracies and groups of library staff dealing with primary care examples of operating adhocracies. Debating the type of adhocracy is probably less important than being aware of the likely course of development of an adhocracy and some of the other characteristics of adhocracy. Adhocracies do carry high costs of communication: 'people talk a lot in these structures' (Mintzberg, 1979, p.463). There will be lots of meetings! Research on social learning has also produced ideas around the way knowledge is shared, and expertise gained in organisation. The informal mentoring happens in 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) and other studies have noted that distributed teams often need a mix of electronic and face to face communication. (There is much more written on communities of practice and knowledge management)

Assessing and developing learning

How, in amongst all that seemingly fragmented activity in the adhocracy, is it possible to assess whether most people in the partnership are learning anything? Is the advocacy successful or just a talking shop? In many innovative partnership projects, the assessment and monitoring is integrated into the project management to ensure that the project completes successfully. The learning is part of the ongoing reflection on project progress to answer questions on whether the goals are being met, (and why), and how the participants feel about the project.

One of my favourite partnership project reports is the account of 'There be monsters', a project that involved The National Archives, and Workshop & Company working with mental health service users in London. The project aimed to provide the mental health service users with confidence – learning about the map and atlas collection was part of the programme but the aim was inspirational. And it's difficult to get learning

outcomes to measure 'inspiration' but perhaps after reading about the project you could make some suggestions on the type of measures other similar projects might use in the future (The National Archives, 2005).

Measurement of outcomes can be at various levels, and can be direct or indirect. It is not easy to measure the progress of an educational strategy to support better information and knowledge management within an organisation, and as you have probably found, different stakeholders have very different measures of success or expected outcomes. Many of the hopes placed on the information management strategies developed centrally by organisations are concerned with changes that may take several years to see, or have to be viewed as 'lifelong learning'.

Museums have been in the business of learning activity projects, and exhibitions for a long time. A useful framework is given in a review of the learning activity project evaluations in museums (Hooper-Greenhill & Moussouri (2000). The entire report is interesting if you are interested in museum and exhibition work, but if you want a brief overview that you might be able to transfer to other situations, read Chapter 2 on learning theories, one of the sections in Chapter 4 (choose a type of museum that you like), and read Chapter 5. Section 5.1 of the report by Hooper-Greenhill & Moussouri (2000) emphasises the lack of research studies on programme evaluation, rather than just exhibition evaluation (and that is relevant to many of our education programmes for nursing students – where does that session fit into the bigger picture of their learning programme? There is also a lack of open-ended evaluation in museums, the type of evaluation that asks questions about 'what is going on here?' There may also be too much emphasis in science museums on science-based learning evaluation, rather than social learning (do we think about informal knowledge in any of our nursing education programmes?). And, for museums there's a lack of clear theoretical or methodological approach. Perhaps we are getting better at that. The report concludes (among other things) that more emphasis is required on a wide range of learning processes and outcomes. New computing technologies can possibly enable different sorts of learning. But that question –

what is going on here (?) – is one that should be asked more often than we do.

Valuing diversity

Questions about the value of outreach activities often occur when things are not going according to our plans, and people seem very difficult, very intractable, and things seem to be going backwards, not forwards. If you do need some consolation about the value of working with diverse people then perhaps you need to consult an IBM report on innovation (IBM, 2006). The seven steps to building an innovative environment are in two parts. In *setting the stage*, you need to paint the picture, stamp out fear, and encourage diversity. In *taking action* you need to connect the dots, reach outside, makes ideas visible and motivate for results. Evidence-based, you ask? Some of it probably is, but this report is definitely the 'onwards and upwards' sermon. But there are ideas on how to achieve some of those aims – I leave you to appraise the report for yourselves.

Conclusions

Outreach and collaborative project partnerships are not always easy, but I hope that the article has helped to explain how the research shows that adhocracies are the way they are – because that's what the evidence suggests. I also hope that you are inspired to think more creatively about learning outcomes, and that you are consoled that outreach is worth the effort in helping innovation.

References:

Hooper-Greenhill, E. & Moussouri, T. (2000). *Researching learning in museums and galleries 1990-1999: a bibliographic review*.

Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries.

Retrieved June 6, 2007 from <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/19>).

IBM Institute for Business Value (2006). *People and innovation: putting ideas on the table*. Retrieved March 5, 2008 from

<http://www-935.ibm.com/services/us/index.wss/ibvstudy/gbs/a1025934?cntxt=a1005263>

Jordan, E (1999). Information systems strategy in adhocratic businesses. In Brooks, L and Kimble, C. *Information systems - the next generation, proceedings of the 4th UKAIS conference*, University of York, 7-9 April 1999. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, p.357-367.

Mintzberg, H. (1979). *The structuring of organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mintzberg, H. (1994). *The rise and fall of strategic planning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

The National Archives (2005). *There be monsters*. Retrieved June 5, 2007 from <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/partnerprojects/monsters/default.htm>

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: CUP.
