

Umbrella 2009

**Making connections: the power of
people, partnerships & services
14-15 July 2009, University of
Hertfordshire**

Trudy Waterton-Duly

**Assistant Librarian, Customer Services
Anglia Ruskin University
Faculty of Health and Social Care
trudy.waterton-duly@anglia.ac.uk**

Umbrella 2009, the biennial library professionals' conference, had its theme as '*Making connections: the power of people, partnerships & services*'. This theme was then broken down into 9 different areas:

- Libraries as spaces
- Our skills
- The shock of the new – technology
- The shock of the new - practice
- Professional values
- Our professional future
- Only collect
- The value of libraries: advocacy & funding
- Information skills for life

All of which covered varied and interesting talks by a range of different speakers.

Plenary session – Learning the way: the transformation of an American public library. Charles M Brown.

Umbrella opened with Charles M Brown, Director of the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County, one of the leading public libraries in the United States with a presentation entitled "Learning the way: the transformation of an American public library". A dynamic and interesting presentation it covered the challenges, models employed and initial outcomes of leading his organisation through the transformational changes required in the 21st century (CILIP, 2009). He discussed how the many changes that have and are due to happen were implemented from the management team they employed, which interestingly only consisted of two library professionals with the others being drawn from other professions, to the consultation with all staff and the library users via focus groups. Charles outlined the reasons for the change:

- Children of the 80's who are now using the library are very different from their parents who were children of the 50's and 60's
- Use of Google has changed user profiles
- 20% of the diverse population are functionally illiterate and the library is trying to address the issue
- Very diverse ethnic minority

- Economic downturn which means more people are using the library
- Reduction in county funding

Clearly the changes are still taking place with full implementation by 2010 but the most important message was that change is possible as long as it is planned thoroughly and everybody involved is consulted. *"Change must be as ordinary as breakfast cereal"* (Brown, 2009) really sums this up. Generally people are frightened by change, it is not always deemed a good thing and very difficult to get people to embrace. However, the way in which it has been/is being implemented here is a good example of how it can be done successfully. I feel we could all learn from some of the methods Charles employed. Charles finished the session with a very pertinent quote:

"If you want to make enemies, try to change something"
(Woodrow Wilson, US president 1913-1921, 2009)



<http://www.plcmc.org/> - Library website

Following a welcome tea break and a chance to meet up with colleagues it was time to choose my first session. This was difficult as I was only there for one day and there were so many to choose from. As a health librarian I normally steer towards the health sessions however, it was evident that health didn't have a very strong presence. HLG didn't have a stand in the

exhibition, and in total there were only 2 health related sessions out of a total of 54. Therefore, I chose to broaden my horizons and do something different and attended sessions under the headings *Our professional future* and *Libraries as spaces*.

The information society: does it need the information professions?

Professor John Feather – Loughborough University

John Feather is well known for his book *The information society: a study of continuity and change*, now in its fifth edition so I felt it a good opportunity to actually see the man himself in the flesh. I was also interested to know whether I would have a job in ten years time(?) John began the talk by introducing CILIP's Body of professional Knowledge, something which those of us who have Chartered recently are probably familiar with. He continued by relating our profession to this and questioning whether the profession is coming to an end. He also discussed "deprofessionalisation" a term that can be applied to Public Libraries where managers are employed with little or no library experience. An example of this was evident in the case of Charles Brown's changes, yet 15 years ago it would have been "*unthinkable to have an unaccredited MLS in the USA to run a library*" (Feather, 2009).

He stated that "*we are now in the golden age for access to information*" (Feather, 2009) and that this has changed how the profession must work and once again questioned whether we need professionals, as there is far more interaction with

computers rather than with the profession. The *"library is no longer the gatekeeper of information"* (Feather, 2009).



Other issues were then raised such as the fact that many LIS staff do not seek accreditation because they can not see the point in doing so and that there is not so much need for a librarian as there is for a plumber! He questioned the need for a qualification in LIS: is it so necessary nowadays?

This turned out to be a lengthy discussion and a very academic one, perhaps with the point of view coming from a library professor rather than a professional. Overall I didn't feel that Professor Feather answered his question and I came out feeling none the wiser as to whether we need information professionals or not or indeed whether I would have a job in ten years time! On the other hand it was nice to put a face to a name and it was a very different face from the one I had imagined.

Following a very good lunch and a good look at the exhibitors (including lots of wonderful freebies), I opted for Library Spaces as the title of the session sounded intriguing.

This session was in two parts, the first given by Anna Strange from Buckingham County Council and Karen Newton from Sunderland Libraries talking about mobile libraries and the second by Rachel van Riel talking about library design and how we should learn from retail.

Hells angels with shelving – towards a 21st century mobile service

Strange title you might think, but it is actually an original quote which came from someone describing a "mobile meet" where lots of mobile libraries come together in one place.

The mobile library service is 150 years old with the first mobile library in 1859 being horse drawn. Over that period of time mobile libraries have changed enormously, so how relevant are they in society today? Both Anna and Karen displayed and discussed various statistics and evidence that had been gathered via questionnaires from the public that use the mobile library service.

Currently the mobile library service is divided into different levels of service, standard and specialist. Standard service is a normal library service whereas the specialist service targets specialist groups e.g. the travelling community. The statistics show that usage across these two services is very similar. However, despite this mobile libraries are in decline. Their service, issues and usage have been reduced by up to 61% between 1994 and 2005. Reasons behind this were investigated and the main issue was that there were very few stops out of hours and very few evening and weekend stops. As a result of this an out of hours service was introduced therefore increasing the usage. The survey also confirmed that 87.5% of participants used the mobile library due to their branch library closing down.

Mobile libraries have also introduced "Partnership working" whereby they link up with other organisations that would benefit the community e.g. Age Concern, the Benefits Agency, the Police, Social Services, Job Seekers, this has had many benefits including funding and sponsorship.

Social inclusion is also an area where mobile libraries have adapted well. They serve travellers, the elderly and in one pilot project the homeless, where amazingly they always got the books back! By visiting travellers the library service has helped to break the cycle of poor literacy in this community.

Of course mobile libraries are now more than just about books. The majority of them all have a full range of technology on board so much so in some areas they are now called "Mobile customer service centres"!

Most amusing was a picture we were shown of an Australian mobile library that has a kitchen, bathroom and even a bedroom as they are frequently on the road for weeks at a time.

Overall for me this was an enlightening talk. Always having worked in HE, I never knew there was so much to a mobile library service. What is evident is that the service still has a strong presence in society and one that will be required for the coming future.

Learning from retail – the psychology of library design

A fascinating talk given by an enthusiastic and energetic speaker. Rachel van Riel described herself as a library's answer to "*Mary Queen of Shops*" (Portas, 2009). She is a consultant who through learning from retail, has given advice to libraries and helps to change their look into one that is attractive and welcoming.

Her first question was "*Why learn from retail?*" and her answer was that "*Library neutrality does not work*" (van Riel, 2009). Just like shops libraries need to have the same kerb appeal. Rachel demonstrated some typical pictures of libraries where the first thing you see are signs which say "No eating", "No mobile phones" followed by on entry, a huge desk acting as a barrier between staff and the user, all of which create a negative vibe. She also pointed out that the products within libraries need to "shout" just like they do in shops. By avoiding the negative and making things more attractive, your users will feel far more comfortable: first impressions always count.

Rachel then continued by showing us some before and after pictures of some of the libraries she had worked her magic on using her main three principles of product, space and colour. The transformation was amazing from typical library set up to something more like a contemporary bookshop. The main differences in the old and new were the way the books were displayed and by zoning into a quick reads area or a gender specific area, both of which have been successful. Rachel also advised to look at the way books are displayed, avoid rows and add height to attract people to them. She gave many more

useful tips many of which on reflection seemed like common sense. The changes Rachel has made to many libraries have been a success with the end result attracting more people from all ages into the library.

I really enjoyed Rachel's talk and I left Umbrella feeling inspired and encouraged to go back to my own library and make radical changes in order to attract more students in and make it more user friendly.

Overall a useful day where I broadened my horizons and learnt a lot about areas I have never entered into before. Umbrella 2009 most certainly *made connections* and *used the power of people, its partnerships and services*.

Further information about the Umbrella 2009 conference is available on the Umbrella website <http://www.umbrella2009.org.uk/>

References

Brown, C. M., 2009. *Learning the way: the transformation of an American Public Library*. [Conference notes] (Umbrella 2009 conference, 14 July 2009)

CILIP., 2009. *Umbrella 2009 conference handbook*. London: CILIP

Feather, J., 2009. *The information society: does it need the information professions?* [Conference notes] (Umbrella 2009 conference, 14 July 2009)

Portas, M., 2009. *Mary queen of shops*. [Online] (Updated 2007) <http://www.maryqueenofshops.com/> [Accessed 22 July 2009]

Van Riel, R., 2009. *Learning from retail – the psychology of library design*. [Conference notes] (Umbrella 2009 conference, 14 July 2009)

Wilson, W., 19???. *Enemies quotes*. [Online]
http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_enemies.html [Accessed 22 July 2009]