<u>Hard Times – 15th November 2011</u>

Held at the Royal Asiatic Society (with thanks!), the year's conference welcomed a new chair and two new faces to the committee.

The guest speakers offered a wide range of talks under the wider theme that gave the conference its Dickensian title. **Phil Sykes (University of Liverpool)** opened with some sound advice on how to approach the powers that be with business cases and budget proposals. He used the lovely phrase *journey of imagination* to encapsulate what the collections we all work with can offer to the intrepid explorers who use them.

Coming from an academic library standpoint, Phil argued that when we are addressing people who hold the power and the purse strings and, often, have considerable calls on resources beyond that of the library, we need to be pragmatic. Many of us can empathise with this idea of working as part of a larger organisation where we are but a small cog in a huge mechanism. Phil therefore suggested emphasising the benefits of the library to the bigger picture. Three key points he identified were:
- the research reputation that a strong library service can engender (amongst academics and the media);
- the perceptions of the students who use it (which can be measured by National Student Survey);
- the financial health of the whole organisation (by attracting new students and academics).

Anticipate counter-arguments. You won't stop trying to make the best of a situation, and therefore, if it is pointed out that you have been functioning well, with good feedback, on a reduced budget for years, your response could be to emphasise that this only shows that more money would help make an even bigger impact. This positive argument is likely to be better received than one of natural justice – 'we have had less money than other departments for 'x' years…'

Phil expressed what we probably all know in our hearts – people don't read everything we write! When writing a business case document:
- be realistic
- rather than being comprehensive but incomprehensible document, get to the point and be memorable
- communicate your key points clearly, and probably do this at the beginning of a document
- don't be arrogant, demanding or threatening.

For a meeting to discuss your case:
- get it to the top of the agenda so you won't find your allocated time is cut short
- practice getting the points across beforehand, so you can edit down to the core arguments
- be clear and obvious (what do you *want* to say?)
- avoid bland jargon.

Be aware of your audience, and tailor appropriately. They may need a different argument or angle for the same objective. Similarly, you may find you have to acknowledge the reason the party you are addressing is sceptical, but state that 'this **is** beneficial **because**…'

Finally, Phil concluded that part of success in this area is building a favour bank with those that will be making the ultimate decision. If you can surpass their expectations when they ask for a service or help, hopefully they will remember this when you come before them with your proposal…

Katie Birkwood (Cambridge University Library) gave an enlightening talk on the 23 Things for Professional Development scheme. First thing to do here is provide the web address for the project:

http://cpd23.blogspot.com

Conceived as a 'free' way of learning and developing in times of restricted budgets, staff at Cambridge's libraries were invited to contribute and draw up a module to form one of the 23 points (reduced from similar US versions that had unwieldy 43 points!). The project was open to anyone wishing to develop skills both as a librarian, information professional and as a human being… The announcement of the project led to a lot of healthy debate and enthusiasm, with doubters as engaged as the participants.

Ultimately nearly 800 people signed up to the programme, each setting up their own blogs as a starting point. The most successful of the 23 segments were:
- creating a blog
- personal brand (understanding that you need to consider how you communicate in new media)
- meeting and engaging with other participants
- reflective practise
- job applications

Katie recommended 'library wanderer', 'dots and loops' and 'dumpling in a hanky' as the best – if oddly named – blogs created for the project. One measure of the success of the scheme was in the reviews that were invited, in the form of 'six word stories', and which produced many positive accolades.

There was criticism, but Katie pointed out that the whole idea was that it was a way to explore any of the 23 topics that were of interest:
- in your own free time, when convenient
- in bite-sized chunks
- as it suited – the point was to do enough, not to achieve perfection

All in all, this was a very successful scheme that introduced people to new areas of information provision, or enhanced the skills of those who already used some of these. This community learning model should be considered for future learning when budgets for training courses are tight.

Alison Cullingford (University of Bradford) gave some ideas on making the best of things with very limited budgets and uncertain futures.

With a growing band of online resources (EEBO, Google etc) undermining some arguments of the worth of historical libraries, Alison outlined the strengths of such libraries that need to be emphasised:
- they are a treasure trove – unique collections show what original collectors were thinking, and often have annotations that won't appear on Google Books…
- the books are much more than text – they are objects with unique provenances
- power of the real – books are artefacts to be admired, attractive to audiences (e.g. exhibitions)
- they aid learning, teaching and research
- they can attract new audiences when shared via new technology – crowd sourcing for tagging, transcribing, and linking data

In straitened times, consider utilising partner museums and universities who may be interested in undertaking the research you can't afford to, but which you will benefit from. Make best use of limited resources by questioning whether a project is necessary when looked at alongside the bigger picture of strategy. Unfortunately, we can't do everything we want with limited budgets, therefore make best use of time and money by pursuing the manageable projects. Instead of the expense of installing an expensive physical exhibition, with issues of insurance and conservation, be creative. Consider making it an online exhibition, with a potentially wider audience, instead. Be aware of where the money for activities comes from, and that there are many others trying to get something from the same small pot, so being pragmatic and sensible can win you friends and inspire confidence when it is being dished out.

The – slightly – contentious issue of volunteers, in these times of cuts, was addressed by **Edward Weech (Bishopsgate Library)**. His library has long used them to both augment their work, enabling paid staff to concentrate on large projects, but also to provide a valuable work experience for the volunteers. The volunteers don't carry out public services, but have catalogued just under 20% of the 50,000 items to have been worked on in the past six years. Although their work has to be checked and tidied up, Edward explained that this was still a considerable saving on the librarians' time. The volunteers are recruited through email lists and a regular intake of placements from UCL's department of information studies. CVs and covering letters are required, and references sought. Edward explained that the volume of work that the volunteers undertake is of great benefit in terms of time, whilst the range of backgrounds of the volunteers means they can offer refreshing ideas and an awareness of new/current issues. When they move on, these ex-volunteers promote the library, spreading the word.

Senate House Library established a Friends group in 1988. **Karen Attar** presented some of the pros and cons of such as scheme. Primary amongst the benefits were the group's assistance with fundraising and for advocacy. Income from membership fees was fairly negligible, with membership standing at 140 in 2009, double that of 2002, but perhaps showing the difficulty in making such a group attractive. With small number like this, the value of running a book club, three group meetings a year and issuing a newsletter could be questioned. However, Karen reiterated the help the Friends – clearly very interested in the library – were in terms of raising money for acquisitions and equipment. The conclusion could probably be drawn that if you have the resources and enthusiasm, a Friends group provides a ready audience for your activities and valuable support, and so should be given due consideration.

Jonathan Harrison (Senate House Library) recounted his successful bids, while at St John's, Cambridge, for Heritage Lottery Funding (the other, but for the next bit only, HLF).

With reduced budgets, Jonathan stressed that the HLF was an important external funding source to consider for large, desirable projects. His experiences were positive – in 2007 St John's bid for £48,000 to pay 50% of staff fees for a three year project to catalogue and promote the archive of astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle. This had the benefit of being the collection of a well-known local with much public interest. A second bid in 2010 for £40,000 to cover 50% of staff fees for a similar project on Samuel Butler's archive again proved successful.

The reasoning of launching the bids were that St John's could not afford to carry out the work with its existing funds. The collections were too large to be worked on by full-time staff alongside their other duties in a realistic time frame, and yet the collections were important and needed work.

Strengths of the bids included:
- the collection was surveyed for volume, so it could be quantified in the bid
- these were the collections of high profile personalities
- there was an existing and demonstrable potential audience for the completed work
- a realistic time frame and level of money sought was reached before applying

Jonathan explained that the HLF and other bodies were happy to discuss and give advice before applying and which, in these instances, encouraged him that the projects were likely to be well received. He noted that:
- applications could be made at any time
- there is a single round application process
- decisions are made within ten weeks
- the HLF lets you get on with the project once greenlit
- there is a high success rate amongst applications (90%), so work to get it right

The applications themselves are not as daunting as might be feared. A pre-application form runs to six pages, and helps to shape the final application. For this you should:

- set out clear aims/objectives
- have a realistic timetable
- explain who will benefit, and how
- give evidence of consultation (eg in the Hoyle case, the Scientific Catalogue Organisation)
- show how you intend to sustain the project's outcomes
- make the costs clear
- use strong visuals in the application (you can include photos etc)
- include letters of support for the project (associates and societies; academics including any celebrities(!); schools etc

In conclusion, Jonathan explained that his bids concerned interesting collections, showed team work, enthusiasm and belief and a willingness to open up the collections. Finally, it showed that success can breed success.

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