

From class to clinic: the power of partnership in information skills delivery

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Summary

This paper aims to look at how collaborative practice amongst fellow librarians can enhance information skills teaching for the benefit of both learners and teachers.

Librarians have always worked within a spirit of collaboration and cooperation however with increasing specialisation has also sometimes come a divide between fellow professionals. To reduce this the two librarians at the Health Sciences Library, University of Sheffield, are now actively engaging in a shared delivery of information skills sessions. We describe our experiences around critical appraisal and other skills initiatives demonstrating how collaborative practice allows us to share our knowledge with each other and our students and also creates an open and collaborative learning environment - reflecting the multifaceted nature of the learning experience.

Background

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is one of the UKs largest, busiest and most successful NHS Foundation Trusts. The Trust provides a full range of hospital and community services for people in Sheffield, as well as specialist care for patients from further afield. With a long history of providing high quality care, clinical excellence and innovation in medical research it has been awarded the Hospital of the Year in the Good Hospital Guide 3 out of the last 5 years. There are over 1600 employees making the Trust the second largest employer in the city.

The University of Sheffield grew out of the Sheffield Medical School (founded in 1828) and its Faculty of Medicine Dentistry and Health is one of the major UK centres for education and research in health and related subjects. The faculty has a long-standing tradition of excellence in clinical education and research. There are currently 2234 full and part time undergraduates and 1449 full and part time postgraduates.

In order to support both of these organisations therefore there has existed for some time now two separate roles in the Health Sciences Library; a liaison librarian to support university staff and students, and an outreach librarian to support NHS staff. While both roles perform similar tasks they serve two separate sets of clients. In reality however the two sets of clients are much more fluid; with many NHS professionals attending continuing professional development courses at the university and a student curriculum increasingly concerned with developing future employability and transferable life skills (1). It therefore makes sense for the two librarians to work together to deliver effective skills sessions across both sectors.

Critical Appraisal

Our first successful partnership began with teaching on a jointly created critical appraisal workshop at the Health Sciences Library. Critical appraisal has become an area of expertise for many health librarians however at the same time Maden-Jenkins has identified many barriers for both NHS and HE librarians getting involved in teaching critical appraisal despite appropriate training (2). Amongst these barriers are a lack of time and confidence and collaboration is specifically identified as a possible solution to these and other barriers. We assert that our experience supports this view as joint teaching has enabled us to develop and deliver highly successful workshops. It has also provided a unique learning experience for the workshop participants. Open to both NHS staff and University students the workshops allow these two groups to come together and learn from each other as both often bring very different perspectives and knowledge to the workshop discussion.

Delivered within the Library setting the critical appraisal workshops are specifically designed to be generic, with example papers chosen with the aim of being accessible to all workshop participants. Often taking place over the course of a whole morning the sessions are broken down into a mix of traditional powerpoint delivery, discussion, and student-centered activities as attendees are given the opportunity to appraise the good, the bad and the ugly of published material. We are very much facilitators of the sessions and not teachers, after all it is they who have the clinical knowledge so we encourage all attendees to take part in discussions and student evaluation confirms that it is this opportunity for discussion which is often valued the most. Here the collaboration between the two librarians effectively sets the scene for this type of group critical appraisal creating a cooperative and mutually supportive environment. Critical appraisal can be a daunting subject for everyone not just those trying to teach it and providing a friendly environment in which debate can flourish is essential for a successful workshop.

Collaboration also allows each of us to play to our own strengths. The length of the workshops and mix of teaching styles means that each of us can lead on the activities where we can add the most value and which are best suited to our personalities. For example one person may be more mathematically minded and enjoy explaining the statistics while another may excel at discussing the real-life application of critical appraisal. In this way the different strands of critical appraisal can be highlighted within the workshop and the students themselves can understand the different skills involved. In delivering the sessions however we do at times deliberately swap activities to ensure that each of us would be confident delivering the session alone if necessary and also to allow us to broaden our individual skills. Again the joint teaching approach means that this can be done in a supportive environment and we can constantly engage in peer-observation to improve our own teaching practice.

We also deliver the sessions to those NHS staff working in the community and these sessions are tailored to the groups' clinical areas. These sessions can sometimes take you by surprise and neglect to inform you that your session is part of a wider annual training day and that the one you're attending will include a staff pantomime – with workshop participants turning up in fancy dress on a Alison in Wonderland theme! This was one of our earlier sessions and it really helped to keep the session informal. We're not suggesting that all workshops should be delivered in fancy dress but it may be an option.

Overall the critical appraisal workshops have been a great success and student evaluation is very positive with 100% of attendees reporting either 4/5 or 5/5 for improved confidence in their critical appraisal skills.

Healthy Campus Week

Another exciting partnership and opportunity for collaborative teaching has emerged around Sheffield Students' Union 'Healthy Campus Week. First held in February 2015, Healthy Campus Week encompassed a wide range of activities aimed at promoting and discussing health issues for students. Health and wellbeing has become a key social issues in recent times and is increasingly high on the agenda for student unions and universities alike with initiatives on key topics such as mental health and disability (3). Healthy Campus week was therefore a golden opportunity for the Library to engage with the broader student community. We teamed up to work with another Library colleague Vic Grant, who as well as being the Faculty Librarian for Medicine, Dentistry and Health is also currently studying for a PhD, researching patient narratives and the experience of chronic illness. Working with Vic and the Storying Sheffield Knowing as Healing Project we delivered two sessions as part of the Healthy Campus Week programme open to all students from across the University. Entitled 'Creative Health Information' the sessions used storytelling methodologies combined with information literacy skills to create a vision of a supportive campus for people with long-term health conditions.

Once again the team teaching approach allowed each of us to take the lead on our own area of expertise, with Vic leading the collage and storytelling activities while the Liaison Librarian and Outreach Librarian focused on facilitating information finding during the session. By planning and teaching the session together however we were able to construct the activities in such a way so that there was a seamless exchange between the narrative and the information seeking strands, between the personal and the political. This was also an ideal way to introduce to the concept of evidence-based practice and in this case evidence-based policy as students beginning with their own experiences then sought to propose ways in which the campus environment could be changed to better meet the needs of students living with illness, backed up by the academic research.

This collaboration also further allowed the boundaries between the graduate information seeker and the student information seeker to be broken down as once again the Liaison Librarian and the Outreach Librarian were able to pool their knowledge and demonstrate the importance of information health literacy across society more broadly. For students from other disciplines in particular this was invaluable at showing how health literacy could benefit everyone from patients, health professionals and policy makers, taking the skills beyond the classroom and utilitarian academic means. Engaging with these interdisciplinary issues and teaching health literacy together as a life skill is particularly important at the moment as Higher Education moves increasingly towards embracing interdisciplinary programmes and developing curriculums that address the transferable skills needed by students in order to become successful graduates and citizens (4). This trend can perhaps be best encapsulated by the University of Sheffield's Achieve More programme which involves undergraduate students in cross-disciplinary challenges focused on addressing global issues such as population, old age and sustainability whilst developing skills such as team work, problem solving and presentation skills (5). In order for librarians to stay relevant therefore it's essential that we also practice the same team work in the profession between our different areas of expertise and demonstrate this clearly as a good example to our students.

Future Development

The structure of the University Library has never been static and is even now evolving in a way that will likely increase the collaboration between the two health librarians, with the NHS Team and the Faculty Team merging shortly into a single unit. This provides an exciting opportunity to re-imagine the way we deliver services to our two sets of clients and while we would never want to lose the unique expertise each team member has built up there will be ways we can continue to share our knowledge so that each set of clients benefits from a more rounded and inclusive service. In the short term we are already looking at delivering further team teaching. Our critical appraisal workshops are now well established and we are in the process of putting together short sessions for previous attendees giving them the opportunity to appraise other forms of publications. We are also developing a training day for NHS professionals ‘Bridging the Gap’ which will provide CPD training on critical appraisal and finding the evidence. Similarly the University Library has recently starting providing a regular programme of information skills workshops outside of the curriculum for students hosted in the award nominated new study facility The Diamond. As part of this programme the health librarians will once again be delivering health literacy sessions for multi-disciplinary students and promoting transferable life skills.

Conclusions

The experience of the health librarians at the University of Sheffield Library demonstrate the value of team teaching and collaborative practice most notably in critical appraisal but also across a range of information literacy initiatives. Collaboration allows individuals not just to share their skills with each other but also to play to their strengths which in turn allows a more complete service of skills teaching to be delivered and the varied needs and experiences of learners to be supported. From a business perspective this collaboration has also enabled both librarians to cut down the amount of time they spend planning separate sessions and freeing up more time for innovation elsewhere. It also creates a more robust service ensuring that sessions can always be delivered even if one person is absent and allows expertise and knowledge to be shared across the workforce. For the future therefore the pathway is clear, power comes through partnership.

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