

Librarianship education, employability and equality

Introduction

The University of the West of England is in its second year of running an MSc in Information and Library Management (ILM)¹ jointly managed by academics in the School of Information Systems and by librarians. One of the conditions of the UWE validation of the course, and the CILIP accreditation, was to audit the content of the curriculum related to supporting the disabled user.

This played well into our hands because, being librarians based in the South West, we are loyal members of Claud² and had already discussed the ILM curriculum with Claud committee members. They had identified, for each module of the course, how issues relating to disability could be addressed and, in many cases, assessed.

As UWE is also heavily involved in the FDTL-supported Library and Information Management Employability Skills (LIMES) project³, we are also acutely aware of the need to develop the curriculum to fill some of the gaps identified by employers of information and library course graduates. The survey of employers and employment agencies that was undertaken at the outset of the LIMES project indicated that awareness of legislation is often lacking in new library and information graduates.

Finally, as practising librarians we are all too aware of how easy it is to overlook disability issues in our daily working lives, despite our best intentions. Within the past few years the whole of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has gradually come into force. More recently the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 has placed a positive duty on public authorities to promote disability equality, requiring organisations to produce a disability equality scheme and action plan to indicate how they will achieve this. Such legislation places greater responsibilities on librarians to be proactive in their support for disabled people and to know where to find relevant information and advice quickly and efficiently.

So, as we are now involved in educating librarians we have the opportunity to try to embed awareness of disability legislation in students on our ILM course. Through the support of the LIMES project we are also able to share our ideas, experiences and learning materials with staff (and therefore with students) in other library and information departments.

This brief article aims to outline how far we have got.

Setting the task

Our first attempt at creating materials to support awareness of disability legislation, and related accessibility standards, is set within the context of a task relating to collection management and development. The aspiration is to direct students to relevant publications and web sites so that they become familiar with useful resources, to use library practitioner documents (policies, procedures, guidelines) that students can critically evaluate, and to encourage students to feedback any useful information and Web sites they find whilst undertaking the task.

The task itself uses a problem based learning (PBL) approach. PBL requires students to share their learning experiences, to work co-operatively, to be self-directed and to take responsibility for their learning⁴. As the task designed to integrate subject knowledge in order to solve a particular problem, it encourages students to study at a deeper level. PBL is increasingly popular because of the increasing demand to bridge the gap between theory and real-world practice⁵ - something that employers of library graduates are keen to see.

The task itself is a fairly simplistic problem-based scenario – “Your library has burned down. The insurance money will pay for a new one! Ensure that the needs of your disabled users are embedded in your library’s design and policies to ensure they can locate, access, navigate and easily use information in whatever format it is presented”. This gives students a lot of scope to think about and research the needs of disabled users in the context of developing a new collection and organising information in such a way as to be accessible to the largest number of people for the greatest amount of time. It involves their thinking carefully about their users, the proportion of them with any given disability and how people with these disabilities experience libraries, especially the physical and virtual information content provided within and through them.

Students work in groups on different types of library and are encouraged to share out the research amongst them.

Design and development

The initial idea was conceptualised as a flow chart, then expressed in a Word document. It was then converted using the Transit⁶ resource converter tool into a Web page. Then, again through Transit, it was developed into a “learning object” that the students can work through either sequentially or in whatever order they choose. This has been zipped up and loaded into the virtual learning environment (Blackboard). Discussion boards within the VLE allow students to debate and collate the information they find as they undertake the task. Their assignment is to make a group presentation on their proposed new library and

how the collections have been designed/accommodated to ensure maximum inclusivity and equality of access for the disabled users they had identified.

Support for the students is provided in the form of links to disability organisations, legislation, web accessibility standards, case studies and research. Claud members were also asked to contribute policy and training documents, etc, that we could anonymise and present to the students to provide examples of how libraries have addressed service issues for disabled people.

It is intended to develop this “resource base” by including information and web sites found as a by-product of the students’ research so that this continually evolves and becomes available to other modules on the ILM course. In essence, this will help to underpin the work done in disability awareness across the ILM curriculum.

The outcome

As disability legislation continues to evolve it is important that students graduate from ILM courses with a set of experiences and resources they know they can draw upon when required to do so in their work. It is the intention that our ILM graduates will not think in terms of disability provision and disability equality as an add-on, but as integral to all library services. As such, they will be able to demonstrate good practice to those of us who seek to employ them in our libraries!

¹ <http://info.uwe.ac.uk/courses/viewCourse.asp?CC=GP5112&year=2007>

² Claud is a consortium of librarians in HE networking to improve access for disabled users
<http://www.bris.ac.uk/claud/intro.html>

³ <http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/limes/CONTENT/information.htm>

⁴ Clouston, Teena J., 2005. An emerging person centred model for problem-based learning. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 29 (3): 265-275.

⁵ Tan, Oon Seng., 2004. Students’ experiences in problem-based learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 41 (2): 169-184.

⁶ <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/elearning/transit.shtml>