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Sharpening The Infodesk Toolbox: Peer Learning Through Flexible Modules To Ensure Sustainability In Professional Development

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Abstract:

The Lund University Library reference service is influenced by students' and researchers' changing information behaviour. The service consists of a physical and a virtual reference desk that engages about 30 librarians from different departments with different educational backgrounds and experiences. To meet new challenges, the Library has launched a training programme for the reference staff. The programme is intended to develop professional skills and competencies and to create a new workplace culture based on openness, sharing and dialogue. The programme runs from autumn 2014 to spring 2016. After the end of the first part in December 2014, an evaluation was carried out by the participants and, based on the outcome of the evaluation, some adjustments were made in the continued programme design.

Keywords: Reference services, Staff training, Competences, Skills

Introduction

The University Library (UB) in Lund was founded in 1666, at the same time as the University. The UB holds extensive collections extending over 2000 years, covering practically all languages and subject fields. UB's role is to preserve, make known, and provide access to the various special collections, Swedish print publications and foreign research material. As early as 1698 UB was made a legal deposit library and today the Library has a statutory duty to keep Swedish print publications for ever. UB also functions as a national and international inter-lending centre.

The University Library is part of the Lund University Libraries network, which includes the University Library and eight faculty libraries. The network has a joint strategic plan and, according to the plan for 2014-2016, the Lund University Libraries will

- encourage, promote and offer professional access to information and reference services
- actively contribute to the research and publication processes of researchers
- actively contribute to the learning processes of students and the physical and virtual learning environments
- actively participate in strategic discussions at the University; and
- proactively work with employee and leader excellence and in skills provision.

The UB has 90 staff members organized in five departments with functions that range extensively from rare manuscripts and special collections to Information Technology (IT) services and IT development. The diversity of the organization affects the view of each individual staff member on what the core mission of the University Library is, and we strive to unite these views to reach a common view of the

The Library provides services for a wide range of users, researchers and students from a variety of faculties as well as the general public. The Library reference service consists of a physical reference desk and a virtual reference service (where questions are answered by email, telephone and live chat). It serves as a meeting place for staff and users and it is crucial that staff competencies and skills are continuously developed. In the rapidly changing landscape of research and education, with the use of new technology and the incorporation of new media, the UB reference services need to be flexible to adapt to change.

For this purpose the Library has launched an ambitious professional development programme that will run for two years, focusing on four main areas:

- Reference work
- Technology
- Service encounter
- Competitive intelligence

Project background

The reference service at the University Library, traditionally conducted at a physical information desk, was complemented in 2014 with a virtual information service (VRS). The 30 people who staff the reference service commit about 20 % of their working hours to this service. The remainder of their time is dedicated to other functions, ranging from IT services to the department of rare manuscripts. The educational and professional background of staff is very diverse. Not all staff members are librarians by training or education. The collective competencies of the group are quite wide-ranging, and a primary goal for this project is therefore to increase the skill level by collaborative learning and peer learning.

A secondary purpose of this project is to create a strong workplace culture, based on openness, sharing and dialogue. It is important to view the reference service as *one service* although it consists of two separate units, a physical reference desk and a virtual reference service, and to include the staff from both these units in the training programme in order to create a common platform and to share knowledge. The goal is to develop a cohesive group that works together, shares knowledge and provides a high quality reference service to library users.

Framework and methods

A Basic Framework

In the process of developing the programme and establishing it in the organisation some basic principles were agreed, and these form the overall framework. These principles are:

- *Sustainability*. New staff members in the information service should be able to join the programme; therefore it is important that each module is documented and can be taken asynchronously.
- *Flexibility*. The staff members in the information service work in many different areas and have other commitments elsewhere, apart from the information service. It must be possible for individuals to work with the professional development programme at their personal convenience.
- *Peer learning and collaborative learning*. Each staff member is an expert in her or his own area. An important purpose of the project is to engage the participants in peer learning and collaborative learning and to promote and facilitate knowledge sharing.

Kolb's learning cycle

According to David Kolb “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it” (Kolb 1984: 41). Learning is not something which happens when knowledge is transmitted to the learner; the learner must actively transform the experience in order to learn. “The simple perception of experience is not sufficient for learning; something must be done with it.” (Kolb 1984: 42)

Kolb developed a model to explain the experiential learning process, the experiential learning theory, as a learning cycle (Kolb & Fry: 1975).

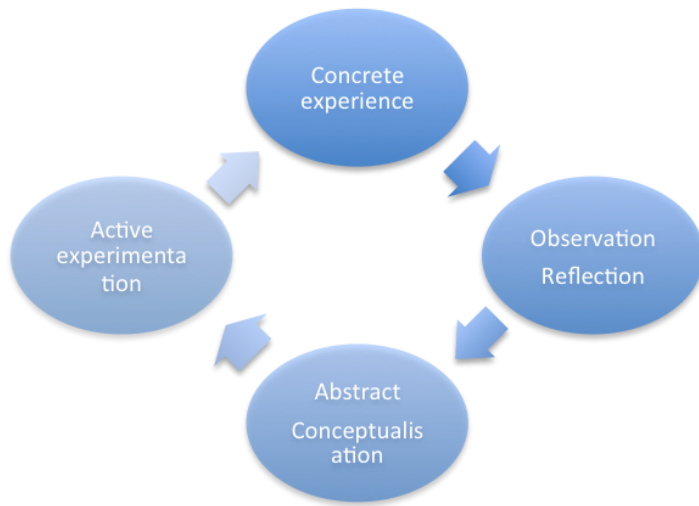


Figure 1 Kolb's learning cycle (drawn by the authors)

Learners go through stages in the cycle, experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, and this process is recursive, i.e. when the cycle is completed and knowledge is created, the process starts all over again.

A concrete experience leads to observations and reflections; these observations and reflections are assimilated into knowledge/understanding, which in turn form the base for active experimentation, actions which test and apply the new knowledge. The active experimentation leads to new concrete experiences. (Kolb & Kolb 2008: 5)

Individuals have different learning styles (Kolb 1984: 77-78); one can enter the cycle at any stage and may feel more comfortable in some stages than in others, but all learners go through all the stages in the cycle to complete the learning process.

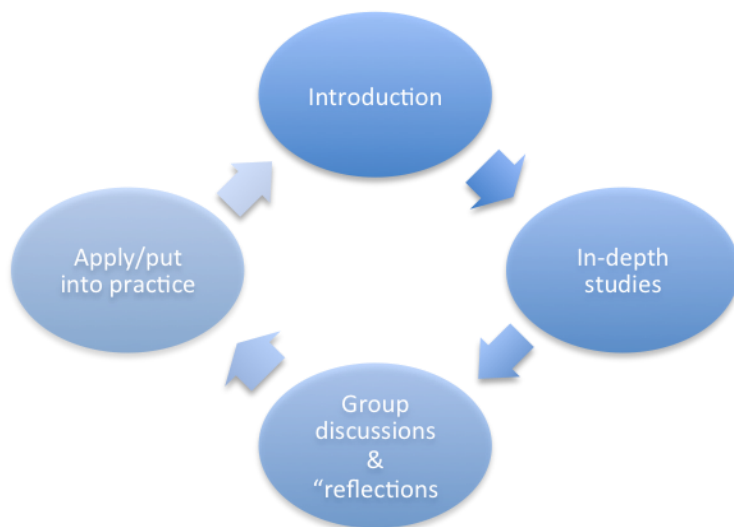


Figure 1 Design of the professional training programme, based on Kolb's theory of experimental learning.

Design

Kolb's cycle was used in the design of the individual courses in the programme. Each two-week long course (a "module") starts with an introduction, intended to provide the participants with a concrete experience. Depending on the subject of the module the introduction could be a short movie, a lecture, a guided tour in a section of the library/archive or a text. Irrespective of media, the introduction should set the frames and the objectives of the module, be engaging and create motivation, and include the learning outcomes.

A virtual learning space is used, a LibGuide where materials for in-depth studies are provided. These can be texts or open educational resources and exercises and the material is designed to give participants the ability to observe and reflect deeper on the subject. This can be done individually or in groups.

After taking part in the introduction and using the in-depth study material, the groups discuss and reflect upon more open questions about the meaningfulness and usefulness of the subject as it relates to the everyday work in information service. Participants ask themselves: how is this relevant for me in my working situation?

Finally, the groups are invited to discuss how to apply the new knowledge in their working situation. All groups share discussions and reflections in writing on a blog and in a plenary discussion to conclude each module.

The overall goal is to have the discussions and the learning continue in everyday work in the information service, and to have participants experiment with new knowledge in real life and in doing so make new concrete experiences and enter the learning cycle all over again.

Active learning, peer learning and collaborative learning: the role of the learners, the tutors and the experts

Contrary to traditional views on education, where the teacher transfers a given content to the learners, in active learning the learners should actively take responsibility for their learning. Focus is on the learner and on the learner's activities. The role of the teacher or, in this case, the tutor, is to facilitate learning by providing meaningful learning activities which involve the learners in doing and thinking about what they are doing (Gogus 2012: 78).

As mentioned above, one of the basic principles for the programme is collaborative and peer learning. An important aspect is to create a culture of sharing knowledge. The people staffing the reference service belong to different departments/sections in the organisation and have different educational and workplace experiences. Everybody has acquired deeper knowledge, "expertise", in their specific areas. How can the sharing of knowledge be facilitated and motivated in the larger group?

The introduction of smaller groups and the plenary discussions described above are part of a strategy to facilitate sharing. The groups are composed of members with different experiences and knowledge and their expertise varies according to different subjects. Every individual will have more experience and knowledge about a specific subject and be able to share it with their peers in the group. This constitutes informal knowledge sharing.

The role of tutor for a module can be described as more formal knowledge sharing. It is a strategic choice to give different persons working in the reference service the role and task to

act as a tutor for a module. The programme spreads the tutor role as widely as possible and acknowledges that all are experts in one way or another. Thus, no one acts as a tutor for more than one module, so that a large number of participants are also tutors. In a few modules, however, colleagues who are actually not working in the service have been invited to act as tutors.

The tutors are responsible for the introduction, the in-depth material and the support in their module. They play an active part in the concluding plenary discussion and tutors have been invited to workshops and seminars to provide them with tools to accomplish this responsibility. The tutors have become very deeply engaged and they have all created motivating and much appreciated material for their modules.

Using digital media and technology

When possible, digital media and technology has been used in the professional training programme. The reason for this is two-fold. Digital media are sustainable, and flexible in that many digital media can be accessed and used asynchronously, unlike lectures and seminars. Trends, showing increased use of digital and mobile media and technologies in society in general and in research and higher education specifically, make it necessary for the staff to acquire high levels of digital literacy.

According to the latest *Horizon report* one of the short term trends (1-2 years) is the increased use of blended learning and one of the mid-term trends (3-4 years) is the proliferation of Open Educational Resources. Recent technologies include “Bring your own device”, i.e. mobile technology, and the “Flipped classroom”, i.e. letting students acquire part of the knowledge content by video media before meeting the teacher (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, Freeman 2015: 14, 16, 36, 38) These trends seem already to affect university libraries and will probably do so increasingly in the near future.

Diana Laurillard (2002) examined media for teaching and learning, and suggested those media that are appropriate to support different learning experiences. She classified educational media in five categories: narrative, interactive, communicative, adaptive and productive. Narrative media support learning experiences such as attending and

apprehending; interactive media support investigating and exploring learning experiences; communicative media support discussions and debates; adaptive media support experimenting and practicing; productive media support articulating and expressing learning activities (Laurillard 2002: 90). Maria Hedberg and Lotty Larson (2009) have created a useful visualization of Laurillard's educational media categories in the Media Wheel.

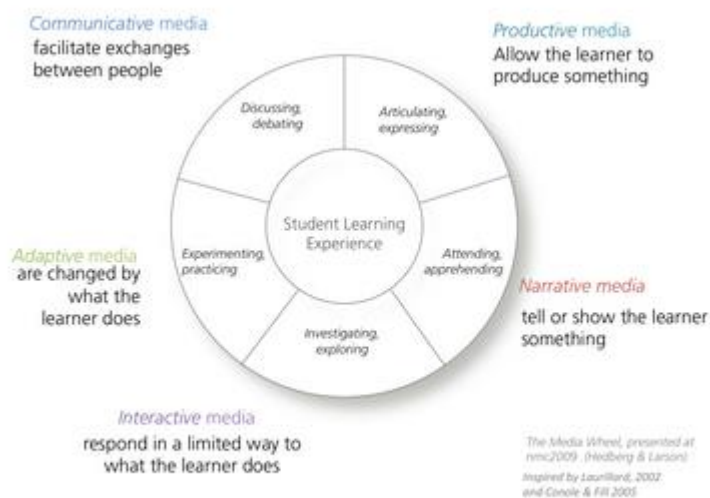


Figure 2 The Media Wheel.

Starting the programme

The decision to launch the programme was taken by Library management. The programme began in autumn 2014 and will extend to spring 2016. The content, and who would be involved, was discussed with the managers of the sections involved. During the programme members of staff have the opportunity to give feedback on the content and methods. Flexibility is important in the programme, to maintain motivation and avoid stress among staff members. New staff members should also have the option to join the professional programme when it is already underway, and the documentation process of the programme is therefore very important. Tools used for documentation include a blog tool and a LibGuide. The documentation contains text, digital movies and written exercises for each module.

The project started off with a one day workshop to get input on the content of the training programme. In this workshop an inventory was made of the strengths and competencies of the group, and the group then brainstormed around future needs and challenges for the information desk. The result was the outline of a range of areas which needed special attention in planning the professional development project.

The input was categorized into themes:

- reference work
- technical issues (both new technologies used for information retrieval and management, and everyday technical issues)
- deeper knowledge about the university’s education and research
- pedagogical issues
- service issues.

Following this input a programme was created focusing on these categories. Each category contains several smaller modules that each run for two weeks:

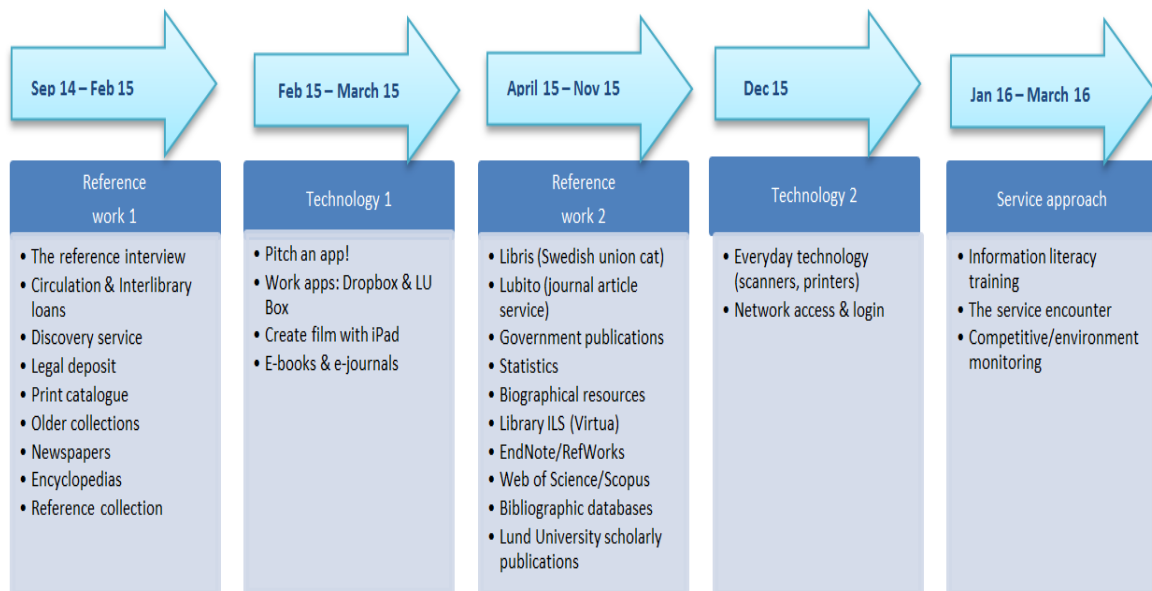


Figure 3 Lund University Library professional training programme

Lund University Library professional development programme

Reference work part 1

The first part of the programme was dedicated to one of the core competencies in librarianship: developing skills for the reference interview. Apart from the areas of circulation, interlibrary loans and how to use the discovery system, the focus was on deeper knowledge of the information resources that are specific to the University Library. Specifically addressed were: how to access the legal deposit material, how to work with the older print catalogue containing material pre-1957, the specific conditions surrounding the collections of rare manuscripts and other special collections, and how to guide users in accessing the reference and encyclopedia collection.

This first part was quite comprehensive and contained nine different modules. The tutors were given a free hand in designing their modules as long as they kept to the underlying pedagogical idea described above. Not everyone is comfortable with being filmed, and tutors were therefore offered the option of making a screencast or holding a lecture instead. For the initial module, the Reference Interview, a researcher was engaged, Anette Svingstedt, who is affiliated to the Department of Service Management and Service Studies at Lund University. Her research focuses on the quality of the service encounter, and how organizational conditions interact to form the overall service encounter experience (Svingstedt: 2012).

Subsequent modules were led by University Library staff. In designing their modules, tutors could choose the form and media for the introduction of the module subject. The module about the discovery service (Ebsco EDS), for instance, contained an introductory film, some reading material and a number of search exercises for deeper understanding of the system. The module about the reference collection was built around actually visiting the collection: walking around the shelves, looking in the books and thus getting more familiarized with the resources, combined with exercises where the participants should get acquainted with the content in different sections of the collections, and open-ended reflection questions on improvement of the reference collection.

Technology part 1

For these modules, all participants were equipped with a mini-tablet. Here the module focused on exploring the use of the tablet in a professional context. Participants first learned the basics on how to start using it and how to download applications. Next the module concentrated on learning how to use the tablet as a work tool: to manage documents and files, to create small instruction films and to read e-books and e-journals.

Reference work part 2

This is the category in which the authors are currently engaged; they are at the time of writing half way through the entire programme. This module goes more deeply into more of the Library's information resources: the Swedish union catalogue Libris, the UB system for accessing digitized print articles (Lubito), the collection of Swedish government publication and so forth. The module also pays special attention to researchers as a specific group of library users, and focuses on their information needs and the tools most important for them (the reference management systems, databases and the Lund University publications database).

Technology part 2

These modules will focus on the challenges of everyday technology for our users: scanners and printers in the Library and the network access.

Lessons learned

As this is the first time a professional training programme such as this has been conducted, there has been a "road trip" of lessons to learn along the way. One important issue has been to pay close attention to reactions and arguments from the participants. This has been done through regular contact with participants after each module. A larger qualitative evaluation was also undertaken after the conclusion of the first part (Reference Work part 1), where the participants discussed some prepared questions in small groups and used the blog tool for answering. The answers were later discussed in the whole group in a short seminar and after this session some suggestions for changes to the programme were compiled.

The outcome of the evaluation led to some adjustments to the programme, as described below. A further, quantitative, evaluation will take place in late 2015 to complement the first evaluation.

Through the informal discussions, as well as through the formal evaluation, some major concerns regarding the programme have emerged:

Motivation

During the process, the level of motivation of participants in the group has fluctuated. Questions about why and how the programme is carried out have been discussed. It has been important to allow open discussion and to be open to adjustments to the programme along the way.

The motivation has also varied considerably between the participants, and this may be for several reasons.

The fact that the entire programme is mandatory for everybody has provoked some reactions. Some participants have been less motivated when taking part in the modules in which they already consider themselves knowledgeable. This has resulted in less rigidity about the rule of mandatory participation, and an option has been introduced for skipping a module in some cases. It also emerged that not all participants understand the concept of collaborative learning or are comfortable with it. The role of the peers in the group, and the importance of sharing knowledge were concepts that needed to be made more explicit.

The programme is very ambitious, and will run for a long time. The fact that the end point is so far away may decrease staff motivation. A solution to this might be to try to redesign the programme with emphasis on a sense of conclusion between each of the main categories, for example by having a small ceremony when the participants receive a diploma for finishing all the modules within this particular category. This might give the participants a stronger sense of accomplishment and progression.

Yet another difficulty may be to understand the need for new knowledge. At the start the way in which changes and trends at the University have an impact on the Library was discussed.

These important trends include the increased use of mobile devices, e-books and Open Educational Resources (OER) (Horizon report 2015). Such changes are not always noticeable in everyday life in the reference service, since the Library is a legal deposit library with a long tradition of focusing on the print material, and therefore there may be less motivation to acquire more knowledge within these areas. The modules on using the old library catalogue and the reference collections were mentioned as the most appreciated in the evaluation in March 2015, while the need to master the discovery system was called in question during the module about this system.

One strategy to raise the level of motivation and involve participants more might be to integrate their own experiences better into the module subjects. One way of doing this might be to ask participants to exchange experiences, questions and expectations about each module beforehand and then incorporate this input together with the tutor.

Consideration should also be given on how to accomplish a more explicit progression between the modules, and encourage the participants to use the knowledge and ideas acquired in a module in their reference work.

Lack of time and problems regarding flexibility

Flexibility is one of the main principles of the programme, but in reality a conflict between flexibility and collaboration has emerged. The participants have been working in groups and the groups have chosen to meet in real time to do the exercises together, and discuss and reflect upon the module, so that the collaborative method has actually decreased the flexibility. According to the March 2015 evaluation, participants have found frustrating the difficulties in making a meeting time for the group. As a result, a new approach will be tried: a mandatory afternoon meeting every four weeks will be scheduled, where participants will have three hours to work in groups, write the blog and discuss in a plenary.

Methods and learning styles

Individuals have different preferences and learning styles, and Kolb identified four basic learning styles. Some individuals prefer to learn by abstract conceptualization (convergence);

some prefer concrete experience and reflective observation (divergence); some abstract conceptualization and reflective observation (assimilation); and some concrete experience and active experimentation (accommodation) (Kolb 1984: 77-78). Allowing for differences while keeping the main principles requires a difficult balance, and more efforts are needed to achieve this. This will also demand more active involvement in the design of each module, to avoid putting too much of a workload on the tutors.

Communication

Forms of communication comprise an important part of the programme. E-mails and postings in the LibGuide have been the main way of communicating during the programme.

Participants in the groups have sometimes mentioned information overload as a problem, yet at other times they have mentioned low volumes of communication as a challenge. What is important is to be flexible and listen to the feedback on the specific issue to make suitable adjustments.

Conclusions

This paper was written when the authors were half way through the programme. The programme will continue through 2015 and end in spring of 2016. It has been, and is, a deeply rewarding learning process for the project planning group, which consists of three people who have held regular meetings to follow up on feedback coming from participants and to solve practical problems along the way, all with the purpose of maintaining flexibility and responsiveness during the programme. It has been a highly interactive and creative way of working, and is recommended for carrying out a long and ambitious programme such as this. An important lesson in this process has been to learn from our mistakes, change what should be changed -- and have fun along the way!

When the programme continues, with “Reference Work part 2”, containing several modules, the methods and processes will be adjusted according to the lessons learned. Attention will continue to be paid to the feedback of the participants.

The goal for the programme is to have all the information service staff feel more comfortable and self-confident when meeting the users in the daily information service; for them to feel

that they have more tools to ensure sustainability in their professional development, and that they find daily work more fulfilling when their levels of competence are broader. Evaluation of this process will continue, together with an assessment of whether the professional training programme has had an impact on user satisfaction.

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