Article: Between the Devil and the deep blue sea – the Library between its users and its contract at Britannia Royal Naval College

By Peter Barr

Introduction

In September 2010 the library at Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth (BRNC) failed a Ministry of Defence (MOD) Audit. Notably this occurred after responsibility for the library - along with a number of other ‘training support’ tasks - had passed to an outsourced contractor in 2006, as part of a general trend towards outsourcing within the MOD. The reasons for the library's failure long predated the outsourcing but it is fair to say that the nature of this commercial relationship probably brought things to a head. The audit was the necessary managerial mechanism to shift the focus from who was to blame for the condition of the library towards recognising that a plan of action was required to change it.

My own time at Dartmouth began shortly after that - indeed the first recommendation of the post-audit action plan was the appointment of a CILIP qualified librarian. My time at Dartmouth ended in March 2016 just over a year after a second audit had found it to be “a model of its kind” amongst MOD libraries. This is a neat way to summarise what was an immensely gratifying time for me professionally, and it was the ability to tell the story of what we achieved over this time that was of itself an important factor in our success. What we achieved was, I think, testament to the method we applied of opportunistically pushing towards a vision of the library that was underpinned by a desire to understand the uniqueness of our users in context and deliver a service that matched their needs.
As with all such case studies this article will present the achievement as a coherent whole, and certainly it was driven by a core philosophy, but much of what we learnt we did so in hindsight. Indeed, it was the visit of the CILIP SW Members group to BRNC in November 2015, and the requirement to explain to them what we had done, that made us clarify what had been the features of our success.

It is the purpose of this article to share this philosophy and to argue for its efficacy in the delivery library services in these straightened times. As a small service it is perhaps easier to articulate the method but I believe it is equally applicable in larger more complex services. In essence, I am arguing that the core of delivering high quality library services is understanding user behaviour and needs in context and then, equally if not more crucially, articulating these needs and behaviours to your commissioning authority.

**Benchmarking**

That BRNC Library was failing had been established by the audit, but for it to become successful we needed to have a vision of what that success looked like. One way to judge the success of a library would be to compare it with its contemporaries. In the case of the Royal Naval College Library this was not a simple proposition. It is the only naval college library in the UK. The direct comparisons to BRNC are the library services at the other officer training establishments - RMA Sandhurst and RAFC Cranwell. However, these comparisons were only of limited value. Our sister institutions were not involved in directly similar tasks and did not suffer the complications of privatisation that BRNC endured. Sandhurst still supported an academic faculty that had been outsourced at Dartmouth and furthermore there are necessary differences between training to prepare cadets for their professional lives in the Army, the Air Force and the Royal Navy.

BRNC had been an MOD library but there did not seem much value in benchmarking ourselves against other civil service libraries as our role was not to provide information for the operation of civil servants, we were an educational library. Therefore, potentially more valid comparisons were to be found in education. We were nominally teaching at a postgraduate level but the curriculum was dedicated to grounding their learning for the fleet - naval history, international relations, ship technology, meteorology, oceanography - and higher level study was not undertaken at BRNC. We were not as complex as a HE library service and not as wide ranging as a FE college library. So the conclusion we came to is that we had no valid comparator libraries, and this realisation was liberating. In other sectors it is easy to assume that there is an ideal model for service and oftentimes you will see University X
involving itself in an initiative just because University Y has started doing it. In many ways this is the natural collaboration of our profession, but it can also be used a crutch. Context is everything in delivering a library service. It is necessarily a community enterprise that serves a community in context. Our community was naval officer cadets and while we could learn from all the innovative work being undertaken elsewhere our duty was to understand what was deliverable and desirable in our context.

Understanding

There a number of ways to understand what is required of library service. It can be defined externally - by the commissioning body, the wider department, the college authorities - it can be defined by its users or it can be defined by staff within the library. We were acutely aware that the Library's difficulties had arisen from a librarian developed idea of what constituted a good library service with little recourse to the actual needs of users and with poor oversight from the commissioning authority. Consequently, we actively sought this oversight.

At BRNC there was no one - other than the library staff - who could be reasonably expected to articulate what they wanted the library service to achieve. Indeed, the general opinion of the library's purpose was limited and will be familiarly depressing to anyone who works within the sector. Even supposed allies of the library often defaulted to the notion that a college must have a library without being able to say why or what value it might add. Therefore, there is a danger in relying on your authority (without expert guidance from professionals within the library) to define what a service can achieve. In the case of BRNC, after years of an underperforming service their expectations were very low, and if our only goal was to meet or exceed these then we would not have achieved very much at all.

As has been mentioned we were running the library at BRNC as part of an outsourced contract. Theoretically, the customer (the MOD) is supposed to specify as part of this contract what services they want provided. Elsewhere, these specifications can become very detailed indeed. In the instance of the library service, this amounted to one line in the contract that said “deliver an academic library service”. Whether this is a failing of that contract or outsourcing libraries in general is something I have discussed elsewhere. Nonetheless, where the contract was useful was in clarifying what was definitely not desired. This was very helpful to us as it allowed us to focus on the educational aspects of the service whereas previously library staff time had been damagingly distracted on the collection. Therefore, for our service to be successful under its contract, it was necessary to develop an understanding with the customer of what they consider an ‘academic library service’ to be. It was a crucial part of my role as college librarian to help them come to this understanding.

Understanding within the information profession has usually been thought of as understanding the users of the service. In the case of BRNC these were RN Cadets. We invested a lot of time in understanding our users. To deliver the service successfully it was necessary to understand the profound personal change that military training was designed to bring about in
their characters. More broadly, with no personal background in the military, it was necessary to understand the collective culture and how they lived as well as how they learned. Only by understanding this could we decide which aspects of the civilian ‘academic library service’ were appropriate to apply in context.

It is obviously important to keep your key user group satisfied, and to deliver to them innovations based upon your professional expertise, but it is important that this success is validated by the appropriate authorities within an institution. The entire crisis in public libraries is in some way a failure of the authority (in this case councils) to value the evident customer satisfaction with local library services. Therefore, the importance of the commissioning authority as a stakeholder cannot be over-emphasised. Again, the authority is explicit within a contract arrangement but selling a service to its ultimate paymasters is key for ongoing success. In essence then our job at Dartmouth was to deliver a library service to our users that reflected their needs and behaviours, with the resources available, in a way that was agreed by the contract managers. Therefore, articulating what our users really required rather than just blindly following the contract was the core of our service. It is possible to deliver a bad service that still meets a contract but what marks out librarianship is that it is a profession, therefore professional values enrich a service in a way that otherwise soulless documentation (commercial or otherwise) cannot. The library staff then have a clear role in articulating what the authority wants to its users and what the users need to the authority, through the filter of their own professional knowledge (conceptualised at Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

**Vision**

For our users and our institutional hierarchy to validate the service, it was necessary to build a vision. In stating that we had no contemporaries it do not meant that we could not, as professionals, learn from best practice elsewhere. Indeed, what had made the library struggle was the desire to compare itself to a wholly unsuitable model. Once we abandoned the idea that the role of the library was to collect and moved to the idea of the library as a service we could progress. This, of course, is not a radical proposal elsewhere but it was at BRNC, even in 2011.

The question was then: If the Navy did not want a library like it had, or like universities had, what uniquely did it want? It is an old adage but you do need to know what success looks like. Only once we had defined this in our context could we assess our activities and which of these were fundamental to our service model and which had become detached from any demonstrable purpose. At BRNC this initial phase took the form of the response to the
audit report, but we felt it was necessary not just to address our failings but to change to a positive rather than remedial stance to demonstrate what we were proposing for the library in the future. The vision for BRNC Library was an informal space for learning in a college with a lot of rules and regulations, a collection that focused on the curriculum and an information literacy programme (which we spoke about at the 2013 CILIP Conference) that prepared young officers for the fleet rather than repeated what they may have learned in higher education. On this basis we were able to rationalise the stock to a focus collection and then to invest the time in reclassifying this smaller collection for discovery. Similarly we were able to drop our food and drink policy, our no talking policy and to keep the library open even when it was not staffed - all of which was focussed towards making it a welcoming space. With the time saved we were able to develop our information literacy programme and the materials to support it. These things coalesced into what became known as the ‘Library Transformation Project’ which was more of a way of explaining the changes post-fact than a project that was visible at the time. It was a way of explaining the new service approach, and formed the foundation of our philosophy that underpinned our customer service ethos going forward.

The interesting point to consider is had we not reached the point of being labelled failing would we have engaged in the self-reflection that formed the foundation of what we went on to achieve? I would like to think yes, but this trauma certainly encouraged us to think of the service as a blank slate, that we should rebuild from first principles. The real challenge was to embed this new attitude into our activities going forward. In contract relationships and project ways of working it is easy to implement a change or a new service declare it complete and move on, but we naturally wished to go achieving. Success breeds success and the well-worn analogy of a snowball rolling down a hill is apt, because we achieved the things we set out to do in the Library Transformation project (or less grandly stated, because we addressed the audit) we were trusted with more freedom within the institution.

**Embedding**

Establishing our reputation and our ability to deliver with our key stakeholders made it easier to communicate with them. This made it simpler to articulate what - uniquely - our users expected from the service, and to gain the necessary institutional bias. This was not merely a case of asking the cadets what they wanted and telling the college leadership, it was a combination of feedback, statistical analysis and our professional judgement (developed through focused CPD).

Necessity had forced us to focus on the essential aspects of the service, but this engendered a critical approach more broadly. If we could not justify a new idea against our vision then we did not pursue it (My feeling is that libraries often pursue ideas that interest them that while worthwhile in a grander sense are of no demonstrable value to their service). We felt our approach was justified because the amount of staff time available to pursue projects, or maintain gold standards, was limited. We tried to be as unencumbered with prejudice when we dealt with our users and we used such borderline iconoclasm as
a means to drive service improvement. When people suggested that ‘cadets don’t read books anymore’ we tested this conclusion and where possible took it to extremes (We proposed an entirely electronic library - they recoiled). We were in command of our statistics where we could say that cadets did read books but on average they loaned about 4 during their time at Dartmouth, they did want better electronic resources and platforms to host them and this led to us being able to drop some expenditure to restructure our systems. When cadets claimed they had not used the library we could point out through all the sessions they had had and space they had used that the library was benefiting them even if they were not interacting with the collection.

By understanding the priorities of stakeholders we could tailor the message to them. We could show the MOD that we were using their money efficiently, we could show the Navy that our information literacy programme tied in with their aspirations for an educated officer corps skilled in decision making. We could also show teachers that we were supporting the curriculum with a focused collection and we could demonstrate to our (contractor) leadership that our success was a public relations coup. It is often noted, but no less true for that, that libraries can be too timid about celebrating their success, abandoning this timidity was part of embedding the library’s position within the institution.

Most crucial of all was a genuine desire on our part to advocate on behalf of our users as partners. We knew what we did and where we impacted their training, we also knew which elements were too advanced or not relevant. We did this through a continued commitment to gathering feedback, considering it, getting buy in for new improvement from stakeholders and then acting upon it. A lack of understanding of user behaviour lies at the heart of many of a library’s problem - and was a process BRNC had entirely abandoned prior to its failed audit. I think we managed to be both humble with our users and bullish towards authority to achieve what we did.

Conclusion

This narrative is necessarily an over simplification. It does not include all the stress, mis-steps, upset and diversions that ran alongside our achievement. As mentioned at the outset this is a story that appears coherent in retrospect but was not always so in process. We were guided by a shared vision. Although we had seconded support from time to time, for the most part there were only two staff in the library. Therefore, it was imperative that we both believed in this vision. At which point I should pay fulsome tribute to my colleague Gill Smith who is an excellent librarian and a credit to our profession, and was crucial in building this vision with me. Despite everything, in the end it was largely our hard work that made the changes in BRNC Library. Nonetheless, above this, I believe it was our ability to sell our vision to the Royal Navy and to go on telling the story, and articulating the progress, that created the environment where we could be successful.

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