An away day with a difference: developing new ways of working at the University of East London

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Introduction: WOW

At the University of East London, library and learning services (LLS) is committed to enhancing the student experience and also to encouraging the staff development that underpins any service improvement. One important means of achieving this is to encourage our staff at all levels to reflect upon their 'ways of working', to critically evaluate current procedures and to suggest new approaches.

The concept of new 'ways of working' (WOW) emerged during UEL's move from its old Barking home to an expanded Docklands campus in 2006. To assist the process of creating a new library and of integrating staff from two different sites, a WOW group was set up, consisting of a mixture of staff from all grades. The purpose of the group was to look at the operational differences between

the two libraries and to reconcile them, sometimes by devising new procedures. Thus change was used as an opportunity to review and improve our services.

The group proved to be popular and several interesting ideas emerged and were implemented. Now in its third year, the new library has been a success with a 50% increase in usage. Although the WOW group itself was disbanded, the idea of new 'ways of working' has lived on. When we began planning a summer away day for all our staff, it quickly became apparent that this could be the concept around which we could structure the event.

Library away days

Traditionally, LLS staff away days have formed part of our university's annual strategic planning process. Sessions and workshops at these days are generally facilitated by senior managers and their content and structure are determined by the institution's pre-determined planning priorities. The days are a means of discussing targets and formulating action plans for the coming year and are designed to assist the library's management team in developing its annual service plan.

Although these days serve an essential function, evaluation of feedback forms after such events indicated the need for more involvement from all levels of staff. For this reason, it was decided to hold a second annual day with less prescribed content and a more inclusive programme: a staff development day.

Organising group

In keeping with the aim to broaden staff involvement, responsibility for organising the day was given to the authors of this article – the assistant campus library managers at our three library sites (Docklands, Stratford and Duncan House). We formed an organising group and together we planned and co-ordinated the day.

The three of us felt that the WOW concept would serve as a good basis for planning the day. We hit upon the idea of structuring it around a series of visits that library staff would make to other institutions. The visiting groups would be mixed (including, for example, subject librarians and shelvers) and their brief would be to look specifically for different working practices and come back with lots of new ideas. At the away day they would give brief presentations about their visits.

The day would therefore be about sharing best practice from other library services in order to generate discussion about how we do things at UEL and how we might improve our services.

It would take place in mid-September 2008. Most people would be back from their holidays by then and we liked the idea of everyone getting together before the start of the new academic year. This also meant that the visits could take place during the summer, a quiet time for the library when we could release staff without this having too great an impact upon service provision.

Risky?

From the outset, our main concern was whether it was risky to structure the day around presentations by library staff, many of whom were not used to regularly speaking in front of large audiences. Might it become a bit shambolic?

We addressed this concern in the following ways:

- *Mixed groups*. Although we encouraged staff to suggest visits and form their own visiting groups, we made sure that each group (usually of 2–5 people) included at least one person who had some experience of giving presentations. This did not have to be in their current position. In fact, some of our library assistants had excellent presentational experience from previous jobs and outside activities (running art workshops, for example).
- *Guidelines and close liaison*. We circulated some guidelines for the visits. These included a description of their purpose, tips on how to plan them, information on where to claim travel expenses and advice about the presentations. We also divided responsibility for overseeing each visit among the three of us and made sure we liaised regularly with the visitors, particularly around the time of the visits and during the week leading up to the away day.
- *Digital photography*. We made sure that all the groups took a digital camera with them.

We felt that a series of photographs would form an ideal backdrop for the presentations, providing the groups with a readymade structure for their talks, acting as a memory prompt to speakers and helping to illustrate aspects of their visit to the audience.

- *Smaller audiences*. On the day, the presentations were given simultaneously in two rooms, partly for logistical and time reasons, but this meant that they took place in front of smaller audiences of 25–30 people as opposed to the whole staff of over 60.

Venue and programme

With a limited budget, we set about finding a suitable and affordable location for our away day. The cheapest option would have been to book rooms within UEL but we felt it was important to get away from our workplace, particularly given the theme of the day. A colleague suggested the Geffrye Museum. The Geffrye is one of East London's best-kept secrets, a lovely museum of English domestic interiors set in surprisingly secluded grounds off Kingsland Road, E2. Their rates turned out to be very reasonable, the facilities impressive and the venue just about the right size for our staff.

Although we felt excited about both the venue and the visits, we were mindful of the fact that we had a whole day to fill and that the presentations would probably only take up the morning. Fortunately, our investigative visit to the Geffrye suggested a second part of the day's programme. The museum is situated in a culturally rich part of London, within walking distance of Hoxton's art galleries (Flowers East, White Cube) and other libraries (the Stuart Hall library at the Institute of International Visual Arts, Hackney Community College). Why not arrange a series of additional, brief visits to these places in the afternoon? The visits would be mainly for interest but staff would be asked to think about these places from a WOW perspective and report back verbally when they returned.

In addition to these visits, staff would also be offered the chance to stay at the Geffrye and participate in workshops where they would consider the ideas that had been generated by the morning presentations. All the visiting teams were asked to send us a summary of the WOWs they would be highlighting. The afternoon workshops would sift through these and pick out ones that they felt were potentially applicable at UEL. Workshop

participants would also get the chance to have a look at the Geffrye's collection.

Our main concern with this element of the programme was the weather. Heavy rain (not impossible in September, after a so-so summer) might make the local visits a less attractive prospect and ruin the second half of our day. Troubled by visions of bedraggled library staff traipsing through the streets of E2, we worked on a contingency plan of expanded workshops but in the event we got away with intermittent light drizzle.

How did it go?

Library staff visited and gave presentations about ten very different libraries:

- Birkbeck College
- Cambridge University
- Cass Business School (City University)
- Idea Store, Whitechapel
- Jubilee Library, Brighton
- Kingston University
- Museum at Docklands
- Sheffield Hallam University
- University College London
- The Women's Library.

Confounding our earlier concerns, they all presented confidently, succinctly and with humour. The idea of using digital photographs in the presentations worked well, giving staff the opportunity to talk around interesting visuals rather than attempt lengthy descriptions, and this is a great example of how new technology can widen participation in events such as these. The speakers highlighted what was new and innovative in the libraries they had visited and also what worked less well. Reassuringly, many concluded that we offer a high standard of service ourselves. The audience (a number of whom would also be giving presentations) were supportive and asked lots of questions at the end of each talk.

The local visits in the afternoon were popular but a significant number of people also stayed behind to participate in the workshops. These were surprisingly lively. Although many of the WOWs were felt to be too expensive or not appropriate for our service, several were deemed worthy of further investigation. In particular ideas about making the library greener (inspired by the visit to Birkbeck College library) were popular. Other WOWs we liked included a reshelving area, lanyards for library staff, quick-use PCs and colour-coded signage. As a result of the popularity of

the green ideas, a library 'green group' was set up soon after the away day and some of the ideas about making the library more environmentally friendly have now been put into practice.

FEEDBACK

Rather than giving out paper evaluation forms, which in our experience are always filled in rather hurriedly, we used Google Documents to create an online evaluation form, a link to which was e-mailed to all staff. This generated a good response and the feedback was almost entirely positive, with a lot of enthusiasm for the day's democratic format.

FOLLOW-UP: THE WOW BLOG

We felt that it was very important that the ideas generated by the visits and discussed in the workshops were not simply forgotten once the day had ended. We therefore collected them on a website (actually a WordPress blog) and each WOW was tagged by theme. The resulting tag cloud enabled us to see at a glance which aspects of library service provision had attracted the greatest number of ideas.

Each idea was also allocated to an internal library group (e.g. our customer services group) which then formally considered the idea at their next meeting. In reality, many of the ideas were rejected as being impractical but a few did make the grade and have gone on to be implemented. After a decision had been made, the blog entry was amended so that library staff could see whether each idea had been accepted or rejected.

You can view our WOW blog and all the WOWs here at http://waysofworking.wordpress.com/

In fact, we feel the blog could become a standing 'ideas bank' for library staff and not simply be used in conjunction with away days. Staff could submit suggestions which would be tagged and forwarded to the relevant library group. In this way, a transparent channel for staff feedback would be created and more interesting and innovative ways of working might emerge.

CONCLUSION

Overall we feel we were successful in creating an away day with a difference. WOW provided us with a strong theme for the day and the visits and presentations allowed the participation of library staff of all levels. Staff were able to see good practice elsewhere, meet colleagues from other organisations and develop their presentation skills. We were also able to utilise both digital photography and web 2.0 in our efforts to create a more inclusive and interesting event.

Additionally, we succeeded in stimulating discussion about our library and concrete ideas emerged from the day that have since been put into practice, although the visits also reinforced our view that our own service is a good one which in many regards matches the best we have seen at other libraries. On a personal level, we acquired invaluable experience in organising events and working together as a small team.

That the day was popular was confirmed by some very positive feedback and it was deemed successful enough to be repeated again this year with the same format. However, we are mindful of the fact that what is fresh can quickly become formulaic and next year we will probably require new activities and a different approach. Perhaps a visit to another library will provide inspiration?