

Meeting Reports

Umbrella 2009

Laura Woods

Last week, I spent two days learning, networking and avoiding the karaoke at CILIP's Umbrella conference in Hatfield. I was lucky enough to obtain sponsorship for this from UKeiG, without which I certainly wouldn't have been able to go: being an impoverished student, even CILIP's reasonable rates for conference attendance are a bit out of my budget! Throughout this year as a student, and my previous year as a graduate trainee, I hadn't had much involvement with CILIP (beyond flicking through the *Gazette* and *Update* when they arrived); but have been impressed recently by the work that CILIP are obviously doing to reach out to members (such as the re-launched CILIP Communities site, and the Network of Expertise and Interests). I had been looking out for CILIP events I could attend, and was looking forward to seeing what was on offer at their annual conference.

The conference programme was impressively broad, split into seven "streams" to cover some diverse subjects. There were more than enough interesting sessions to choose from – I had difficulty picking just one from each time slot to attend! I was also impressed by the way the conference had been made fully Web 2.0 compatible: wi-fi throughout the venue meant that I could Twitter away to my heart's content throughout the sessions, and the #cilipumbrella hashtag allowed me to chat with other Twittering delegates (although, like many others I soon shortened the hashtag to #umb – the official tag took up to many of the precious 140 characters!).

The first day off the conference began with an inspiring talk by Charles Brown, Director of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, on the "Imagine 2010" programme at his library service. Charles discussed the aims of the project, including greater customer focus, community involvement and responsiveness to employees. He talked about the need to break down information silos, and foster a culture of communication and collaboration among staff. Charles pointed out that there were more front-line staff involved than there were senior managers and directors. He said that this had been a conscious decision to "ask people who'd never been asked before how to make our service the very best". I wholeheartedly agree with that ethos – it was good to see recognition of the fact that the people who deliver the service often have huge amounts of untapped ideas and experience.

The first of the parallel sessions I went to was Richard Wallis's talk on "Libraries coping with technology: waving or drowning?". Richard started by emphasising just how much technology has moved on in the last 40 years, pointing out that a child's interactive toy made today has four times the computing power as the Apollo 11 lunar module. His talk covered a range of topics: from the technology adoption curve, to the development of the Internet and the Web, the development of next-generation Web OPACs, the need to break down information silos to provide the kind of service our users expect, and projects such as Talis' Information Commons. It was all a bit of a whirlwind tour around some concepts that had only been touched upon in library school, and Richard's enthusiasm for Web technologies and accessible, open data was infectious. I would recommend having a look at his blog for a good starting point on some of these topics:

<http://blogs.talis.com/panlibus/archives/author/richard-wallis>.

After Richard's session I trooped off with some fellow newbies to the First-Timers' lunch. I thought this was an ideal way to get people talking to each other (especially if, like me, you'd come alone!). I was sat on a table with a few fellow librarians and a few library vendor representatives. It gave me a really good opportunity to find out what people's expectations were of the conference, as well as learning a little about the range of career options available within library and information services.

In the afternoon, I went to a session on access to UK government information. This is a topic I'm quite passionate about, so I was interested to hear about the current initiatives to make public information more accessible. There were two speakers in this session: Jennie Grimshaw from the British Library, talking about the Magic (Maintaining Access to Government Information Collaboratively) project; followed by Edward Wood from the House of Commons talking about digitising Hansard.

Jennie explained some of the problems in maintaining access to government information that the research had uncovered, for example the preservation issues in moving from print to Web. She also talked about the fact that the types of materials that researchers use (mainly grey literature) are usually only found on government websites, not commercial sites. The preservation issues will therefore cause great problems for researchers. It was also discovered that many people rely on general search engines to tell them what information is available, but the lack of quality metadata and poor site design of most government websites means that search engines don't index them very well, so a lot of important information is effectively invisible to the average Internet user. Jennie went on to describe some of the initiatives already underway to combat some of these problems: such as the National Archives project to comprehensively archive all government websites, and the BL Digital Donations scheme.

Edward Wood then took over to talk about the hows and whys of the Hansard digitisation project. He described the benefits of digitisation, including increased access/usability, freeing up physical storage space, and enabling preservation. He also gave an overview of some of the technical processes involved, and discussed the development of the Web interface. Edward described the project's aims of creating something that was fully "Google-able": most people won't realise that what they are looking for is in Hansard, so they won't come directly to the site. I was really impressed by the enthusiasm that Edward obviously had for making this information publicly accessible.

My final session of the day was a panel discussion on "Professional Education in the 21st Century". The four panellists were all LIS employers, from four different sectors: Veronica Kennard, from Rothschild; Ayub Khan, Head of Library Services for Warwickshire County Council; Linda Ferguson, from NW Health Care Libraries; and Sharon Palmer, from Leeds University.

The importance of a library qualification, what students gained from studying librarianship, the content of current LIS courses and how this matched up to employers' requirements, and future directions for LIS education were discussed. Some interesting points were raised: for example, most of the panellists viewed a library qualification as "desirable, but not essential"; although they did all say that this would depend on the post they were hiring for. There was broad consensus on the need to re-focus on the core competencies of librarianship, such as cataloguing and classification – it was felt that current graduates lacked skills in these areas and did not consider them necessary – but library schools were also praised for encouraging development of skills in digital technologies. One of the points that caught my attention was that all the panellists felt that library schools should place more emphasis on general, non-library skills, such as customer service, marketing, management and making a business case. I did agree with this to a certain extent – those are all vital skills for any librarian, and I would particularly have appreciated, for example, a management module in my course; but I also think that there is a limit to how much a library school can pack into their courses.

After the sessions for the day had finished, we all piled into coaches to go to the Gala dinner at the RAF museum. It was a fantastic location for the dinner, and good to get a chance to relax and have a chat with some fellow delegates over dinner. The karaoke back at the university campus was entertaining too, although I abstained from singing!

On the Wednesday I was up bright and early for a session on Continuing Professional Development and mentoring for chartership. The first section, on CPD, was lead by Carol Barker. Carol summed up the purpose of CPD as "learning and reflection, applied to the real world". She talked about the need to incorporate various activities into your CPD plan – going on courses is a great idea if you have something specific you need to learn, but can be a passive experience. Taking part in other activities such as workshops and networking events

forces you to get fully involved. Carol also stressed the need to take yourself outside of your comfort zone, volunteer for things that are different from your usual experience – you learn more that way than by taking the safe route.

Some of the obstacles to effective CPD were briefly mentioned; mainly lack of time and resources, particularly if you are a solo librarian and/or your employer is not supportive. There wasn't much exploration of practical solutions to this though, which I thought was a little disappointing – I'm sure there's a lot of people in that position who would appreciate some solid advice. Carol finished her section by emphasising the importance of reflecting on your CPD – without the reflection phase, any new ideas will be lost. I'm totally in agreement with Carol here – I started a blog a few months ago for exactly that reason. I find it really helps me to get my thoughts organised if I write something down.

The second half of the session was Carol Brooks' talk on "Mentoring and Support for Mentors". I am still in two minds as to whether or not I should charter, so I'm always glad to hear from anyone involved in the process at all. The session was very much aimed at existing mentors or people who were thinking about mentoring, so some of it went a little over my head; but I am glad I stayed to listen; it gave me some food for thought.

The final session I attended was on "Professional inspiration to join the communities of Second Life". Keri Weekes, of Weekes Gray Recruitment, kicked off with some examples of how she's found SL useful. She gave some examples of ways that libraries can use SL, such as marketing and publicising services, holding events, engaging users, collaborating and networking, and building virtual libraries. She also mentioned a few potential barriers to use, such as time difference – a large proportion of SL users, particularly LIS professionals, are based in the States, so events tend to be held on US time. She did emphasise that technical proficiency (or lack thereof) is not a barrier to use – Keri's 61 year old mother apparently runs a nightclub in SL!

Sheila Webber from the University of Sheffield then took over the presentation, with an excellent live demonstration of the Infolit iSchool. After all the talk about SL, it was good to get a look at how it actually works in practice, what the interface is like, etc. It did look like the Infolit iSchool is doing some interesting work, and the interface looked a lot better than I'd expected. Both Sheila and Keri gave some very persuasive reasons why librarians should be using Second Life, but I still think I'll leave it alone for now. The main issue for me is time: I think that on an individual level you'd need an awful lot of free time to commit to it before it became useful.

The afternoon plenary session was a real eye-opener. The presentations for the two finalists and the winner of the Libraries Change Lives Award were made – I came out feeling really

inspired, and proud of my profession. All three projects were incredibly worthy; it was wonderful to see such important and life-changing work being done by libraries and librarians. That was the end of my Umbrella experience – sadly, the train I needed to catch meant that I couldn't stay for the final session. I came away from the conference full of ideas and with a renewed commitment to the profession. I cannot thank UKeIG enough for making this possible, and would also like to extend my thanks to the CILIP members and staff who worked so hard in organising and carrying off such a successful conference.

Laura Woods

I am currently working as an Information Assistant with law firm Davies Arnold Cooper, a job I started in late June of this year. I am also studying towards an MSc in Library and Information Studies at City University, due to complete my dissertation in January 2010. I am interested in using Web 2.0 technologies for effective communication and information dissemination, and the accessibility of public sector information. I blog at <http://woodsiegirl.wordpress.com/>.