Knowing our place: reflections on thirty (ish) years with FE and libraries

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Thank you very much to CoLRiC for inviting me to speak as part of your 30th anniversary webinar series and to contribute this summary for *CoLRiC Impact*.

Let me begin this article by explaining what I mean when I talk about 'knowing our place' as librarians. (Incidentally, I'm still proud to call myself a librarian, even though my professional journey has taken a circuitous route away from the 'front line'!)

'Knowing our place' could be taken to mean putting up with an inferior situation. I wouldn't want to suggest for a minute that librarians should settle for a place that is less than they deserve. Quite the opposite, in fact. I believe that if we want the things that libraries stand for to be valued in another 30 years' time, it's no good being self-effacing.

Knowing where you are and where you're going

When I'm talking about 'knowing our place' I mean knowing where we belong right now. It's about being as clear as we can be about the role and purpose of the library service, in the college but also perhaps the wider locality. 'Knowing our place' is also about having a sense of where we are in relation to the wider landscape:

- ➢ Where have we come from?
- ➢ Where do we want to get to?
- ➢ How do we get there?

You might well say that's easier said than done and you'd be right. Libraries reflect the needs of their communities, so they won't all be the same and there are few simple answers. Unfortunately, in some colleges I've worked with, there is little concept of a library service, no sense of what the library represents or the benefits it delivers to its community.

A problem of identity?

Having talked to a good number of FE library staff and FE managers in recent years it can sometimes seem to me that the FE library is having something of an identity crisis. It can feel like the moment in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* where Alice meets the caterpillar:

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I–I hardly know, sir, just at present– at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

It's not easy in any sector to pin down what a library is, but it can be especially challenging in FE where policies and roles can change very quickly. There again, libraries have always evolved to meet the changing needs of their communities. Does your library have a clear identity and role within the college? Where and how is this vision communicated?

Moving forward

On the Jisc website we have a collection of member stories, updated regularly, which highlights interesting things colleges and universities are doing to improve or transform using digital innovation.

One of the member stories I've been most impressed by was about a project at my local college, Gower College Swansea, which developed a chatbot to assist vocational learners who were not engaging with the library. The story does a great job of advocating for libraries and showcasing what they are capable of. What was most interesting for me personally in that the story is not so much the technology itself, but how the experience of exploring the technology – library staff working in collaboration with other skilled staff in the college - prompted the library to rethink the challenges their vocational learners faced when using the library and how they might find better ways to reach out to them. It's a great example of a library continuing to move forward while holding true to its core purpose of supporting students.

What would be your member story?

The challenge of engagement

While it's important to celebrate successful innovation we shouldn't overlook the serious challenges facing the sector. In the Jisc FE Library LRC community of practice that I co-manage, we did a survey earlier this year where we asked community members to tell us about the main challenges they were facing.

After budgets and staffing issues, engagement – engaging students, engaging staff, engaging senior managers with the library's services generally or its learning resources specifically - was the biggest challenge reported by our members.

One of the most helpful insights I've come across on building engagement with libraries is from Matt Finch. His blog offers some inspiring ideas from his consultancy work with libraries around the world, and he is a powerful communicator and excellent trainer if you ever get a chance to attend an event with him. From Matt Finch I learned about the idea of value relationships: if we want to create value with our libraries we need to understand and build relationships. Then we can figure out the value that we bring to each of those people or groups (or not!). In turn, those people or groups may bring value to us (for example they may advocate for us or promote what we have to offer).

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Digital skills

Another challenge which looms large for our Jisc FE library members is digital skills. But it's not always clear whose digital skills libraries see as their challenge. Is it students' digital skills? Staff skills as well? And what about the digital skills of the library staff themselves?

Now more than ever, it's important that colleges recognise the need to develop student and staff skills in information literacy, the area of digital capability that libraries have traditionally specialised in, as well as the related area of media literacy.

Space and place

FE libraries tell us that they are currently facing challenges relating to their physical space and what to do with it. I think it's important to remember that you can do a lot with a modest space. A great example of this is Orkney Library with its mobile library Booky McBookface, connecting communities across the isles. It is a relatively small library that nevertheless manages to be embedded in its local community while projecting a very strong brand.

What changes are you making to your space? Another Jisc member story shows what has been done with the library space at Basingstoke College of Technology. It's an example of a library changing shape and shifting identity. This evolving nature of the FE library can make it hard to pin down so it's all the more important that we find ways to advocate for the library's value.

Inspiration

Given the challenges libraries are up against today, I feel it's necessary to seek out some inspiration to refresh our perspective and find new approaches. It may help to draw on the wisdom and energy of people who inspire us, whether that be colleagues, mentors, critical friends, or a cause close to our heart.

Reflecting recently on role models, I found my thoughts returning to Lewis Carroll's Alice who we met earlier. I came across an article marking the 150th anniversary of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The author of this article attempts to sum up Alice's qualities and I found myself reflecting that similar qualities are needed in libraries if they are going to continue evolving through difficult times:

> *Alice is a girl who will dare to try the cake, the mushroom, the mysterious contents of a bottle labelled 'drink me' – having first of all, of course, checked that it is not marked 'poison', since if you drink from a bottle marked poison, "it is almost certain to disagree with you sooner or later". She knows something interesting is sure to happen if she does so. […]*

> *She walks through the curiouser and curiouser realm in which she finds herself, fearless, inquisitive and exerting boundless common sense in the face of the ridiculous.*

Who might be your role models?

Advocacy

Advocacy means giving a voice to someone or something. I feel it's even more necessary today for FE libraries, not least because there is a dearth of realistic, attractive visual representations of them in the media, and a severe lack of research in the field.

Back in 2015, just as I was starting in my current role at Jisc, I went to a higher education libraries conference to hear a [keynote](#) by Andrew Green who at the time was Librarian of the National Library of Wales. It focused on the growing threat to public libraries, with branches being closed or handed over to untrained volunteers. Andrew urged his audience of university librarians (and me) to take action in support of public libraries, hinting that a similar fate may lie in wait for other libraries too.

It was a powerful speech. One of the things that stayed with me the most was an image (available with the [text of the talk](#) on Andrew's blog). It features a motto: "Educate, agitate, organise" that I discovered came from a 19th century political pamphlet. A few lines from that pamphlet, which I tracked down in a [magazine article](#), could make very useful advice for those working in FE libraries, or indeed anyone else who wants to advocate for the future of library services:

> *Success can only be achieved by organised effort:*
>
> | *Educate.* | *We* | *shall* | *need* | *all* | *our* | *intelligence.* |
> | *Agitate.* | *We* | *shall* | *need* | *all* | *our* | *enthusiasm.* |
>
> *Organise. We shall need all our force.*

So how do we do that?

Community

One answer, though not necessarily the only answer, is to build and strengthen our communities. Of course the word 'community' can mean different things. I'm thinking here particularly of librarians' communities of practice, but it could also refer to communities we are part of, such as the college community or the wider locality. Communities can provide strength in numbers.

In addition to maximising the power of our communities of practice, I would suggest a few other approaches:

- Exploit every bit of research evidence available
- Beware library jargon (it can create a mystique which is not helpful to engagement)
- Don't become too inward-looking
- Treat digital as an opportunity. What if we could start talking about library resources and services as (digital) tools for learning and teaching that enhance the life of the college?

Innovation

Those of us in Jisc who manage communities meet regularly to learn more about using community-based approaches in our work. Recently we have been talking about the idea of having 'community pioneers' and what makes a 'community innovator'. These conversations have helped me realise that valuable innovation isn't only about lightbulb moments and solitary geniuses. It's also about trying small experiments and learning from failures.

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Has your library tried something new in the past year, that benefits learning and teaching or student experience? Or have you supported digital innovation in your college in other ways? Maybe you tried one small thing and it didn't work but you learned from the experience?

If you find it difficult to think of yourself as an innovator, or would simply like a bit of encouragement to try something new, this year's Jisc Digifest video Hello innovator might be a good source of inspiration.

Be open, be visible

In conclusion I'd like to wish CoLRiC a happy pearl anniversary! If I have one final message for you, it is to be open:

- ➢ Open to collaboration
- ➢ Open to innovation
- ➢ Open to sharing the special skills and assets that libraries have to offer

And be visible so that others outside the library or learning resources service can engage with you and join forces with you.

Stay in touch

You can find out more about communities, including our Jisc FE Library LRC community, on our library communities page. You can also explore many other communities on our Get involved pages.

We include listings for non-Jisc communities on request. If CoLRiC or any other FE community would like to be publicised on our site, you can go to this support for community groups page and ask to be added.

If you would like to find out more about support available from Jisc for your library/learning resources service, you can talk to your Jisc relationship manager. You are also welcome to contact me at lis.parcell@jisc.ac.uk or on Twitter at @lisparcell for more details of my current work.

Resources shared during the presentation:

https://padlet.com/lis_parcell1/knowing-our-place-colric-b085iskz14ff7nki

https://wakelet.com/wake/hYbQNY-lq18VUlq3j_Uv4

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