

Enhancing library catalogues at University of Huddersfield

The University of Huddersfield library has used new technologies to enhance usage of the library catalogue.

Material was gathered for this study from interview with Dave Pattern, Library Systems Manager, University of Huddersfield on March 20th 2009.

Tags:

HE, Data sharing, Personalisation, Student voice

Harnessing technology system outcomes:

Enabling infrastructure and processes

Sectors:

HE

Innovation

As elsewhere, the library catalogue at Huddersfield University is maintained by library staff and used by academics and students. The project described here exemplifies a trend towards using new technologies which explore and exploit the potential of existing resources in higher education institutions, for the purpose of improving management information and usability.

Background

Dave Pattern worked for a children's library book supplier prior to becoming Systems Manager at the University of Huddersfield library, where he is now developing services. He has a business background.

The University needed a cataloguing system that was more accessible and responsive to user needs than the existing 'stock inventory'. Commercially available systems were considered but not thought sufficiently flexible for the University's requirements. Data, collected and stored by the library for

over thirteen years, was not being used to inform borrower requirements. The purpose of the project, which is at an early stage, is for borrower data and user profiles to become part of a more useful resource.

Library staff, academics and students of the University are currently involved.

The process was described as 'experimental'. The system is evolving along a number of strands:

- » An electronic stock control and management system
- » An enhanced library catalogue for users
- » A shared data source which can be used to reveal overall trends in borrowing and to look at individual patterns of use, or borrower profiles

The third strand is intended to yield instantly available, up-to-date information that has useful and practical applications.

Technology

The database contains around three million library transactions. Mr Pattern explained how the system can be used:

"A student borrows a book from their reading list and the choice is automatically recorded and stored. From these transactions, a search on 'title' can reveal 'trends', that is number of borrowings of any book in any one year and 'patterns', that is which other books were taken out at the same time or transaction. This information is available at individual user level."

Taking into account the number of borrowings, and what other books the student has borrowed – 'borrowing clusters' – the library system can suggest titles or other books the student might find useful. Mr Pattern observed that, *"libraries don't usually look at usage data to look at clustering."*

October is the peak month for book loans, with peak usage of the recommendations occurring the following month, namely when stock is not available on the shelves, borrowers are using recommendations to find other material. Library staff are alerted to which titles are likely to be most in demand, for example around exam time, and individual students can get 'personalised' recommendations straight to their accounts.

The system can also detect where books on the reading lists are not being borrowed. This information can be useful for academics compiling or updating their lists.

The system has just started to track journal usage.

Technology and learning

Enhanced information can be obtained through a 'star-rating' and comments section for staff and students, which has been running for around 18 months. Eliciting comments from students is intended to open up dialogue about study materials and encourage lines of communication. However, the 'rating' system is more popular with students than the 'comments' section. Some tutors are more active in encouraging student comments than others.

It is thought that the new online system may make it easier for academics to compile and submit their lists to the library, which would help with provision of books, and even that the library data could also be of benefit to prospective students in making their choice of course. It would be useful for students to see which books and resources they would need to read for different subject areas.

Impact

The information which libraries routinely collect is often an untapped resource. There is some evidence that analysing library data is not only useful for stock management, but may help to encourage new borrowing habits:

"Many libraries are seeing a decline in borrowing, but Huddersfield is bucking the trend."

According to data from the Society of College, National and University Libraries, the combined number of issues and renewals had gone down in 2007/2008, but issues had gone up. This suggested that students were doing less renewing, but borrowing more widely. By looking at the Huddersfield data, it could be speculated that students are acting upon the recommendations and starting to expand their borrowing horizons.

Challenges

Challenges fall broadly into three categories: institutional, pedagogical and technical.

University libraries tend to be interested in sharing data and resources. Some librarians have come to Huddersfield to see the new system, but at institutional level, it is thought there may be resistance to sharing, because of competition and the issue that some universities want to protect their data, not share it.

Pedagogical challenges focus broadly upon knowledge sharing. For example, when tutors compile reading materials, there may be a tendency to rely on particular 'familiar' academic publishers. The technology has the potential to 'enlarge the stock of knowledge' by recommending associated titles and

resources from other sources, which might include exchanging data with other universities. Another example focuses on making knowledge-flow a more reciprocal process, for example between students and tutors, where students' ratings of books can be fed back to tutors, opening up new dialogues, or between students and library staff. Students have considerable technical know-how and libraries are now 're-positioned as a more flexible space'.

Technically, there are challenges to developing the 'immediacy' of the resource. In addition to encouraging students to use the ratings and comments feature, Mr Pattern considers that 'point of user' feedback might be more readily obtained if technology could be installed in the automated sorting machine, which asked students, *"Did you find this book useful: yes/no?"*.

Wider adoption

Of relevance is the 2008 JISC project entitled 'Towards Implementation of Library 2.0 and the e-Framework' or TILE for short. TILE advocates closer collaboration in the higher education community for the purpose of developing a resource, based on 'concentrated intelligence about user behavior'. Through his involvement with the Huddersfield system, Mr Pattern believes the project could be enlarged to include other HE institutions. Universities could contribute their loan transaction data to a UK-wide aggregation service, so that a picture of what is being borrowed across the country could be developed.