

Responding to COVID19: supporting our library communities in the shift to the online world

UKSG eNews 468

1 May 2020

Lesley English, Lancaster University

I started writing this editorial one week into lockdown, and my message then felt very positive and uplifting in terms of supporting students and staff in the pivot to online. However, as this situation changes rapidly, and as the HE-sector continues to respond, I want to be frank and honest before I reflect on the positive responses to COVID19. Across the country as library teams are asked to make difficult decisions about furloughing, this seems a precarious and unsettling time, and I don't want this editorial to underestimate the impact this has had on all staff, both those who have offered to be furloughed, and those who remain working from home keeping the online library open.



Preparing for working from home

What now feels a lifetime ago, but in reality, just four weeks, our library and learning development teams were starting to prepare for working from home (WFH). Echoing Leo Appleton's sentiments in his [editorial](#) on 17 April, we weren't aware of the challenges that lay ahead as all our services moved to online delivery. We were not new to Microsoft TEAMS, we've used it as one of our communication methods for around a year – creating channels for library groups to share files, make announcements and chat. However, we knew that we would need to move all our meetings and communication to online, and there was a realisation that, for many, this was something new, and outside of their comfort zone. We hurriedly set up a number of training sessions offering support for WFH, focusing predominantly on using video in TEAMS, giving staff the chance to bring in the tech they would be using at home. We had people who were more confident in using TEAMS joining us from their desks and others in a training suite, and everyone got to chat, both to individuals and to groups. They learned how to blur backgrounds, mute (themselves and each other), and how to pin someone to the screen, which made some of us laugh at a time when many were highly anxious, and it contributed to the increasingly supportive culture that has developed over the past month.

Lockdown

As we entered lockdown and the library building closed, these skills, to feel confident in using the technology to be able to communicate with each other when isolated, were developing at pace. In addition to existing channels in TEAMS, WFH tech support and a staff wellbeing channel were added. In the latter colleagues began to share the ways they were coping with the lockdown: links to online mindfulness, online choirs, film and TV recommendations, and responding to an SOS for pictures of pets! Generally, throughout each working day there was chit-chat across channels, contributions to an isolation play-list, regular morning “Hello – how are you?” (reminding me of John-boy and the Walton family).

Supporting our library communities

The move to online teaching happened as our students entered the last week of Lent term. Many had assessment deadlines for the end of the week, they voiced concerns about summer exams, and whether they would still go ahead. The library building closed at the start of our Easter vacation, and for many that threw more confusion into the mix, how can we still study if we can't get books out? Questions came through our various communication channels from students and academic staff and included how to access databases off-campus and how to request electronic versions of print material. A couple of days into lockdown and we saw library teams coming together to support our library communities in a number of ways:

1. Our faculty librarian (FL) team started to develop short ‘Top Tips in Using the Digital Library’ videos, working with our frontline library service advisors (LSAs) to identify the questions that were frequently being asked via email and phone. The LSA's shared these videos on social media channels, and soon they were interested in creating their own content. Then came the shift, we supported them in using the software to create their own videos (which is not so easy when you are using TEAMS to learn how to use a software package). The enthusiasm for learning new skills was catching. By week three of lockdown we joined together to run a live Q&A session ‘Using the Digital Library’, with a panel of FLs and LSAs, which I genuinely don't think we'd have done before the lockdown. While we had more staff than attendees, it is something we will run again in term time, targeting specific user groups.
2. Having recently moved to LibAnswers to provide a FAQ service, we had signed up to LibChat but it was temporarily on hold. This new situation brought the launch forward, and staff from across the library came together via TEAMS to test the chat feature as both a library user, and from a library staff perspective. Week two of lockdown and the service was launched, available between 10-12 and 2-4 each day, and in the first ten days the LSAs answered 157 enquiries.
3. Our central library and information skills programme for students and staff, predominantly face-to-face workshops, was quickly moved to a different model of delivery. All involved in the programme were offered support by the FL team in pivoting their workshop to either synchronous (webinar) or asynchronous (videos followed by a live Q&A) delivery. Our first online Endnote session is being delivered next week, with a series of video tutorials being created to be offered for students in a different time-zone or with poor connectivity.
4. Finally, while we already offered appointments online, this became a priority service. My first lockdown appointment was with an international PhD student working as a nurse in Portsmouth. She had planned to go to her local public library to use the computer to finish a

resubmission, but was self-isolating. While she wanted to talk referencing, we ended up sharing screens so that she could download Microsoft Office and get on with her work safely at home. I have chatted with her regularly since then, often after her shifts finish. She comes home from heart-breaking situations at the hospital and switches off by learning how to use Endnote!

Other essential work going on behind the scenes includes checking reading lists for e-book availability, creating subject guides of freely available electronic content during the pandemic, developing the leisure reading guide to include e-books and e-audiobooks, and continuing support for the REF submission, and central to all of this is the work of the digital innovation team who support all of us in our ongoing transition to the digital world.

I'd like to finish with one of our Director's morning messages, which sums up perfectly how we have come together as one connected team:

“These are hard times, but all I see looking from Liverpool to Lancaster University Library is people pulling together for each other and for all our users. Thank you all - now who's got any more ideas for songs for that playlist?”

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



This UKSG Editorial is taken from the industry newsletter *UKSG eNews*, published every two weeks exclusively for UKSG members. The newsletter provides up-to-the-minute news of current issues and developments within the global knowledge community.

To enjoy *UKSG eNews* and other member benefits [become a UKSG member](#).