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“Not just the help”: library services as professional colleagues

ALISS Quarterly, 2018

Disclaimer

This is a write-up of a paper delivered at the 2nd Relationship Management in HE Libraries Conference, 16th-17th November 2017 at Lancaster University. For slides which include audience responses, see <http://eprints.worc.ac.uk/6120/>.

Introduction: problematising our service ethos

As a profession, librarians are often knowledgeable, talented and dedicated people, who care deeply about what they do and the service they provide. Library services in recent years have diversified to encompass and address a variety of activities and concerns, including teaching, social media, research data management, and learning spaces, to name but a few. Each new area is tackled with the same commitment to good customer service and problem-solving that we bring to more traditional library services.

However, if librarians have a fault – both individually and as a profession – it is an excess of humility. We often do ourselves a disservice by acting in ways that define us as “the help” or support, the junior partner in an unbalanced power structure which relegates us to an ancillary role, secondary to academic staff, rather than as professional peers and experts who are respected in our own right. This is usually an unconscious act rather than a deliberate move, and the aim of this article is to highlight the unwitting ways in which we position ourselves as a support service, rather than as a professional one.

To make clear, in the argument set out here, the term ‘professional’ does not relate to a LIS degree, or professional chartership or affiliation. Both these attributes help define librarianship as a profession. However, neither is any guarantee of how an individual positions themselves in relation to their academic colleagues.

The following examples demonstrate some of the ways in which librarians express and engage with this power dynamic:

Example 1: “It’s what librarians do all day; we answer questions”.

Whilst this is true in the context of offering an enquiry service, in the broader picture librarians do a great deal more than simply answer questions. We ask questions. We teach. We negotiate, liaise, advocate, research, write, influence strategy, and more besides. Although a nice soundbite, “we answer questions” can sound reductive.

Example 2: (paraphrased) “If I’m helpful, then they [academic staff] will want to talk to me in future, but if I’m not they won’t engage”.

In this context “helpful” refers to taking on tasks that academic colleagues see as an administrative burden. Whilst they are appreciative of this kind of help, it can encourage them to see us as administrative support, rather than as experts in teaching and research. How will those staff want to engage in the future? For expert advice or to pass off unwanted tasks?

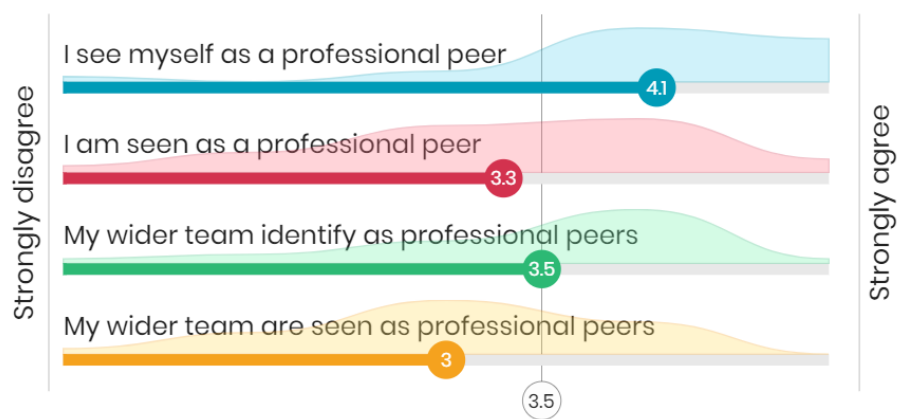
Equally, examples abound where librarians' professional status is devalued by members of their academic community:

Example 3: "Back in my first job, I was just starting a jigsaw activity with an English 101 class when the instructor said "I don't want them doing that. That doesn't sound useful." Can you imagine how demoralizing it is to be contradicted in that way when you are teaching?"¹

Self-perception vs external perception

These examples demonstrate a nuanced picture where our self-perceptions, the identity that we project, and the opinions of others all play a part in whether librarians are seen as professional peers or junior members of support staff. Delegates at the 2nd Relationship Management Conference in HE Libraries were asked to reflect on this and consider not only their self-identity but also that of their teams, as well as how they think they are perceived (see Figure 1).

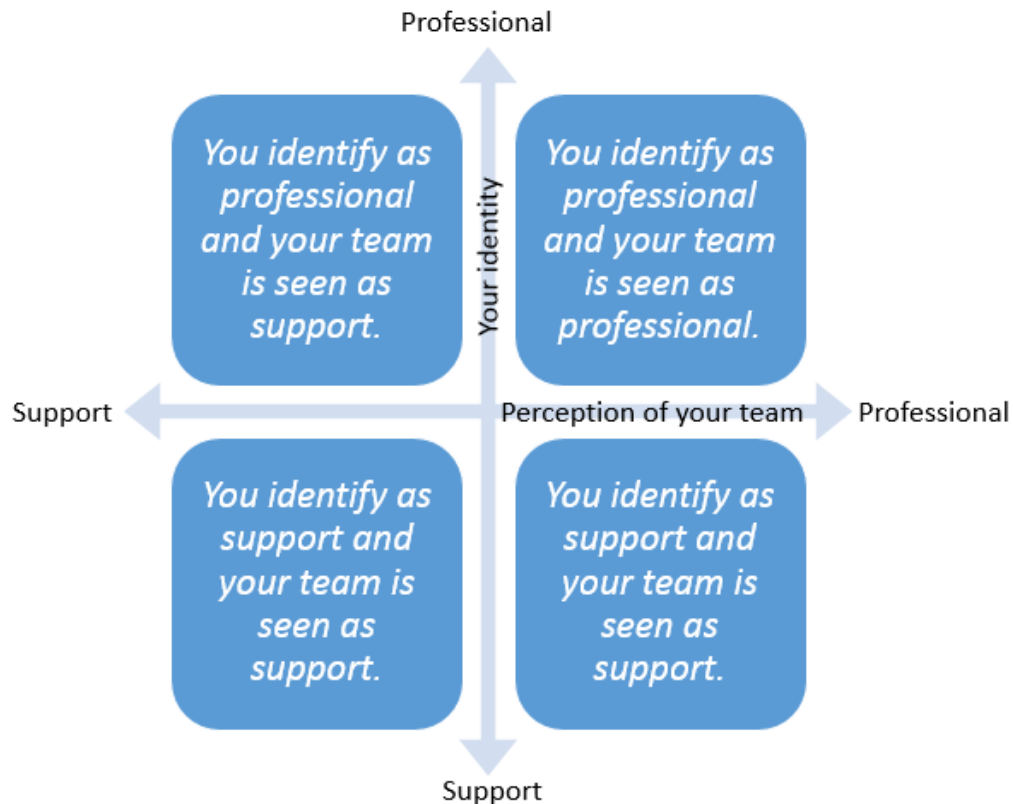
Figure 1: how Relationship Management delegates identified themselves



This showed a clear difference between how people perceive themselves/their teams and how they are perceived by others. There is also a disparity between self-identity and team perception. These are issues that both individuals and library leaders need to grapple with. To elucidate some of the potential issues, the following four position statements highlight problems and questions.

Figure 2: mapping position statements

¹ Farcas, M. (2017), 'The ballad of the sad instruction librarian', *Information wants to be free*, 11 Oct. Available at: <https://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2017/10/11/the-ballad-of-the-sad-instruction-librarian/>, accessed 15 February 2018.



- **Statement 1: You identify as professional and your team is seen as professional.**
 In theory, this is a good match, with personal and departmental values in alignment. But does everyone in the team feel this way? And if not, how can they be helped to project their identity differently?
- **Statement 2: You identify as professional and your team is seen as support.**
 This could be a frustrating experience for individuals, with a clash between personal and departmental values. It is helpful to understand where this clash arises. Is it an internal culture issue, where colleagues routinely take on administrative tasks and are not concerned with wider institutional concerns? Or is it university leadership and culture? What can be done to change the perception of the service overall?
- **Statement 3: You identify as support and your team is seen as professional.**
 As with statement 2 above, here there is a clash between personal and professional values. This may be less obvious to an individual, but may be a cause for concern for managers. Are you able to fulfil the needs of your team or service? Do you need to consider changing your self-perception and who can help you do this?
- **Statement 4: You identify as support and your team is seen as support.**
 On the one hand, this may be a good fit, with personal and professional values in alignment. However, can a team which is focused solely on support service delivery contribute fully to the life of the university and get involved in dialogue about learning, research and the student experience?

Changing perceptions

Neither self-perception nor external perception are fixed states. It is possible to change both, given time and determination, although where institutional culture pushes administrative tasks from academics to professional services, change is harder to come by. In these cases, strong library leadership is required to make the case for partnership working rather than simple service delivery.

However, both individuals and teams can involve themselves in a range of activities which bolster individual profile and confidence, as well as departmental ethos and perception. For example:

- Evidencing commitment to teaching and learning to maximise parity with academic teaching staff. For example:
 - Undertake a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PGCert), and gain Higher Education Academy Fellowship (managers can include this expectation in job descriptions).
 - Include teaching in the interview process for librarians expected to teach.
 - Contribute content to the PGCert or other educational opportunities in your institution.
 - Adhere to the same policies and frameworks as other teaching staff, e.g. Teaching and Learning strategies, peer observation frameworks, etc.
- Undertake your own pedagogic research projects, so academic colleagues can see you actively engaging with the same issues as them.²
- Attend leadership programmes, providing time out to reflect on how staff think about and present themselves and develop confidence.
- Initiate dialogue about professional capabilities and expectations among teams.

Whatever you choose, thinking beyond the library is key. Library services who are valued by senior management are those who contribute to institutional dialogue and strategy, whether that's leading on student experience work, contributing to TEF and REF submissions, or managing and evaluating an institution's learning spaces or digital strategy.³ These are conversations that all librarians can contribute to, given the space to grow and become confident in themselves as professionals.

² For an example from the University of Worcester, see: Pittaway, S. (2017) 'Student information and study skills; a learner journey from pre-entry to level 6 – what can we expect and how do we support students in completing the journey to independence?', 30 Oct. Available at: <https://rteworchester.wordpress.com/2017/10/30/student-information-and-study-skills-a-learner-journey-from-pre-entry-to-level-6-what-can-we-expect-and-how-do-we-support-students-in-completing-the-journey-to-independence/>, accessed 15 February 2018.

³ Baker, D. and Allden, A. (2017) *Leading libraries: The view from above*. Available at: <https://www.sconul.ac.uk/publication/the-view-from-above>, accessed 15 February 2018.