0496

Librarians as partners in Higher Education

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Background

Background

This paper explains how, as a librarian working in an academic environment, I promote the idea of librarians as full partners in higher education (HE). I thereby also aim to contribute to positioning librarianship as a research-based profession and to new discourses about the role of librarians in HE. This issue has become critical in debates about the need for developing information literacy and other capacities for HE staff and students (e.g. CIBER 2008 and Committee of inquiry into the changing learner experience 2009). This development in policy emphasis matches my own commitments about the right of all to forms of educational provision that promote lifelong learning, including developing capacity in information skills. Librarians are central to supporting such capacity building throughout HE institutions.

However, arriving at the position where librarians are seen as full partners in educational provision is problematic from two perspectives: first, mainstream academic faculty tend not to see librarians as academic practitioners; second, librarians tend not to see themselves as academic practitioners. Further, dominant discourses perceive librarianship as a valuable form of practice, but not as research-based practice. My research aims to deconstruct such perceptions by offering my account of how I generate my own living theory of librarianship, within broader contexts of educational research, and how I support other library staff in doing the same. Through the production of our scholarly accounts, librarian colleagues and I aim to produce explanations for how we are developing educational partnerships with other academic practitioners for the benefit of our own professional learning and that of our students.

Research Questions

Focus of the enquiry

The focus of my enquiry is therefore to research my role and responsibilities as academic support librarian, using an action research approach that enables colleagues and myself to engage with questions of the form 'How do I/we improve my/our practices?' (Whitehead 1989). Such engagement enables us to produce descriptions and explanations for how we are theorising our individual and collective practices as we strive to develop partnerships with academics, other librarians, and students. These partnerships provides sites for new forms of institutional research that show how we are contributing to new relational practices that are grounded in collaborative institutional networking. They also show how we are contributing to new thinking about the potential contributions of library staff across disciplines and sectors.

My research is therefore about how I support the development of institutional partnerships through educational action research, and what key processes are involved. My educational values of unfettered access to education and democratic forms of working practices form my key conceptual frameworks. These values of free and democratic exchange also come to act as my living standards of judgement as they emerge through practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006).

Methods

Research methods/mapping the literature

Much literature exists about co-operation between academics and librarians, mainly focussing upon integrating information skills in the curriculum. However, most reported studies take for granted that partnerships have been forged and focus on documenting and analysing how partnerships work and develop (e.g. Gibson and Luxton 2009). Little attention is given to how this co-operation was initially established, and what some of the problematics or barriers to success might have been. McGuinness (e.g. 2007), an empirical researcher, is one of the few authors to acknowledge the importance of understanding the roles of all partnership participants, as well as how institutional and policy contexts may influence the development of partnerships into action. I wish to explore similar territory, but from the methodological perspective of studying my own practice as I seek to influence the development of partnerships within a context of acknowledged supercomplexity (Barnett 2000).

Frame

Analytical and/or theoretical frame

From my action research perspective, I explain how I strive to realise my commitments to valuing the contributions of all participants within the Higher Education community. In my presentation I will produce multimedia evidence to show the development of key partnerships and their influence in the professional learning of the entire community, as contributing to a form of institutional research whereby all members of the community show how they are exercising their educational influence in their own and others' learning. Together we are creating a knowledge base that may be shared with others across the sector, with potential international transfer.

Research findings

Contribution to knowledge

Through my research I hope to influence the development of new thinking about the role of librarians in HE, specifically about librarianship as an evidence-based profession with its own validated knowledge base (Wilson 2009). By researching my own experience of supporting educational partnerships, I hope to contribute to the librarianship research base, and also articulate the significance of my research as contributing to new understandings of collaborative forms of knowledge creation through educational partnerships.