EMBRACING THE NEW AT LA TROBE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

K. FREEDMAN1, K. WIESE2, R. MOREY3

1 Faculty Librarian (Law & Management), La Trobe University Library, Melbourne, Vic, k.freedman@latrobe.edu.au
2 Faculty Librarian (Health Sciences), La Trobe University Library, Melbourne, Vic, k.wiese@latrobe.edu.au
3 Faculty Librarian (Science, Technology and Engineering), La Trobe University Library, Melbourne, Vic, r.morey@latrobe.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Over the course of several months in 2010 six Faculty Librarians were appointed at La Trobe University Library, Melbourne campus, with four beginning in February. Each librarian was new to the profession and had less than three years experience. The six new Faculty Librarians came from diverse backgrounds; five had previously worked in academic libraries in Western Australia; Victoria; Queensland and the UK; and one arriving from a public library in Victoria.

This paper will highlight the value early career librarians bring to a large organisation such as a university library. The six new librarians have brought attributes such as energy and enthusiasm; fresh eyes; digital competence and confidence; a commitment to learn, embrace and disseminate new ideas; and a readiness to challenge perceived norms and experiment. It will also look at the challenges faced by the arrival of six new librarians with respect to the induction process.

“New” is a recurring theme at La Trobe University where innovative teaching and learning strategies and applications have combined with the redevelopment of the library to encompass the environment the new librarians are working in.

The authors will show how they, as early career librarians, were encouraged and supported in their roles whilst utilising the attributes they have brought with them. The paper will also highlight their experiences at La Trobe University and showcase some of the projects and ideas they have been involved in.

It is the authors aim to inspire new librarians to identify and value the attributes they hold.
INTRODUCTION

If we don’t change, we don’t grow. If we don’t grow, we aren’t really living.
– Anatole France, 1844-1924

In 2010, six new Faculty Librarians were appointed to the Learning and Research Services section at La Trobe University Library. All six were early career librarians eager to embrace academic librarianship. Twelve months have passed since the influx of new librarians and as it is now appropriate for us, as part of the new recruits, to reflect on our experiences so far. As early career librarians, what attributes have we brought to La Trobe University Library? How have we been supported in the transfer from previous roles to our new environment? Have these attributes and enthusiasm for our new roles helped us to embrace the ever-changing academic environment?

1. NEW LIBRARIANS AT LA TROBE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

1.1. New at La Trobe University

In 2009, the year before our appointment, the library and the university environment at La Trobe was characterised by major change on a number of fronts; organisational change, redevelopment of physical spaces and curriculum renewal.

In 2009 the library underwent a functional review. For Learning and Research Services, this meant a change in name from ‘Subject Librarians’ to ‘Faculty Librarians’ and the organisation of Faculty Librarians into teams aligned with university’s faculties. The review also identified the need for three additional Faculty Librarian positions supporting the areas of Health Sciences, Law and Management, and Science, Technology and Engineering. It was anticipated that the need for research support in these areas would grow in the coming years.

Major changes to the library’s approach to information literacy were initiated and developed in 2009 as a result of the library’s involvement in the university agenda for curriculum design and renewal, later formalised as the Design for Learning (DfL). Changes in curriculum began with the faculty of Health Sciences’ move to Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) and a common first year for all health sciences students. In the Health Sciences common first year, students undertake a series of information literacy (IL) modules and IL skills are assessable in the form of an online quiz. Other faculties have also now embedded IL modules into their cornerstone subjects (La Trobe University Library 2010).

The library initiated projects to develop learning objects to support these initiatives, including the ‘Inquiry/Research Self Check’ – an indicator tool in the form of a quiz providing students with appropriate feedback about their entry level IL skills in relation to university expectations. Other projects include the ‘Academic Referencing Tool’ and ‘Academic Referencing Modules’ – consistent and easily accessible online guides on the principles and practice of academic acknowledgement.
In 2009, planning for a nine million dollar redevelopment of the library began. At the same time the first of the new librarians started in 2010, the Melbourne campus library redevelopment was underway and by September the library had a new, modern, learning commons for students to work in to support the new teaching and learning models that focus on student collaboration. In the redevelopment, the library gained an additional 850 seats for students, separate academic and postgraduate study areas, a new integrated help desk and a cafe.

1.2. The Challenges of Induction
The unprecedented intake of six new Faculty Librarians over the course of eight months presented unique challenges with regard to how new Faculty Librarians are inducted into their positions. The challenges were not limited to the logistics of having new staff trickling into a large section consisting of twelve Faculty Librarians, four Communications and Online Learning team members and a section Manager. The varied levels of staff experience, the differing needs of each faculty team and the personal leadership styles of each faculty’s Team Leader would be major factors in the induction process of the new librarians.

La Trobe University has five faculties, and library teams are organised into four; Health Sciences; Humanities, Social Sciences and Education; Law and Management; and Science, Technology and Engineering. The first three new librarians joined the faculty teams of Health Sciences; Law and Management; and Science, Technology and Engineering. The fourth also joined Health Sciences shortly after. The fifth new librarian joined Science, Technology and Engineering in June; and the sixth joined Health Sciences in October.

Whilst most of the new librarians had worked in academic libraries before, one had not, which also produced a unique challenge for the induction process. When the Health Sciences team received two new librarians who were at different stages in their levels of experience and readiness for the new roles, a team-based buddy/mentor program was used for their induction. The mentor program was a successful trial for both the new librarians and the mentors as it enabled the Team Leader and an additional experienced librarian the opportunity to work one-on-one with the new staff, to get to know them on a more personal level than they may have otherwise and to share their knowledge directly with the new librarians.

The Team Leader for Law and Management also took a mentor-like approach to inducting the team’s new librarian. In contrast, the new librarian joining the Science, Technology and Engineering team had a more independent induction, with the Team Leader encouraging her to begin liaising with Faculty staff straight away.

The convenience of having three librarians begin at the same time, shortly followed by a fourth, was used to advantage when it came to their introduction to the more general facets of their roles. When the fifth and sixth librarians began later in 2010 a similar format was used for the general aspects of induction. One of the lasting benefits of the arrival of so many new librarians for the organisation was the development and refining of an induction program for all new library staff. By the time the last two Faculty Librarians began, the process of inducting new staff had been perfected, and thus they were able to provide valuable feedback about their induction experience for the benefit of future staff.
1.3. The Attributes of Early Career Librarians

The current cohort of early career librarians are in the position of being able to offer their organisations a range of attributes which are unique to their level of experience in the library industry. Over the last five to ten years universities offering ALIA recognised qualifications have transformed the projected learning outcomes for graduates of their courses to match the evolving demands of the library industry for the 21st century.

Current graduates coming from the ALIA accredited Graduate Diploma and Master’s degrees are arriving in the industry with the skills to work as information professionals in a large variety of work places, including traditional library environments and emerging industries which demand highly skilled knowledge managers and generalist information professionals with the technological competence and interpersonal skills to take on projects, promote their ideas with confidence and embrace innovation in their workplaces.

Aside from skills acquired in ALIA accredited courses, early career librarians, like most early career professionals bring a level of enthusiasm, energy, and fresh perspective into a workplace, as well as a commitment to learn, embrace new ideas and a readiness to challenge traditions. The biggest benefit of an influx of early career librarians is the flurry of energy combined with new skills and knowledge being brought to a traditional library working environment. One of the ways in which the La Trobe University Library cultivated the incoming enthusiasm of early career librarians with experiences to share was to encourage a number of new projects to allow these librarians to pollinate their skills within their teams and among other staff. This included forming a Twitter/social media discussion group and bringing the new librarians onto existing working groups which matched their skills.

2. NEW LIBRARIANS’ PERSONAL STORIES

2.1. Kate’s Story

I joined La Trobe University in February 2010 having arrived in Melbourne only three days prior. Coming from a university library in Perth, I was confident in taking on the reference desk part of my job, having dealt with endless assignment and referencing questions, book queries and printers which had run out of paper. What I didn’t expect was the amount of responsibility I would be given, and the freedom and trust to step outside the square. I took on a number of projects in my first year that have proven both interesting and educational.

As a fan of new technologies, I was offered the opportunity to take over the handling of the library’s Twitter account (@LTULibrary) and give it a new voice. The next six months saw it gain legitimacy within the library, not just as a fun experiment, but as a useful tool. We now have it positioned on both the front page of the library website and embedded into subject LibGuides which shows that it is growing in acceptance within the library.

Another project I have been involved in is the ‘Research Smart Series’ aimed at helping postgraduates develop a better understanding of research skills and techniques. Collaborating with a colleague, we developed and taught classes on ‘Introduction to Research’, ‘Google Scholar’ and ‘Bibliographic Management’. In 2011 we revised and expanded the range of classes offered to include social and
mobile technologies, allowing me to combine my personal interests in social media with research and teaching. I developed classes on ‘Free Online Tools for Researchers’ and ‘Research on the Move: Using Mobile Technologies’. I plan to develop these classes further in the form of an interactive LibGuide. Aside from expressing my interest, I believe the attributes that led to my involvement was the confidence in my ability to use the technology and explain it to others and my enthusiasm.

I had been working at the library less than eight months when I was asked to help co-ordinate the end of year mini-conference for the Learning and Research Services section. Along with a librarian from each of the Bendigo and Albury-Wodonga campuses we delivered a conference, with all La Trobe librarians coming together at one of the regional campuses. Holding it outside the main campus bought with it logistical, transport as well as budget issues that were challenging but interesting to deal with.

During this time I had also co-written and presented a paper at the 2011 ALIA Information Online Conference and received a lot of encouragement from the management team at the La Trobe University Library, who supported me through both the writing and the presentation. They have encouraged me not only to succeed at this conference but to keep writing abstracts and hopefully present at many more.

2.2. Katie’s Story
I joined La Trobe in February of 2010, being appointed to the role of Faculty Librarian for Health Sciences, more specifically, liaising with the schools Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy. I had previously worked for two years as a reference librarian at another university library, so I felt I had a very good understanding of what the role required but it was still a very steep learning curve for me as I only had a working knowledge of some health databases and had never heard of Enquiry Based Learning (EBL).

February was a particularly busy time for the health librarians, as the move to EBL and a firm focus on Evidence Based Medicine (EBM) meant that there is a huge emphasis on improving the information literacy of the students. I found myself focusing on teaching these classes in the first few months of my time at La Trobe, while developing the knowledge required at the same time.

A functional review conducted previously, meant that the health team gained an additional member – which meant that after years of barely getting through the workload there was a real need to develop in-depth knowledge of EBM process and more effective search techniques, and now, someone had the time and the will to do it. Firm understanding of, and confidence with databases, allowed me to fully investigate the full functionality of the larger medical databases and disseminate this knowledge back to my team.

Several times during my first year, I was asked to lead projects like usability testing for Summon and the Library’s new Inquiry Research Self -Check tool. I was also given the opportunity to design and lead orientation activities for 2011 and with that the freedom to be creative. I feel that these opportunities were offered to me because of the enthusiasm and new ideas I brought to my role.
La Trobe Library has been very supportive of any professional development activities that I asked to undertake. I applied for support to undertake an EBM in librarianship course which was approved and this learning allowed me to become the team expert in EBM and subsequently train up other librarians. I successfully carved out a niche for myself within the health team and the wider library as the go-to person for EBM and health databases.

In a very short space of time, I feel I have achieved more than I could have dreamed of in my previous role. Even with a small amount of experience, I believe I have shown that using the attributes I had brought with me as a new librarian, I was able to not only fulfil my duties as faculty librarian but to also go beyond that. Having said that, I feel very lucky to work in an environment where there is trust in my ability and the support from above to participate in professional development activities such as conferences which, in my experience, are opportunities often not afforded to new librarians. My advice to any new librarian is to trust in your attributes, be enthusiastic about what you do, and if you see a niche to be filled or if an opportunity arises—put your hand up.

2.3. Rickie’s Story
Since being appointed in June 2010, a highlight of my experiences during my time as a Faculty Librarian at La Trobe University was participating in a new liaison activity with 800 first year biology students. The Science, Technology and Engineering faculty’s Academic Language and Learning staff, in collaboration with lecturers, developed a writing workshop which all first year biology students were required to attend. The Faculty Librarians were invited to participate in this workshop by introducing the students to the library’s services and how to find information for their essays using the library’s resources.

Having the opportunity to contribute to such a significant lecturer-run workshop was an enormous confidence booster and felt like a significant milestone had been added to my professional experience as it was the first time I had stood in front of so many students to deliver an information literacy class. I was buoyed by the confidence my Team Leader had in my abilities to plan and execute the class and flattered by the appreciation of the lecturers who had invited me to participate; I don’t think they were expecting the librarian to be as excited about their scientific workshop as they were.

Ways in which the attributes of the new librarians are utilised in our section is to allow us to explore new ideas and be creative in our student outreach. Earlier this year I worked in conjunction with two other new librarians to design and implement the library’s orientation program of information literacy classes for semester one. Our manager had the confidence in our abilities to assign us this project and allowed us to pursue our fresh ideas for an orientation program that had not been run before.

My previous library experience included some project work for Collection Development and my enthusiasm for this kind of work meant I was approached to work on a project involving the weeding of the library’s reference collection. In addition to my enthusiasm, I believe I was entrusted with this project because of my technological abilities to condense a great deal of information, make sense of it in excel and communicate it to other librarians. This experience reinforced to me the importance of expressing interest to managers when you have an interest in work you don’t normally do. I think the keenness to take on additional projects is a valuable attribute that new librarians possess and can be
a useful path to expanding one’s experience and knowledge and making the best of opportunities that arise.

The encouraging work environment at the La Trobe University Library has enabled me expand my breadth of knowledge and experience to a degree that I was not anticipating when I began my position. I felt this particularly when I was asked to be involved in the training of new casual reference staff. Having a background as a casual reference librarian meant my existing knowledge and experience could be harvested for the benefit of new casuals. Thus I was given the responsibility of training the new casuals in their duties and developing training materials for future use.

CONCLUSION
Our stories demonstrate that as well as coming into the workplace with new ideas and enthusiasm, it is also necessary to have a supportive work environment that gives new librarians the opportunity to bring their ideas to fruition.

Bringing with them their unique attributes, early career librarians at La Trobe University have been embraced by the library and given opportunities to lead projects, attend conferences and to pursue professional development with full support from supervisors and senior management. The authors have endeavoured to illustrate that great things can be achieved by early career librarians with the right attitude, attributes and support.

REFERENCES