UoP Conference: Shaping the Future: Predicting the Unpredictable

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The Red Queen’s Race: running twice as fast or a slow sort of country?

[Shift Happens (2013, v.3)]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4evcTQbS2Lg

Red Queen’s race – Alice Through the Looking Glass

[Alice meets the Red Queen, joins a chess game as a pawn and runs madly with the Red Queen only to find she hasn’t moved]

'Well, in OUR country,' said Alice, still panting a little, 'you'd generally get to somewhere else--if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing.'

'A slow sort of country!' said the Queen. 'Now, HERE, you see, it takes all the running YOU can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!'

Is that how you feel – not just here at work, but perhaps at home as well? Running as fast you can just to stay in the same place?

Way back in 1949 Isaac Asimov entitled one of his science fiction short stories ‘The Red Queen’s Race’ which was about using time travel to try to improve the world. The recent film All About Time finds Tim and his Dad trying to improve their lives with time travel. And who hasn’t wished for Hermione’s ‘time turner’ (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban) which she used to fit in more study. Time travel would be great - we’d be able to get more done, we’d be able to improve our lives, the world. But usually we feel that we’re running as fast as we can just to keep up. Or perhaps we’re so overwhelmed that we now inhabit a ‘slow sort of country’ where we just don’t try anymore and let work/life wash over us. Or dream of a slow sort of country where we’re on top of things and in control.

1. change not only constant but the pace of change is increasing

We seem to be in a state of constant flux which never settles down. It only seems a moment since I arrived here just as the Library extension (2006) was finished. Then, I wrote an article for my professional magazine ‘Completing the Library’! The then Vice Chancellor felt that that would be the end of development. (http://eprints.port.ac.uk/116/)

Now just eight years later we’re undergoing a £4.2 million refurbishment to provide more social learning space because of the demand from students. (Work on the Portland building is just coming to an end as well).
“The winds of change are blowing. Some of it can hardly be felt, but another part feels like hurricane force winds. The concept of change seems to be a bit of a cliché that can cause many people to yawn and say “so?” For others, the strength and variability of the winds may result in a reluctance to choose a new direction for their library.” Linda S. Ackerman quoted in Hernon, Peter; Matthews, Joseph R. Reflecting on the Future of Academic and Public Libraries. ALA Editions, 2013. Available from the Library in print or electronic form.

A search on the Library catalogue for items with the word ‘change’ in the title will find 4200 hits. A graphic of those titles can be seen on the right with the larger words representing more hits. Climate change was an obvious result but ‘organizational’ and ‘management’ suggest change isn’t just a feature of the University but much wider than that!

We’re often asked to do more with less but should we be recognizing that we just need to do less? Focus on the important not the possible.

The internet, email etc allow us to do so much more with faster communications, so that we fit more and more in. Social media is making it even worse. We’re ‘always on’ and some are in the habit of working in home time (http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2014/04/smartphone-addiction-research-work-email). The continuing pressure on finances will continue to pressure staff – this won’t get better.

If you’re feeling stressed imagine having to work with technology that’s quarter of a century old (Google 1988 - http://www.masswerk.at/googleBBS/). The change coming is hardly any more scary than what we’ve already experienced! Isaac Asimov, again, made some predictions back in the 1960s and it’s interesting to see how many have come to pass – although he had some misses as well. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-27069716. As far back as the 1890s H.G. Wells predicted intercontinental jets, high rise accommodation, and the increasing corporatisation of society. But such predictions of the future are a mug’s game and most futurologists are wrong as often as they’re right. Douglas Adams in the radio series The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (then a book, LP, tv series, film…) took a swipe at this.

[Arthur Dent, intergalactic wanderer in a dressing gown – it’s a long story – has made a surprising discovery on the planet of Brontitor]

“There is nothing on any of its [the Hitchhiker’s Guide] pages to tell you on which planets you can expect suddenly to encounter fifteen mile high statues of yourself, nor how to react if it is immediately apparent that they have become colonies for flocks of giant, evil-smelling birds – with all the cosmetic problems that implies. The nearest approach the Guide makes to this matter is on page seven-thousand-and-twenty-three, which includes the words “expect the unexpected.” This advice has annoyed many Hitch-Hikers in that it is ‘A’ - glib, and ‘B’ - a contradiction in terms. In fact, the very best advice it has to offer in these situations is to be found on the cover. Where it says, in those now notoriously large and famously friendly letters, “Don’t Panic”.

The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Fit the Tenth
So my (perhaps obvious) predictions for the future? You’ll have a bigger TV, faster internet (but be trying to do more with it so it won’t feel much faster!), more reliance on/connections via social media – particularly in university (human beings like to connect!), 3D printing will become a big thing in niche areas where its useful.

Perhaps more seriously, “communication” will still be the biggest problem in the workplace (and dare I suggest in families and other spheres of life!). It came up a lot in the Shaping Our Future consultation and I don’t think I’ve worked anywhere where it wasn’t considered a problem by employees!

I’d suggest also that in the immediate future there will continue to be a difference between the digital skills of staff and students. Or perhaps more accurately digital comfort zones. Hopefully this will become less pronounced as time goes on.

2. Skills are one way to cope with all this change!

What did you train to do? Whether it was at college, university or in your first job? Are you still doing that now? What were you employed to do here at Portsmouth? Is the job still recognizable? We can’t rest on our laurels and sit still. Continuing Professional Development, whether it’s formal ‘courses’ or getting to grips with social media/tablets/google glass?!, is increasingly important for more and more employees. I’m using ‘professional’ in the widest possible sense to include academics, support staff as here today and so on.

‘Back room’ staff now need to consider themselves ‘front line’. For example our cataloguers – perhaps the very definition of ‘back room’ – have a direct impact on the student experience as they assign keywords to a book to help students find it, as they use language in catalogue records that can engage students or completely disengage them (anyone know what an OPAC is? Online Public Access Catalogue). The outgoing VC, John Craven, in his farewell speech reminded us that we’re all in marketing now. Marketing the University and also marketing ourselves. Self-promotion may be very unBritish but is increasingly vital. Perhaps a departmental web page with staff profiles so students can know who’s who as well giving the opportunity for making the university seem personable and human. Making good use of email footers to promote services, URLs and so on. Using University publications or Parade (the Institutional Repository) to ensure that University successes get the widest possible audience. (To practice what I preach, here are my contributions: [http://eprints.port.ac.uk/view/creators/Collinson=3ATimothy=3A=3A.html](http://eprints.port.ac.uk/view/creators/Collinson=3ATimothy=3A=3A.html). Research shows that putting material into an open access repository will increase your citation rate). Being active in conferences such as this, university events, even social activities.

Such ‘promotion’ creates better connections throughout the university so there is a better understanding of individuals and departments and how we might be able to work together, what skills exist, what services might contribute to a project or in solving a problem. (My contribution to this conference has come about as a direct result of this kind of activity.)
To successfully cope with change we’ll need to be more collaborative between services (example of failure of iPhone app falling between several stools). To use a, perhaps very simple, Library example, Reading Lists feeding into course approval on the academic side; requiring information regarding the Units from registry; course numbers from course administrators; and eventually appearing in Moodle perhaps via web developers or online course developers.

Technology is NOT the only answer. How many times over coffee in a venue like this have you made connections, found out what someone else was doing that you didn’t know but was helpful?

In preparation for this I talked to a number of support staff in a variety of different services. One comment was NOT to say “It will look good on CV”. So I’m not going to say that! BUT we should still be looking to improve our skill sets not just for future employability but our present employability.

Very easy to find any number of future gazing publications that are very relevant to HE. They invariably mention skills as crucial:


University Alliance (2012). *What is your vision for universities?* [http://www.unialliance.ac.uk/blog/2012/11/15/what-is-your-vision-for-universities/](http://www.unialliance.ac.uk/blog/2012/11/15/what-is-your-vision-for-universities/)

Even libraries have them:


Here at the University of Portsmouth we’ve recently indulged in such forward thinking. Shaping our Future earlier this year was a great collaborative effort:

- departmental meetings brainstorming together
- pop-up roadshows meeting others from around the university
- the online forum where whatever your position in the University you had an equal say to suggest an idea, comment on ideas, vote on ideas

Even here skills came up time and time again as being crucial. I’m personally looking forward to what comes next of exercise and it’s great to hear that the Vice Chancellor is committed to it.
3. Creativity helping us face change

I’m a great believer in looking for and seizing opportunities (Andy Cope in his ‘Being Brilliant’ session a few weeks in this very room talked about saying “Yes”), looking for creativity in unexpected places, and exercising creativity in unusual places. Again, to draw on the example I know best – how many think of the Library as a creative place or full of creative people? And yet it is! I could do a whole session on examples of this – in fact at previous conferences a colleague and I have done just that with our ‘Library Labs’ workshop. I’ve written about this before in ‘Exterminating boredom: synergy and creativity in an academic library’ (http://eprints.port.ac.uk/1508/) so no need to rehearse it here. But a couple of examples: our PrepUP project for pre-entry students led to a trip to Ostrava to present at a conference, our ‘Cluedo’ presence at Freshers’ Fayre eventually became a Moodle unit called Body in the Library (see image left) introducing distance learners in particular to the Library’s electronic resources, and, again at Freshers’ Fayre borrowing Red Dalek from CCI has led onto the development of our social media presence. We’ve even been able to be creative and learn new skills with regard to poster design and below are some images of the development we went through to arrive at a unified style. (Our thanks to Marketing who have helped with this throughout the process.)

You might find that there are links between hobby and home interests and skills you bring to the work environment. One example from my experience has been writing book reviews in a hobby setting which has led into delivering a lecture for maths undergraduates doing a graduate skills unit and then engaging with an assignment expecting them to produce a book review.

You may feel that your immediate work environment isn’t very supportive of creativity or trying new things or even in doing things differently. At this point I should thank Library management for allowing staff some – thoughtful, not chaotic – space to ‘play’. But in other workplaces I’ve worked with colleagues where we’ve indulged in “guerrilla creativity”. Anything from making meetings more efficient by using De Bono’s ‘Six Thinking Hats’ (even if you don’t tell management that’s what you’re doing formally) to trying out something new in, for example, a lunch break until management saw
the utility of it and adopted it as standard practice. (The Library Twitter feed also started this way as we just jumped in, gave it a go and when we started getting followers thought, “hmmm, perhaps we’d better justify this to our managers”. Shhhhh!)

Hands up those who think they’re creative? (I ask technology students and often get a very limited response – so great to be able to deliver a lecture recently to some CCI students who saw themselves as creative much more universally). I believe everyone is creative but perhaps in different ways.

One of the best training courses, I’ve been on at the University was Creative Thinking and Problems Solving (http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/services/humanresources/managementandstaffdevelopment/calendarofevents/mandsdnewevents/creativethinking/). The segment that stands out in my memory was on Belbin team roles (http://www.belbin.com/) and gave a huge insight in to the people I work with and how we work together – as well as a much better understanding of self. Belbin suggests that there are nine areas in which we have strengths and weaknesses – plants, resource investigators, complete-finishers etc. We’ll be strong in 2 or 3 areas and weak in 2 or 3 but by complementing each other in our teamwork, it’s possible to achieve better results. My own example was, as a strong ‘plant’ being a particularly weak ‘completer-finisher’. By teaming up with one of the latter we were able to write and submit our first peer-reviewed journal article. Belbin also shows that we’re all creative but in different ways – not everyone will necessarily be an ideas generator (the ‘plant’) but may be very creative as a ‘shaper’ overcoming obstacles.

I’ve been on any number of time management courses and found them more or less useful. For the most part it remained a struggle. But then I encountered the Getting Things Done methodology suggested by David Allen (see http://gettingthingsdone.com/ or the book of that title by David Allen in the Library). A couple of features stood out for me – by collecting everything that needs to be done (home/work/hobby) into one system we clear our minds for thinking by not being concerned about keeping mental track of what needs doing. By defining actual next actions rather than vague projects or jobs that need doing we can have a clear sight of what we actually need to do rather than ‘actions’ that need breaking down to be doable. And by reviewing our system we can see more clearly where we’re going in any week, year or further afield. (I’m still weak on that last part so if anyone wants to get together in a ‘user group’, I’m up for it!)

The value of quiet. “Don’t just do something, sit there.” For health reasons I’ve been forced to STOP three times a day – not reading, not listening to music, just switching my mind off. That ‘space’ seems to have allowed mind to catch up with body and has been part of enabling a creative period of writing that’s surprised me. We might engage in meditation, or take a ‘sabbath rest’ or simply stop for a moment or three but attempting to fit more and more in isn’t the solution to dealing with all the change that’s thrown at us. Make space in the workplace for quiet.

Conclusion

“The purpose of the work on making the future is not to decide what should be done tomorrow, but what should be done today to have a tomorrow.” —Peter Drucker, p.16

Perhaps you’re just starting out at the University: fired up, looking forward; or perhaps you’re being dragged along like poor Alice by the Red Queen; or perhaps you’ve been around for a while and are
jaded and fading away – worried about health/pension/retirement etc. But I believe we all have contributions to make, ways to be involved – even passing the baton on.

The University of Portsmouth has great people, great resources, and is in a great position (Professor John Craven’s retirement speech). The NSS may be merciless but has shown we indeed excel in some areas. The new VC and the Shaping Our Future consultation hold out great hope for the future. We have great people, with great talents. Let’s celebrate that and embrace the future, change and all! “Expect the unexpected” – we can’t predict the future with any accuracy – think about where we were 20 years ago before the WWW, before mobile phones, before social media. But...

Don’t Panic!

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