“Life is a journey. Time is a river. The door is ajar”
(Jim Butcher –*Dead Beat*)

Reflections on Librarianship in the Creative Arts

Chris Jones, Learning & Teaching Librarian UCA

The University of the Creative Arts is in the process of change. This change is acting as a driver for the Library & Student Service to be reimagined, providing real opportunities for the service to develop and enhance its’ role in the student experience. The Librarians’ role has had to respond to accommodate these developments, and we have an opportunity to create and shape service delivery in a very immediate way. As I have recently been appointed as the full time Learning and Teaching librarian for the Farnham campus, I wanted to share my reflections about this developing role with you all.

It all begins with the student journey, which starts well before sitting in the first lecture, and ends beyond graduation. It is a realization that the skills and processes with which we work to develop the creative use and management of information can be mobilized to support the student in so many other ways than submitting essays for example. The students at our university enroll to develop a high level of creative and hands on practice. Do I, as an academic librarian, know how they work? I have an idea of the creative process from my personal experience, but that is mine, not theirs. How do they think about what they do, move on, what problems do they have to overcome? What resources might inform the dynamics of creative production? I need to think of this in ways to which I may be unaccustomed, if I am really going to make a difference to a student. I need to go to them, and how could sitting with someone when they are working in a studio not be totally engrossing? In a previous role as a subject librarian at Kingston University, I was blindfolded, led through a large room with random unknown sounds assailing my ears at different distances. Rather than some flaky team building exercise designed by the Office’s David Brent, this was an MA group’s response to an assignment on the Futurist Poetry of Marinetti. The importance here is the immersive nature of the librarian’s involvement. This encouraged me to think that academic work itself is a creative act. It has the nature of play, although the ideas and the type of play might be different. There is a period of exploration and finding out ‘what happens if’ before a jump is made into the unknown where you are led by what you do as much as control what you do. I have found that it strikes a chord with creative arts students to frame essays, dissertations etc. in this way.

Underlying all this though, is reflection. This is the skill that most immediately transfers to the world of professional practice. To think ‘what have I done?’ (in a good way!) is the beginning of the process. Reflection leads to the creative use of information to move forward, to learn and build. Sure, it means absorbing some negative and possibly unjustified reaction, but if after an initial cursing at the injustice of the world, a student is able eventually to use such occurrences to energize the dynamic of reflection, then they have a powerful resource to develop resilience in professional practice. So, what am I going to do to help this? I think, drawing attention to the identities between academic and creative work will emphasise the value of the reflective process to the student, and working toward a holistic view of learning can only impact positively on the quality of student experience.

I suppose then, the Learning & Teaching part of my job title has let us say, a creative ambiguity. By becoming aware of how students are working as much as I can be, they teach me and I learn from them.