**“But I’ve come here to study the piano”: the challenges of Information Literacy in a conservatoire environment**

In the summer of 2018, the RNCM Library successfully competed for one of the college’s Learning and Teaching Awards. Our proposal was for an enhanced programme of Information Literacy which could be rolled out across the four years of an undergraduate course and which would provide a grounding in research skills for those students who went on to undertake postgraduate study. The intention was that it would be in place for the academic year 2019-20. Although we were able to draw on a number of existing models, notably those within the North West Academic Libraries consortium, we were aware that most of these not only lacked any specific music content but were also aimed at university students with different academic priorities from performing arts students. Our own experience was that the latter saw academic requirements as secondary to performance and consequently had only a limited engagement with library resources. Although the college has a thriving research programme, most undergraduates saw it as having no relevance to their own curriculum.

Our challenge was therefore to devise a programme, within a small institution and with a financial limit of £1,000, which recognised that the information needs of conservatoire students differed from those within a university, and that our present approach had only limited success in engaging students with library resources. Meeting this challenge involved such factors as closer collaboration with academic staff, promoting our own archives as research resources, and creating a cumulative programme which reinforced an overall Learning and Teaching strategy that performance should be research-led.

**“But I’ve come here to study the piano”: the challenges of Information Literacy in a conservatoire environment**

**Slide - Title**

It was all going to go as planned. We in the RNCM Library had received a Learning and Teaching Award in the summer term of 2018 and a year later I was going to come along and tell you what a brilliantly successful programme of Information Literacy we’d put together as the result of it. That, at least was my aim when I sent of my proposal to IAML’s Programmes Committee.

Well, it didn’t quite work out like that. If today I offer you a report on a work in progress, I apologise for presenting you with something of a resumé of the problems we faced – and I hoped can learn from – but I do intend to finish with some of our successes, not least in engaging students in a conservatoire environment.

Giving a work in progress report, particularly when I’m stepping out of my comfort zone of presenting a finished piece of academic research, is in some ways a tricky proposition. You’re talking about aims and possibilities as much as achievements. Nevertheless, to start with, a little bit of history…

When you’ve spent a lot of time in the same institution you see a lot of change. This is me in the old Library of the RNCM sometime in the early 1980s –

**Slide – The young me**

In those days, library inductions consisted of instrumental tutors bringing their students to the library and pointing out “This is where the trombone music is”. Suggestions we might be better placed to do this were brushed aside or even contradicted outright. Any kind of formal training in Information Literacy was out of the question. In those days the library was regarded as little more than another administrative department, the role of which was to be stay in the background and be supportive rather than proactive, and certainly not to encroach on the remit of those far more important people, the tutors.

This attitude is due in part to the legacy of a historical binarism in tertiary music education. Conservatoires traditionally trained performers, for whom the library was a place where you borrowed music – hence the need to know where the trombone music was and nothing more. There was academic study, but it was often regarded as a necessary chore. If you wanted to be an academic musician you went to university. Performers distrusted academics because they could write fugues and knew what Monteverdi had for breakfast but couldn’t even play *Baa Baa Blacksheep* on the penny whistle, while academics distrusted performers who could play fugues but didn’t know their brass from their oboe.

What’s changed? In the wider field of UK tertiary music education, the growth of a research culture within the conservatoire sector – not without engendering a certain mild panic in the universities – has modified the old binarism but perhaps created a new one. For many conservatoire students – and not a few instrumental staff – you’re still either a performer or an academic. To the person who wants to know where the trombone music is, academic assignments are given low priority and research is something that other people do.

This leaves conservatoire libraries in a bit of a cleft stick, performing a balancing act between addressing the needs of performers and researchers while trying to reinforce the idea that the two aren’t on mutually exclusive trajectories. After all, those information resources you’re trying to promote don’t come cheap.

We’ve become the one thing that we were formerly seen as separate from – teachers. The challenge, then is to structure anything in the area of information literacy in such a way that it’s going to engage those for whom academic study is seen as a box to be ticked. Although we’ve come a long way since the 1980s, pushing Information Literacy as a core skill for students is still often met with a response along the lines of “But I’ve come here to study the piano”. Furthermore, these days we’re likely to hear it from a growing body of overseas students whose variable English language skills can place them at a disadvantage when faced with the academic requirements of their course but who have received funding on condition they come away with a performance-related degree.

It was the mid-90s before we managed to put in place any kind of Information Literacy training, helped in no small part by the fortuitous coincidence of a change of college Principal, a change of Librarian and the move to a brand new library all happening at almost the same time. It was also the period when the Internet was becoming a reality, affording increasing access to online resources. Yet what looked like a recipe for success didn’t produce the desired results. Looking back we can identify the following reasons:

**Slide – Resumé**

* Training in information skills was initially optional and students failed to sign up for the sessions we offered Still a low take-up rate for sessions which remain optional
* When it did become embedded in UG courses, these were usually non-credit bearing Study Skills courses which some students regarded as optional
* Library input always had to fit round what was already in place. We were an add-on and had no part in structuring the courses
* The format of the courses frequently changed, with no guarantee that the Library would be involved
* Courses only covered Years 1 and 2 of a four-year course. Nothing in Years 3 and 4, when assignments become more research-focussed and IL skills more necessary
* Lack of reinforcement by tutors of the importance of information skills. Many instrumental tutors are part time and have little understanding of the role of the Library beyond a place where you can borrow music
* At least in the early days, cultural resistance to the relevance of new technology in a performing arts environment – A “library thing” : the icing on the cake but not part of the cake itself – Has become easier over the years as older, more technophobic staff are replaced by younger ones who are more techno-savvy
* More recently, the students’ assumptions that everything is available online. Millennial paradox – the more students assume that everything is online, the less they are aware of actual resources that are. The curse of Google, Wikipedia, YouTube. Creates a need to factor into any Information Literacy training the importance of qualitative assessment of online resources. Our experience that tutors will stress the importance of critical reading in dealing with print resources – usually ones that they’ve specified – but less concerned about extending that approach to online resources, which students are more likely to find by a more serendipitous route. I deal with this when teaching Masters students, but it needs to be an important element from the start in UG courses

I’ve lost count of the number of courses on the delivery of Information Literacy I’ve attended, often via the UK’s North West Academic Libraries consortium (NoWAL), or indeed the presentations I’ve given to NoWAL colleagues.

**Slide – NoWAL course**

There’s no doubt that this is a major topic within academia, and even within the specialist area of music it’s attracting a growing body of literature.

**Slide – Book**

The problem remains, however, that much of this, whether generic or specialist is directed at the university sector, in which academic work, and concomitant information skills, are prioritised. There is much less which addresses the issues faced by the conservatoire sector. We need to be honest and admit that those issues need a different approach.

This became a core concern when, in 2018, we applied for an RNCM Learning and Teaching Award to put in place an Information Literacy programme covering the whole of the UG curriculum. The fact that we were successful suggests that at last the issue was being taken seriously by higher management. The award was for 2018-19 but, for various extraneous reasons, it’s been extended to 2019-20. Even then it hasn’t all been plain sailing and we are beginning to wonder if we’ve been over-ambitious in assuming that everything could be achieved within a single academic year, but our aims have been consistent. We’ve also been able to look at the issue of student engagement.

An initial task was to focus on what was already being done, both by ourselves and our academic colleagues, to identify what topics should be covered in each year, and to establish where the responsibilities for delivering them lay. This was what we came up with:-

**Slide – Y1**

**Learning outcomes Responsibility Dissemination**

**Year 1**

Using the online catalogue Library Seminars / online guide?

Athens access Library Seminars / online guide?

Bibliographic terminology Tutors / Library Lectures / Moodle

Referencing Tutors Lectures / seminars / Moodle

Compiling a bibliography Tutors / Library Lectures / seminars

Using reading lists Tutors Lectures

Online resources :

Oxford – JSTOR – Discovery Library Seminars

Essay writing skills Tutors Seminars / tutorials / Moodle

Critical reading Tutors Lectures / tutorials

Copyright Library Lecture / Moodle / online guide?

**Slide – Y2**

**Year 2**

Online resources:

Music Index – Gramophone –

AV resources - Library Seminars / online guide?

Print resources:

Thematic catalogues – Subject bibliographies –

Facsimiles Library Seminars

Qualitative assessment of resources -

Comparative editions Tutors / Library Seminars

Critical listening Tutors Lectures / seminars / Moodle

**Slide – Y3**

**Year 3**

Online resources:

RILM – RISM –

Dissertation abstracts Library Seminars / online guide?

Print resources:

Gesamtausgaben – Denkmäler Tutors / Library Seminars / online guide?

Refresher session(s) on Y1 & 2 Library Tutorials – but would aim to have core issues covered by Moodle / online guides

Elective-specific research Tutors / Library Seminars / tutorials

**Slide – Y4**

**Year 4**

Using archival resources:

Primary and secondary narratives Library / Archives Seminars

Online archival resources:

Newspapers – Programmes – Letters Library Seminars

Referencing archival resources Tutors / Library Lectures / seminars

Elective-specific research Tutors / Library Seminars / tutorials

The weighting towards Years 1 & 2 reflects the fact that this is where our current programme is concentrated.

The next stage was to meet with the relevant academic staff to confirm divisions of responsibility and, more particularly, to clarify the extent to which topics were reinforced. This was born of our experience of students asking us for guidance on, for example, critical reading or referencing which were allegedly covered by their tutors.

The initial response was positive, but several sticking points remain:

* Tutors still regard Library input as an add-on to their teaching – I envisage joint delivery of relevant classes
* Tutors don’t promote the sessions we already run – We see this as a given if we’re to work together
* They see those sessions as options – We’re arguing for their being embedded within the academic programme
* Our proposals presuppose an expansion of what we already deliver but there’s no movement on rethinking the Learning and Teaching programme to accommodate this
* Response on proposals for input in Years 3 and 4 has been sluggish
* In consequence, we’ve opted to concentrate on the Years 1 and 2 programme, where we can work with what we already offer those years

For the time being, then, it might be a question of watch this space, but let’s for the time being move on to something more positive. What have we learned and what have we already put in place which has worked?

**Slide – Overview of below**

* Don’t be afraid to seek outside help. We’re a small institution and don’t have the resources which large university libraries have. We’ve been talking with colleagues at the University of Manchester over adapting elements of their “My Learning Essentials” programme of Information Literacy to produce free-standing online guides. We’ve also decided that buying in some of their Library staff on a consultancy basis is a good use of our award, since we don’t have the technical expertise which they can call on
* Tailor your teaching to specific academic assignments. Focussing on how to access resources to support a specific assignment engages students more than talking about resources in the abstract
* Introduce performance into your teaching. We haven’t yet, but others have, and I haven’t ruled it out. A short recital is followed by discussion of how the music was accessed, what criteria were used to choose a performing edition, and where to find information on relevant performance practice
* Sell your institution’s unique resources. Last year we started to include, as part of Year 1 inductions, an introduction to our Archives…

**Slide – Archives**

…and our Collection of Historical Musical Instruments…

**Slide - Instruments**

…. Hitherto many students – and not a few staff – were unaware of them. It was a huge success. There’s nothing like inviting a student to pick up an autograph Tchaikovsky letter or play a few notes on a virginals from 1540 to get them excited and eager to know more

**Slide – Overview of below**

* Work with tutors to build your unique resources into research topics and assignments. 2016 – ran a Y4 elective option based on our “Making music in Manchester in World War 1” project. Students undertook research assignments about one of our predecessors, the Royal Manchester College of Music, using archival programmes to map student activities and concerts during the war. Great success as today’s students learned something of their legacy and were engaging with the experiences of their predecessors.

Planned elective for 2019-2020 along similar lines but looking at another predecessor, the Northern School of Music, as part of its centenary celebration in 2020

* Make your concert programming and marketing departments aware of your unique resources. Get yourself involved at the planning stage – too often it’s a case of being presented with a fait accompli and being asked if there’s anything the library or archives could add to this. Case study: October – Tchaikovsky violin concerto – Exhibition of letters and original performing material – Pre-concert talk – Reading from letters and diaries in the concert – but none of this would have happened if I hadn’t nabbed the Head of Programming and made him aware of the particular connection between the concerto and the college via Adolph Brodsky
* Put on exhibitions - Promote archival resources on Open Days where you’re aiming to attract new students
* We have themed performance days – Saxophone day – Brass weekend and mini-festivals – Chamber Music Festival – Festivals showcasing a contemporary composer – Highlight the resources your library has to complement these – Exhibitions in the library and in public areas
* Encourage performances of music you might hold in your archival collections
* Gamification – **Slide – Snakes and ladders box**
  + **Slide/games** - Snakes and ladders – Library inductions **Slide/questions** – Have to answer a question before you can move – Questions based on FAQs – Easy yes/no answers – Staff can expand on them – Very popular in a week where students otherwise sit in a room to be talked at – Useful ice-breaker for students whose first language isn’t English and who often didn’t engage in standard inductions
  + **Slide – Locked boxes** - Locked boxes – A small prize is placed in a box locked with a 4-digit combination lock – Students have to answer questions to work out the correct numbers to open the box – Trialled at the University of Cumbria but would adapt well to a music library setting – What is the opus number of? – What is the middle digit in the class number for? – Which of these four referencing styles is correct? – What’s the second digit in the year this book/article was written? Hoping to use this with Y2 students as a means of refreshing what they’ve learned in Y1

**Conclusion**

Teaching Information Literacy in the conservatoire sector does create specific challenges. Some of these are rooted in the way the UK conservatoire system has evolved in parallel to university music departments, but teaching models devised for the latter don’t necessarily adapt easily to a conservatoire environment. Perhaps one of the reasons we found devising a programme more difficult that we envisaged is that the historic binarism between performance and academia still informs the expectations of students and often their tutors as well. Moreover, it can work both ways, with academic tutors sometimes liable to take as little cognisance of their students’ roles as performers as their instrumental teaching counterparts are of their students’ academic assignments. Libraries can all too easily sit somewhat uncomfortably in the middle, trying to fit round both without really being part of either.

I’ve tried to find a balance here between outlining those areas where there is still work to be done and those where I think we’ve achieved some measure of success, with a few pointers along the way as to the course we might take. The overriding lesson we’ve learned – although, to be honest – we’ve been aware of this all along – is the need for real joined-up thinking across the institution. It isn’t enough to be the add-on that comes along when everything else has been decided – you need to be there to have your say when courses are being planned. After all, what good is a Learning and Teaching Award if you have no real say in what’s being learned or taught?