Using scenarios in introductory research data management workshops for library staff

Sam Searle

1Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, samantha.searle@griffith.edu.au

SUMMARY
As awareness increases of the role that librarians can play in facilitating improved research data management, so does the need to provide university library staff with professional development opportunities. Cox et al (2012) argue that learning should be “exploratory, discursive and reflective, providing a space in which librarians can explore developments as they relate to their individual/team role” and that “hands-on practical activities with documents and tools in real or realistic scenarios are important” [1, my emphasis].

This presentation will describe the positive outcomes of incorporating a component of scenario-based learning into introductory research data management workshops for librarians at two Australian universities. An overview of the benefits of scenario-based learning will be provided, along with practical advice on how to develop scenarios and use them as part of an institutional staff development program.

SCENARIO-BASED LEARNING
Errington (2005) describes a scenario as:

- a near-world situation, a descriptive set of circumstances, a critical incident, even a partial life/story narrative. Scenarios usually contain human actors, a storyline or plot (often incomplete), an invitation to solve a problem, demonstrate an acquired skill, explore an issue/concern, and/or to speculate on alternative outcomes. [2]

Proponents of scenario-based learning argue that it is a very effective method of engaging participants and building skills in professional areas, particularly those that require some kind of interaction in the workplace.

One such interaction that can be carried out by librarians as part of supporting research data management is an interview or a consultation with a researcher. Many librarians have conducted reference interviews and research-related consultations in the past, but they can still lack confidence about their ability to identify the data management challenges faced by a researcher. In a real-life situation, the librarian is likely to be alone, to be in the researcher’s workspace (which may be unfamiliar) and to be bombarded with information that can be unstructured, incomplete, and full of new terminology and concepts. By contrast, a scenario can be designed to highlight some aspects while minimising others, and can enable library staff to explore a complex set of challenges with colleagues in a ‘safe’ space.

USING SCENARIOS IN WORKSHOPS FOR LIBRARIANS
In 2012, two half-day workshops on research data management for library staff were held at Monash University. The majority of the 40+ attendees were team leaders and discipline librarians, as well as learning skills advisors.

The first part of these workshops largely consisted of a formal presentation that defined research data, outlined funding agency requirements and discussed trends in scholarly communication such as journal policies, data repositories and the emergence of data journals.

After a short break, this theoretical content was supplemented with a group exercise involving a scenario. Scenarios introduced a Higher Degree by Research (HDR) student in one of four areas: Medicine, Business and Economics, Arts, and Science and Engineering [3]. Each scenario provided a name and brief biography for the researcher and described her/his motivation for undertaking a PhD, the research topic, aspects of the research process, and goals around dissemination. Attendees were split into groups roughly corresponding to faculty team groupings; they were asked to identify two potential data management issues, one technical and one non-technical (e.g. intellectual property).
This exercise was so successful in engaging the librarians that the scenarios were shared with the Australian National Data Service (ANDS) partners list and community bulletin board [4].

In 2013, three similar workshops were run at Griffith University, with around 30 attendees in total. Griffith’s combined Library and IT services model meant that team leaders, discipline librarians and learning skills advisors were joined by less senior staff from the Library and IT Helpdesk team. Again, the group exercise involving scenarios was very successful. A number of changes were made to the exercise for this new context:

- Scenarios were modified to reflect the different research priorities at Griffith.
- A ‘quick guide’ to topics covered in the institution’s research data guidelines was provided as an aid. [5]
- After the workshop, in response to participant feedback, a copy of the scenarios with ‘expert’ commentary was circulated to attendees.

OBSERVATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Observations of the workshops at Monash University in 2012 and at Griffith University in 2013 include:

- Scenario-based learning activities seem to be very effective in building engagement and confidence. The use of scenarios seems to help librarians make connections between their existing knowledge and skills and those needed for this new area.
- Scenarios can be developed and modified quickly for a new context. A good understanding of the research process and common data management challenges helps with creating authentic narratives and with determining what to include and exclude.
- Incorporating scenarios into group activities enables staff in different roles and at different levels to work together. It was observed that some ‘new professionals’ with little practical experience in research support still made valuable contributions to the discussion as their more recent studies included aspects of digital collections and data management not offered at the time when more senior staff had qualified.

Further work could include:

- partnering with learning specialists to ensure best practice in educational design
- developing more intensive activities that could be chaired by a facilitator rather than self-directed
- structuring sessions so that participants have a chance to reflect on what they learned from the scenarios and how they might apply this to their day-to-day work, and
- evaluating the extent to which librarians translate what they have learned into practical action.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Searle is the Change Manager (Improving Research Data Management Program) at Griffith University. Her current role involves promoting the uptake of data stores and repositories, and coordinating efforts to improve research data management through policy, business process change, skills development and researcher engagement. Sam has worked in eResearch and data management roles in Australian and New Zealand universities since 2006, and prior to that in other library, archives, research and publishing roles in Australia and Scotland. She tweets as @datalibsam and blogs about libraries, eResearch, data management, and change at http://www.samsearle.net.