



Information for Social Change

"an activist organisation that examines issues of censorship, freedom and ethics amongst library and information workers..."

Starting to Write for the Information Sector: Some Experiences.

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In recent years, the Information Sector has witnessed significant change, most visibly in the form of digitisation and the growing prevalence of Information Technology. There is a constant challenge to maintain awareness of current developments, not only in terms of Information Technology, but also in areas such as Copyright, Accessibility and Freedom of Information to name a few. The Information Sector has seen a growing demand for accessible information on these issues and there is an unprecedented opportunity for staff within the sector to share experiences and expertise in this climate of rapid change.

Over the last few years, I have become fairly active in writing for the Information Sector. To give you some idea about my background, I worked for several years as a library assistant at NEWI, Wrexham, whilst completing a BA in Literature and Media studies (1999) and an MA in Library and Information Management (2000). In October 2000, I took a new post in Web development and e-learning within the same Higher Education institution; over the following years I also taught intermediate IT with a local community college and undertook CILIP Chartership (with what was then the Library Association).

Sometime in late 2003, I began to consider research as a focus for developing my own expertise and skills and by October 2004 I had enrolled with Manchester Metropolitan University to begin a 5-6 year research programme; the topic chosen was initially Web-based accessibility, but later I decided to focus on 'Distributed learning' (i.e. a form of teaching combining both class-based study and use of e-learning) amongst Part-Time students studying vocation-based subjects such as social work or teaching.

In Spring 2004, whilst enquiring amongst research institutes, I was approached by an editor for the Chandos publishing company (Ruth Rikowski), a well-known Library and Information Science academic who asked me if I would like to write for the Chandos Series for Information Professionals; I initially considered a very tentative and limited contribution, but having submitted a plan, Ruth indicated this could form the basis of a stand-alone text. I finally chose to write on the general theme of e-learning in Higher Education, including the background to Web-based learning, the features found in e-learning systems and a wide range of related issues. Perhaps the main reason I chose e-learning for the text, was because my preparatory study was already underway for my research degree and the two activities seemed to complement each other. The agreed title of the text became *Delivering E-Learning for Information Services in Higher Education*.

The text consisted of eight chapters (with numerous sub-sections); the chapters included: Introduction to e-learning, Virtual learning environments, Managing the virtual learning environment, Training and user support, Accessibility and legal issues, Other online learning tools, Quality assurance and monitoring (and a Conclusion chapter).

Whilst I found it demanding to write such a long text (about 60,000 words), I was able to manage the project by writing fairly small sections each day (sometimes only a few hundred words). Although maintaining momentum was difficult, I overcame this challenge by strictly limiting each sub-section to an allocated length and by setting deadlines for the completion of each chapter. I worked to a strict plan (agreed with Chandos) and treated the writing like a regular project with fairly fixed deadlines.

Professional contacts and acquaintances were important throughout the project, including IT experts and library staff from around the UK; most of these individuals provided useful comments on my text as it progressed and some actually made incidental contributions for inclusion in the text (such as short system reviews or case studies derived from a survey I had conducted). Other individuals provided expert advice on technical issues. All these contributions were cited in the opening pages of the text.

Once the actual writing was complete, the process of creating the supporting documents began, including formalising the Contents page, the Index, the Bibliography, Glossary of Terms and the Appendices, which provided a quick reference for crucial aspects of the text (such as a list of URLs for Web resources and a checklist for Web accessibility auditing). I worked closely with a copy-editor at Chandos to finalise the layout of the text; the cover design was also handled by Chandos, using a generic but attractive technical/ abstract image used for the whole series.

Finally, in around December 2004 the text was published (in hardcover and soft cover), with good initial sales and re-prints to accommodate demand - a reflection perhaps of the popularity of the subject, but also the global coverage provided by Chandos' marketing department and related companies.

Now, I can reflect on the experience of writing a text focused on the Higher Education Information Sector with a strong IT emphasis. I have a few minor regrets, most notably that I focused the book on Higher Education - whilst this is my own area of experience, I later felt that the book could provide useful information for Further Education, Statutory Education or any organisation delivering e-learning; obviously the title of any work demands careful thought and whilst the title can focus the direction of the writing, it can also limit the marketing potential.

In hindsight, I would perhaps have liked to focus more on pedagogical issues, although I felt at the time that the book should be focused on the practical aspects of system selection and delivery - issues central to the role of an Information Services department.

Since writing my Chandos text, I have gone on to write several articles; the experience has certainly given me confidence in my own abilities to write, to manage projects and to

express my research interests through a medium that other individuals within the sector would find interesting and even enjoyable.

For those interested in writing, I would recommend starting to write about topics where you have developed knowledge or expertise, rather than an area about which you are unfamiliar; awareness of developments surrounding the topic is also highly important, either via Web 'blogs', journals, or other current information sources.

Perhaps it is also worth considering to write a shorter piece before plunging into a full-scale text, such as an article or column; short submissions are usually welcome for regional journals, the newsletters of professional bodies or Web-based journals; articles could reflect subjects such as an event or conference you have attended, your experiences of a project in the workplace or your own thoughts on a current issue affecting the Information Sector.

Additionally, if you have an idea for a full length text or shorter chapter, Ruth Rikowski, Commissioning Editor at Chandos is always happy to discuss your ideas (email: rikowskigr@aol.com), Ruth is always pleased to discuss your writing and offer advice.

Paul Catherall is the author of 'Delivering E-Learning for Information Services in Higher Education', Chandos Publishing, 2004. Paperback (ISBN 1-84334-095-X)
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