

Knots opened up a new area of library work

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Helsinki University Library has created a proactive approach to developing services for research groups. A great part of the work was done through an innovative co-operation model called "knotworking". Knotworking is based on a boundary-crossing, collective way of organizing the work. This article describes the outcomes and models of knotworking.

Rethinking library services

At Helsinki University Library, the researcher services development process has been a part of the planning process of the future of the Library. In the 2000s, many risk factors associated with the future of libraries have made it necessary to seek new horizons for libraries work and work areas. - E-resources have attracted more and more customers, but they have also required more libraries' resources. Also, new approaches were needed to define the future work areas of libraries and meet the needs of the users. We found out that it would be wise to identify researches as a specific target groups and try to get them more involved in our work to meet their specific needs, emphasizes the Chief Information Specialist Maria Forsman of the Helsinki University Library.

Changes in the research environment have had impact on researchers' needs to collaborate and utilize expertise of the Library. - The importance of research data and its' storage has increased when scientific publishing and models scientific communication patterns have changed. When the Academy of Finland started to require a so-called data management plan, the researchers were in practice in need of assistance, describes Forsman. - We were able to offer support for researches in these needs and developing our own expertise at the same time.

We also wanted to develop closer relationships with our users and we wanted to experiment new working methods and collaborate with our users.

We wanted to focus on target groups, rather than on individuals, because it was easier to build services to specific target groups than on individual users, states information specialist Johanna Lahikainen. - At the same time there was and a research and further education evaluation process going on at the University of Helsinki, which also focused on the research groups. So, our group setting intertwined with the other development work in a parent organization.

Change Laboratory method

The pilot project started in Viikki Campus Library in 2009–2010 and continued in the City Centre Campus Library in 2010–2011. The aim was to create new kinds of partnership between libraries and research groups in the form of knotworking. University of Helsinki building and estate center, which was responsible for the development and construction projects of the Helsinki University, supported financially the pilots. This was because of the connection of the knotworking to the building project to City Centre Campus Library, Kaisa-building.

At the background of the development there was the idea of the so-called knot working method developed by Yrjö Engeström. His approach has been adapted widely in different organizational development projects. Work began with interviews of participants.

Knotworking was organized to several small collaborative groups, in which library manage-

ment, information specialists and librarians were involved. - In principle, anyone in the library who was willing to participate in the knotworking could join to them, Forsman specifies.

Focusing to the needs of the research groups

Several knot working groups were established by the researchers. Among them were four very different fields of science: the Finnish Language Studies, Gender Research, Cognitive Science and Communications Law. For Cognitive Science group the aim of the project was to build a meta-data format and plan for data storage and organization. The co-operation with Finnish Language Studies and Gender Studies researchers aimed at broader targets of information resources management: more flexible and innovative models of current awareness services and acquisitions. In practice, a new model for current awareness services has been developed and introduced by Meilahti Campus Library Terkko in the field of Health Sciences in a form of data aggregator, FeedNavigator.

Knot working groups worked on several levels. - The Library staff co-operated in one group with Engeström. On another level the Library staff worked together with researchers. In addition, there was a steering group for the knot working pilots, Lahikainen points out.

Progress of the work was driven by the organizational change within Helsinki University Library. - As a result of the organizational change, the tasks of library managers were redefined. Accordingly, two positions for the chief information specialist were established: one for the Humanities and Theology, and the other for Social Science, supplemented Maria Forsman. - In these positions it was possible to focus on the development of researcher's services considering their information needs as specific groups.

A radical solution to the problem

Finding solutions together changed the working

practices from request based services towards collaborative service models, in which needs and supply of services were to be negotiated. - Knotworking also included mutual learning, Johanna Lahikainen says. - We had to think about how to respond to the researchers' needs and wishes. The knotworking groups differed from each other by size and their approach to research.

Collaboration with researchers also changed models of communication and patterns of thinking. - It was necessary to get rid of the library jargon, Lahikainen describes. - Collaboration in the knot groups has been very inspiring and fun, but also very intensive and challenging. You had to consider often, if you understand exactly what the other person says and what exactly he wants.

The regular practices of library work were thoroughly shaken during the knot working, when the services were redefined in collaboration with researchers. - A researcher could, for example, argue that he doesn't need FeedNavigator, because he already finds all he needs through certain other sources, Lahikainen continues. - I had to consider how I could justify and make him realize the value of this new tool and its relevance for his purposes. Or a researcher could ask "what is the purpose of metadata format" and "what is the usefulness of the format"? We practically had to redefine and justify the goals and purposes of our tools.

Discussions with researchers also gave ideas to rethink approaches of library work. - We heard comments like: "you have really good ideas and professional skills, but why do you hide and keep them under the cover", Forsman highlights.

Knotworking is flexible problem solving

Knotworking could be described as a model of organized problem solving, which is more flexible than teams and projects but has a broader setting than information service. It is also multi-professional co-operation between library professionals and researchers.

The effectiveness of a knot groups is based on

dynamic and horizontal organizational arrangement and problem-solving orientation. - Knotworking does not require a permanent organization. It can be rapid. It can override the boundaries of organizations and hierarchies. And it is designed to solve different problems and to combine different sets of skills, Forsman says. - Knotworking can be described as a kind of rapid development working method.

Knotworking also challenges professional skills. - We needed communication skills, understanding of the discipline was a challenge with some issues, and luckily we had a good basis for the development of a metadata format – otherwise it would have been difficult to proceed, Lahikainen explains.

Bibliometric methods applied

Helsinki University Library was asked as a partner to the Helsinki University project of research and further education evaluation in 2005-2010. Library also received funding for doing this work. A crucial part of the evaluation was based on bibliometric analysis.

- Since there were no evaluation methods available for our use which would fit into this situation with TUHAT-database, the library had to develop specific evaluation methods for the areas of the research, describes Forsman. - We utilized publishers' ranking lists. E.g. international connections were evaluated by the language used. And for the conference publications there were separate ranking lists which were applied.

This was the first time that such a bibliometric analysis was used which took into account diffe-

rences between the disciplines in the evaluation of the research at the University of Helsinki. Publications of the researchers and research groups could be collected from years 2005-2010 through the university publication database implemented in 2010 (TUHAT).

The library has been responsible for the quality of data by checking the records and by training the researchers. The university ordered a bibliometric analysis of the publications of the Web of Science –database from the Leiden University Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS). The other publications were evaluated by Helsinki University Library. The work was carried out by a bibliometric working group, which had weekly meetings and included 25 persons of the library staff, and 13 of them to the final analysis. Overall, the work for the project took about 7 months if measured as a one person's working time.

Encouraging experiences


The most important results of the knotworking projects were the extended selection of services for researchers, changes in librarians working methods and a new organizational model for the Campus Libraries of Helsinki University Library. Accordingly, the knotworking projects had a wide impact on different areas of the work.

The City Centre Campus Library has continued to extend and develop their services for researchers after the pilot project. - Together with the researches of the Communication Law we have developed IL training for post graduate students. And for the "Law in a changing world" –graduate school we have planned a customized service package for researchers. With the researchers of Gender Studies we also have development plans, Forsman.states.

New working practices were a recognized outcome of the knot working projects. - Helsinki University Library found out that the knot groups

could be applied to other areas, even within the Library, Forsman describes.

Also researchers have given positive feedback. - A member of the Gender Studies group told that having a library contact person is a good idea; and this kind of practice should be introduced into other disciplines, too, Lahikainen concluded. - Member of the Cognitive Sciences group thought that the development process as such served the researchers as well as the real outcomes of the knot project.

The final report recommends all the Campus Libraries of Helsinki University Library to apply the knot groups approach. 136 research groups participated on the research evaluation: if knotworking would be extended to all of them, a meaningfully broader perspective to knotworking will be ahead. 

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