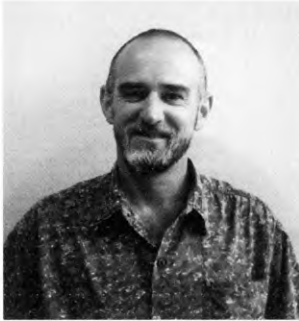


# What Vicki learned on her library placement



**Roy Sanders<sup>†</sup>**

An integral part of education for library and information services is the requirement for students to be able to integrate theory with practice during their studies. Students are given many opportunities, from appropriate assessment methods through to fieldwork, to observe, simulate, or be a part of, a real library work situation.

One such opportunity given to library and information studies students is the Library Placement. At Charles Sturt University, this is a three-week, full-time work placement, during which the student attends a library in normal working hours and is under the supervision of members of staff of that library. The university appoints a member of teaching staff to liaise with the student and her/his supervisors.

This article attempts to give a word picture of the aims and outcomes of a successful placement experience. We want to show this through the eye of a student (who we shall call Vicki) and her supervisors from the university and from the host library.

Vicki is a distance education student in Charles Sturt University's Graduate Diploma of Applied Science (Library and Information Management). She has been working full-time in a public library for four years, and has young children. Vicki undertook her library placement at Queensland University of Technology, a large, multi-campus university library.

The aims of the placement are: to obtain an overview of a library or information agency, specifically in the role of the library or agency; the community served; services offered; library operations; library organization; and hands-on experience in some activities of a professional nature.

The practical experience associated with professional activities will generally be determined by the library in consultation with the student.

## Choosing a library

Before Vicki could begin, there had to be some agreement as to the kind of library to which she would be most appropriately attached. Factors to be considered include the stage of the course the student has reached, previous experience in libraries (or other related organisations), type of library already experienced, timing of the placement, and the willingness of the library to take students.

The university generally requires students to experience a different type of library from that which they have already experienced in a previous placement or in their current work situation.

*Vicki:* Coming from a public library back-

ground, I looked forward to the challenge of a large University library.

## What to expect

It is not always possible for the student on placement to undertake activities in all aspects of the library's work. However they should be able to observe, have discussions with, and ask questions of, staff in all areas. In some cases a period of observation was followed by the opportunity for hands-on experience.

During the three weeks of her placement, Vicki was rostered onto a variety of practical activities. These included the use of a variety of library technologies, answering reference enquiries, and work with document delivery, conspectus, shelf-list analysis, bibliographic searching, cataloguing, and lending services. She had experience with liaison between library and academic staff, in selecting material, and in placing orders.

*Vicki:* A major advantage of this placement was that I was allocated a reference librarian as mentor and tutor for my stay, and this level of personalized training was very beneficial and much appreciated.

*Vicki's supervisors:* Vicki showed an empathy for users and was not fazed by any question. She completed assigned tasks with accuracy and growing understanding.

## What Vicki learned

*Vicki:* The differences I noticed most at this library were things like the higher numbers of staff, different and specialised type of clients, and a very different management structure. The treatment of user education, for example, was a lesson for me because in a smaller library it is more personalised, whereas at the university library the trend is towards less contact and more towards information sheets and on-line tutorials.

*Vicki's supervisors:* This was a very foreign environment for Vicki, and initially she was very quiet — a passive but conscientious recipient of instructions and information. This is reasonably common for someone thrust (albeit willingly) into unfamiliar territory. As the placement progressed, she gained more confidence, showed considerable initiative, displayed constructive thinking in managing her work and felt free to query task processes.

## A highlight

Vicki was asked if she would like to give a presentation to a group of shelving staff on the ERIC database. She agreed, although she knew it would be a challenge as she had not used ERIC a great deal, and was not very experienced in presenting workshops for large numbers of adults.

*Vicki:* I prepared a lesson plan, with three handouts, which aimed to introduce each capability and function of the database while keeping

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to topics of interest to the individuals present, although I had a pre-established search as a backup. The availability of many terminals for teaching purposes made the workshop easier to run and more successful in that everyone could get some hands-on practice.

I found that teaching adults was more threatening because of the possibility of them knowing more than me, but they were much easier to keep on track than the school groups that I have taken. Teaching at this level was a challenge, but an excellent experience as I could relate it to my own work.

*Vicki's supervisors:* Vicki delivered an excellent user education session, with very good feedback from those who attended.

### What the library gained

The library aimed to give Vicki a task-oriented placement. Vicki's willingness to learn and grow in confidence in a 'strange' environment meant that the library gained an extra, motivated and reasonably productive member of staff for a time. It also gave some of the library staff a chance to interact with a student of their profession, and further experience in demonstrating to someone

else what they do, and how and why they do it. If a vacancy was to occur in the library, and if Vicki was to apply for it, management would have an excellent understanding of Vicki's abilities and potential.

### What Vicki gained

*Vicki:* I came back to my workplace with a wider overview of libraries in general, not just of public libraries, and this has given me a broader base of experience with which to make decisions and suggestions on services and procedures. It was useful to observe how very large technical services and lending services departments can be controlled and managed, particularly in the specialisation and division of labour.

It was especially useful to gain experience in a large networked system, have an overview of collection development in a large system, and see the use of conspectus in compiling statistics and analysis of collections.

So, despite having to give up three weeks of annual leave, stay away from home and farm out my children, I feel that the experience has been invaluable in terms of my knowledge and understanding of the library community as a whole. ■

*The placement gave library staff a chance to interact with a student of their profession, and further experience in demonstrating to someone else what they do, and how and why they do it.*



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