

# Blackpool and The Fylde College:



***Rethinking spaces, rethinking staffing - new staff structure and roles for a technology-rich learning resource centre***

## An Excellence Gateway case study

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### Summary

This case study focuses on how the staffing structure and roles have been redefined to meet the needs and challenges of 'The Loop', a new technology-rich library and learning resource centre at Blackpool and The Fylde College.



### About Blackpool and The Fylde College

Blackpool and The Fylde College is one of the largest general further education colleges in the north west of England providing further and higher education learning opportunities for local, regional and, in some cases, national client groups, stating a commitment to "providing high quality, flexible and easily accessible learning opportunities for individuals, organisations and the local community". It operates from four major campuses and three learning centres located along a 17-mile stretch of the Fylde coastline.

The College is an Associate College of Lancaster University and was designated a national Beacon of Excellence and FEFC Accredited College in 1999. It gained national Beacon Awards in 2003, 2005 and 2006, and has Charter Mark and Investor In People status. The College has three CoVEs in Customer Service Quality for Resort Tourism; Building Services and Automotive Manufacturing Engineering.

## The challenge

When **Chris McAllister, Head of Learning Resources at Blackpool and The Fylde College**, led development of 'The Loop', a new library and learning resource centre at their Bispham campus, she recognised that the existing staff structure and roles did not fit with the new technology-rich, learner-friendly development, and so began the difficult task of defining and introducing significant changes.

## The activity

By the time Chris McAllister was leading development of The Loop, she had already been working with two consultants on areas which would have a significant impact on the new development; with **culture change and leadership development specialist, Fiona Emberton**, on how self-service could make a significant difference to working practices, and with organisational development specialist, **Alastair Mitchell-Baker from Tricordant**, on the issue of staff structures.

Chris had been considering the issue of staff structures and roles for some time. Having seen examples from elsewhere, where workers were demotivated through roles which involved repetitive tasks, she was particularly interested in a team structure where everyone is more or less on a par in terms of the duties and responsibilities they have, but therefore also have some enjoyable and meaningful tasks to undertake.

The role of Learning Resources Adviser was introduced. Each member of the team performed this same role, which involved a diverse range of duties (including some routine tasks), and one member of the team was also designated as Team Leader. Responsibilities which all members of the team have range from subject liaison, which includes dealing with book stock for the subject areas they look after, through to direct contact with student enquiries on the floor, where the team are encouraged to 'roam' in their contact with students and not simply remain at an information point.

The new team has no term-time only posts, as was the case previously; this has had a big impact on ensuring that all the advisers feel they are a real part of the team, and means that no-one is likely to miss out on staff development and development time for new projects. This proved to be important, as Chris realised that development of the new centre inevitably meant introducing new systems and technology to meet the changing needs of learners, and to help the centre function effectively.

Laptop loans, for example, have been introduced, requiring the development of a system to enable the advisers to administer the loans; also, the introduction of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, to enable students to loan library stock on a self-service basis, generated an enormous amount of work in tagging the stock, and it took a long time to get stock organised in subject areas on the shelving.

Staff development has been (and still is) an important aspect of The Loop development, where not only has overall team development been necessary to introduce new systems and technology, but where individual staff development has been necessary to address that fact that the advisers come from different backgrounds, and therefore have not all worked with a full spread of library and learning resource duties before.

To this end, Chris has accepted that the full programme of staff development for the team is a long-term process (two years).

In the early weeks of The Loop being open, she spent time with staff on a regular basis discussing all aspects of making the centre and its systems as effective as possible. Regular communication in this way has enabled Chris and the team to be responsive to making changes and developments as the need arises.

A typical example is the staff workroom, originally conceived as a 'hot-desking' space, knowing that not all the team would be in there at any one time and some would always be on 'frontline' duties in the centre. However, it became apparent that the team valued having their own workspace where they could leave new stock out without having to constantly move it around from desk to desk; it also became apparent that the team needed a room (haven) where they could feel comfortable after being on 'frontline' duties dealing with students enquiries and issues.

## The outcomes

Chris admits that the process of 'decommissioning' the previous roles, and defining and introducing the new ones, has not been an easy process and was stressful for all those involved. Having overcome this difficult period and the opening term of The Loop she believes there have been overriding benefits including, for example, a higher grading for the team than any of them had in their previous roles, and the consistent Learning Resource Adviser role meaning that staff are capable of covering duties easily for leave and illness where necessary.

The flat structure, where each member of the team has the same role, does not, however, prohibit individualism and creativity. Staff can undertake tasks in their individual ways where it suits, and Chris draws on the skills and experience of individual members of the team to address specific developments and challenges; for example, following a development day on social networking software, one of the team took the initiative in setting up a MySpace page through which students could recommend fiction for purchase, and music to be played in The Loop.

The latter development also prompted a 'Get it Loud in Libraries' live music project which has, amongst other things, attracted some students who would normally not have been likely to go into 'the library'. In the new structure, ideas are encouraged and the team can play to their individual strengths. Importantly however, information and training for new systems and services are then cascaded where necessary to ensure that all the team are familiar with them and can deliver them.

Encouraging ideas and creativity has meant that Chris and the team have had to take some risks, and Chris acknowledges that some developments have not worked and they have therefore had to make changes. But she doesn't think that such 'failures' have had a detrimental effect on the team, firmly believing that in seeing her make, and learn from, mistakes along the way the team have been more open to suggesting and trying new ideas themselves.

## The impact

So, how have students benefited from the new staff structure and roles?

Chris says the students seem to have found it easy to use the self-service systems, such as RFID, and this has had the added benefit of releasing staff to help with student enquiries and issues which really need their input.

The team highlight the **sharing and cascading ethos** as important, allowing "the students to benefit from a depth of knowledge from [staff from] diverse backgrounds"; also because they all have different areas of expertise "the team is very strong as a whole [and] there is usually a staff member here who can answer most questions asked of us".

But one of the biggest benefits for the students appears to be the **enthusiasm and motivation of the team** as generated through the new structure and roles. Typical comments from team members include the following:

- "My main enjoyment comes from answering student questions, being able to help them move on from that problem..."
- "[I am] excited about helping students to succeed with the best possible facilities."
- "I enjoy working with an HE student one minute on a British Library loan request and then showing a student with learning difficulties how to use the free colour photocopier."

As advice for others who might be considering staff structure and role changes to suit new technology and technology-rich environments, Chris would recommend seeking the perspectives of others with wider and different experiences and expertise, such as the specialists she consulted, stating "don't expect them to make the decisions for you, but they can help you in making the right decisions".

Blackpool and The Fylde College is planning a new development on another campus. Typically, Chris sees The Loop not only as a development in its own right, but also as an important part of the learning process for the new campus development.

## Useful links

- [Blackpool and The Fylde College website](#)
- [The Loop Learning Resource Centre webpage](#)
- [View rolling images of The Loop.](#)

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