We begin by introducing ourselves. We are a pair of humble librarians, one long elevated to the dizzy and somewhat stressful heights of senior management and strategy, and the other walking the tightrope of library middle management. Both of us continually strive to keep our feet firmly on the forever-shifting technical and political ground. Both are driven by the desire to support the library profession to move toward engaging in truly collaborative models and workflows for creating distance-learning programs offered by one of the world’s largest distance-teaching universities, the Open University based in the UK (www.open.ac.uk). This is our story, and depending on whether you feel the challenges we continue to face globally in crafting engaging and economically viable distance education are exhilarating or terrifying, we hope you might be able to identify with our cause.

We had a dream. In our dream, a group of eager students with bright eyes and bushy tails, hungry for knowledge and inspiration, find themselves in a beautiful garden. At first, they wander around together, marvelling at the richness of it all—many sights, sounds, and aromas. Soon, however, they disperse and each begins to select from the abundant range of succulent fruit and dazzling flowers. The more they pick, the more different varieties are revealed—for each student, the possibilities are endless. Moreover, for students requiring some guidance, kindly fairy gardeners are at hand to give support and advice. Like the garden itself, the students begin to grow and flourish, both individually and as a group.

Then we had a nightmare. In the nightmare, the same group of eager students, hungry for knowledge and inspiration, are trapped in a dark and gloomy dungeon. Peering through the gloom, they see a pile of identical brown paper parcels, which they begin to unwrap, revealing some neatly
Librarians play an integral role in the learning process. Working in partnership with academic colleagues and learning technologists, they can facilitate the creative employment of a massive and varied array of resources. As librarians, our vision of flexible learning focuses on the opportunity to enrich, enhance, and diversify the students’ experience as truly independent learners through access to increasingly rich and sophisticated learning materials. In our garden of learning delights, the student is empowered to find, select, and evaluate resources to support and extend their learning, with an increasingly interactive experience facilitated by the ubiquity of the Web and the impact of Web 2.0 technologies. In this scenario, the roles of both academic and librarian change as both assume a responsibility for helping each learner to develop the skills for navigating the changing information environment and making sense of all that is found. However, not all is flourishing in today’s garden of learning!

The Open University in the UK has been supporting students as independent learners for forty years. For the first thirty years, the student’s course materials consisted of a range of high-quality resources—print, audio, and moving image—pre-selected and provided “in the box” (with support from specified broadcast material in the early years). Most students graduated without any experience of using a library or, indeed, being required to seek, find, select, and evaluate information for themselves. There was, of course, good reason for this: library access was at best problematic and at worst, for many, impossible.

Students’ access to the Internet changed all that. A massive investment in electronic collections and the development of sophisticated virtual services enabled all students to have access to their own online library, tailored to the needs of their courses and programs, as well as the largely unstructured but wide-ranging resources of the Web.

But in the dark ages of the last century, the structure and culture of Open University courses did not easily accommodate the use of library materials and the development of information skills for our students. Indeed, the idea of encouraging students to find information themselves to inform their studies was anathema to many individual academics and
course-development teams. They were not at all sure that they wanted their students to enter that garden—it was much too dangerous and beyond their control. They argued that the students were quite happy where they were, often fully dependent on information pre-selected and organized by academics in the course-development teams.

And as the librarians slipped into their dreams, so the crusade began. The librarians of yore donned their best armour, mounted their trusty steeds, and set off to beat on the doors of the castle of distance education. Bringing their treasure chests of learning delights, they hoped to dazzle the custodians who produce the learning elixir and hence delight the learners who consume it. The journey was long and treacherous, and some entrances to the castle were blocked by impenetrable iron doors: they encountered the first-level alchemy course team, who feared that the librarians’ treasures would pollute the purity of their elixir, and the ancient philosophers, who said the treasures would dazzle the learners and lead them into dark and dangerous waters. Even some of the more welcoming course teams were worried that the librarians’ treasures would distract the learners and take up too much of their time—they didn’t understand that the treasures could be added to the elixir from the beginning, creating a richer mix and saving time in production. Worst of all were the fearsome dragons, who thought that librarians should stay in their book tower and not interfere with the pedagogues. But despite all the obstacles, they persevered, and as the years passed, more doors began to open and they were welcomed inside, sometimes with open arms.

The quest had to continue into the twenty-first century and expand into broader territories and communities. The trusty but, by now, world-weary band of librarians was joined by newer and younger recruits and by a growing band of wizards and magicians, bringing new treasures for the garden, like wonderful baskets of images, sounds, and movies, and a box of magic spells, including virtual tours, tutorials, and chat services. There were victories, large and small, along the way, and many more learning custodians were friendly, but there were always obstacles to overcome. Some were humans.

Various kith and kin sought to vanquish the brave attempts of the librarians to muster the forces that could lead to the true embellishments and allure of the garden of learning delights. These included a small band
of impish folk such as those typified and led by Hurste and Woller. Hurste was renowned for railing constantly at the forces of the castle establishment and had established a fearsome reputation among the librarians and his kinsmen for his adept and nimble technical skills (through blogging, tweeting, and many mash-ups). Hurste could be both gentle and fearsome, depending on his mood, but though often Pan-like in his approach to subverting the forces that constantly tried to subdue him, he had more in common then he realized with the librarians in how he sought to support learners to gain access to the abundant resources in the garden. Hurste could often be seen scaling the walls of the fortress called “distance education” and was sometimes successful in convincing the influencers (the rulers, strategists, and treasurers who held the real power) that things in the castle had to change. The librarians could, in fact, learn a great deal from Hurste, who could find different ways into the castle using his skills in producing different flavours of elixir, which, if combined with the librarians’ treasures, could really help to propagate the garden.

Woller believed in his heart that the influencers often connived with the bean counters and the facts-and-data suppliers, and worried about the sustainability of their business models and their effect on the learners. Though gentler in his approach than Hurste, he would often proclaim through his blog the virtues of freedom and democracy in learning, with students not needing any direction or professional advice from librarians. The influencers and many librarians found such arguments disturbing because they believed that the students would need help in unlocking and using the treasures.

The librarians particularly were alarmed at the very thought that their codes and practices for organizing the seed farms via their catalogues and metadata profiles for the twenty-first-century learning garden could be challenged by such sacrilegious railings. On one particular occasion, Woller even had the audacity to challenge the very foundation of a particular branch of their code called “bibliographic management,” calling the very foundations of the code an anachronistic, deliberately complex, and antiquated attempt to confound and befuddle the learners seeking their way into the garden. Woller wanted instead to standardize to one citation style for all types of treasures, sweeping away decades of practice by scholars and librarians.
To cap it all, Hurste and Woller poured derision on the librarians’ attempts to document and code the seedlings in a way to ensure that everyone could find them again through the librarians’ catalogue. The very idea of challenging the foundations of the librarians’ sacred code caused upset through the entire library community. The chieftains protecting metadata standards could often be seen polishing their XML weapons, ready to meet the impish folk head on in the battle to establish standardization in the garden of learning delights. These chieftains had only just lost a battle to the vandal Weinbergstein, who had come up with the idea (a ludicrous one, in the librarians’ minds) that learners would and should code any learning material they found with their own terms. Anarchy would reign. Imagine what that would look like in less than no time! The librarians might have lost the battle because Weinbergstein had a powerful way with words in more than one respect, but they were certainly not about to lose the war. Unfortunately, the chieftains were not blessed with oratorical powers. Academics and learners seeking their advice on how to enter the garden using the metadata profiles often looked puzzled or even fell asleep as the chieftains talked. Some of the librarians were also bemused by the dark arts of metadata and XML weaponry, though of course they would never, ever admit it in public.

As the holy World Wide Web became more and more anarchic and profligate with its treasures, the librarians were more determined to seek resolution in the sanctified scriptures of metadata. However, the learners and the impish folk led by Weinbergstein, Hurste, Woller, and others not only ignored their pleas but themselves searched for quick-fix ways into the garden.

The librarians’ dream garden was so near, yet so far. For those who could see the dream, it had become so clear to them that managing and standardizing the metadata would be the key fertilizer for the garden of learning delights. Metadata would be the key to unlocking, revealing, and delivering the seedling treasures and would enable the learners to seek, retrieve, share, build, and preserve the growing body of knowledge being propagated in the garden.

So where did this arguing leave the learners, who remained confused and befuddled while the librarians, the influencers, the impish folk, and the academics attempted to impose their views? It seemed to learners that
these university staff communities, who purported to help them find their way to the garden and grasp its learning delights, were more engaged in their own prickly arguments and boundary disputes around the periphery of the garden itself. Not all of them, of course—there were always exceptions to the rule. Tribal gatherings like Information Service Committees and Coalitions could see the abundance of knowledge and wisdom that could be gained by accessing the garden. They would have no truck with the anarchy emanating from the holy World Wide Web and could see that to continue to protect it would bring them no luck or fortune.

Librarians and others began to forge new tribal coalitions with these protagonists for change and started to work together to demand a new transparency in the castle called distance education. They wanted to understand why people were imprisoned by all these arguments, and they wanted to liberate them. They wanted access to the old seedling records alongside the new codes, but most of all, they demanded that the librarians, strategists, bean counters, impish folk, and academics stop squabbling and work together. They wished to harness the diversity of learning resources and build new and exciting types of learning experiences. Particularly important was the development of the skills learners need not only to find and access the garden but also to toil within it, manage its resources, and propagate it further, extending its depth, breadth, and richness.

Such work could only be sustainable and possible through a mixed economy and new equal partnerships between the learners and all of the folk responsible for the garden and its treasures.

Through our tale we have attempted to touch on some of the real territorial and political obstacles and battles that are often recounted to us by academic and library colleagues in our own and other institutions. Through our own quest to maximize flexible and effective use of diverse learning resources designed for independent use by learners, we have learned some valuable lessons and we have a few successes to share.

We have learned that, like in the garden of learning delights, as library practitioners and professionals, it is crucial for us to find ways to work together across the existing diverse communities of practice that support education. The immense influence of the Internet, which has liberated access to resources and requires new types of media and
information-literacy skills, will inevitably force our existing professions to re-examine themselves in terms of what they bring to learning support and development in the context of flexible delivery. In order to help this process, we must capture, document, share, and promote examples of good practice in terms of how we collaborate to develop and design learning and skill building for independent, inquiry-based learning. If we are to succeed in fostering reflection, critical evaluation skills, and the broad range of literacies that are at the core of developing independent citizens, we can only do so in partnership with our colleagues and learners in a truly collaborative model. Not only are there ethical drivers for this partnership approach, but the global economic situation, national educational policies, and cultural drivers will inevitably force change.

At the Open University, our library colleagues have begun to collaboratively challenge and re-energize learning programs. We now work proactively, on the ground, with academics, learning technicians, and learner support staff during course design and development of learning resources. We are also involved in prototyping and developing new services that support interactivity and dialogue with learners. Examples of good practice include the drive to embed information literacy within programs rather than individual courses, which will encourage dialogue among students, academics, and tutorial support staff and help to build up knowledge and information-management skills. The Faculty of Health and Social Care has adopted this model and seeks ways to prototype different types of Web 2.0 tools and approaches alongside the virtual learning environment toolkits that sit behind the organizational firewall. The faculty is actively encouraging both staff and students to experiment with open resources, along with library-managed, third-party, licensed material, in ways that enable the embedding of skills and content to aid independent learning.

We have also been proactive in seeking opportunities wherever possible to engage in research and development. These days, seeking internal and external funding is a way of life for most professionals, who need to find revenue streams to build capacity. As organizational resources become increasingly scarce, the need to collaborate across institutional boundaries and within global contexts will become even more crucial. We have pursued a range of research projects that fit within the strategic framework of the organization, and through energy, commitment, drive,
and a spirit of risk taking in a largely risk-averse profession, we have sought, received, and used funding to create new initiatives and projects.

This pursuit of research and development activities, balanced with the mainstream activities of the academic-support librarians, has given us the tools with which to cultivate our own learning delights. These opportunities would have been the poorer without all the close collaboration with learners, academics, managers, funders, project managers, technical critics, metadata specialists, archivists, librarians, and learner-support staff that has fostered such diverse development and innovation.

In our tale, we have reflected on our internal battles and victories over a decade, but during this time, the information world in which we operate has turned upside down. The Web has had an unprecedented impact on the way in which traditional librarians have performed their professional duties. The growth of repositories and the current interest surrounding the possibilities of mobile learning, digital textual analysis, and e-books are opening up new possibilities for engaging learners with content and skill building in new contexts. Many librarians working within education now need to broaden their expertise and knowledge into the field of learning development and design if they are to effect promotional use of library collections for online learning and flexible delivery. It will be increasingly necessary to participate in working with the technical developers and semantic experts to build more agile systems and services that can guide academics and learners to high-quality expert mixed-media collections, either free or licensed, in order to exploit and create their own gardens of learning delights.

They will also possibly, even regrettably for some, have to develop more project-management and broader data-management skills. Such skills will enable them to seize opportunities for experimentation and innovation in order to work with practitioners, academics, researchers, and learners to build engagement and long-term sustainability with the rich collections at our disposal.

We fully acknowledge that, as a profession, we need to change, reinvent ourselves, and abandon many inflexible practices of the past in order to make our dream garden a reality for our learners. But how prepared are our academic and managerial colleagues to see beyond the stereotype, acknowledge our skills, listen to our arguments, and join us as equal partners in developing and fully exploiting the garden of learning delights?
More importantly, are you, as a reflective practitioner reading our tale, prepared to see anarchy reign in your garden, or will you get involved in helping learners discover its delights?

EXAMPLES OF OUR PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

Working with Social Networking Tools

The CLUSTERS Project


Working in Virtual Learning Environments and Virtual Worlds

The DEVIL Project


TELSTAR Project (2008–10)

Working in Second Life

- Working to develop creative spaces and flexible services
  The Digilab http://digilab.open.ac.uk/.

M-libraries work


About the Authors

Attracted by the dark arts from an early age, Non Scantlebury started out studying for a degree in social anthropology and South Asian history. This opened her eyes to the similarities and diversity of human rituals. She discovered that a pattern existed where cultural engagement and interpretation coalesced and manifested itself through a range of shamanistic behaviours and knowledge exchanges. As a qualified librarian, Non then entered the world of media librarianship and observed much bizarre and perverse ritual behaviour relating to the disclosure and concealment of things called “facts and data.” These practices often varied greatly, depending on who happened to be the most powerful shaman of the day. Non then trained to be a teacher and has been lost in the wilderness ever
since. Officially, she is Head of Library Research and Innovation at the Open University (UK) Library Services.

As a child, Gill Needham loved libraries. By the age of seven, she had instituted a loans system for her book collection, complete with tickets and date stamps. She then became distracted, spending three years on barricade duty, occupying various university buildings to the strains of Led Zeppelin while pretending to be studying English and American literature. With limited career opportunities for hopeless idealists, she yielded to the lure of librarianship, creating chaos in a number of institutions due to a distinct lack of the requisite attention to detail. She has tried on various hats for size—researcher, evangelist, teacher, and manager—ending with the heavy and sometimes ill-fitting crown of senior manager, a burden only eased by the talents and inspiration of her team. She is currently Associate Director of Information Management and Innovation at the Open University (UK) Library.