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Bright lights and terror. Diary from the CILIP conference 2023. Sarah Simpson, UWL Library Services.

Bright lights. Voices. Terror.

I have experienced this kind of terror before – facing childbirth for the first time, coming round after an operation, that class of thing – but this was another level. Because- this time- I had an audience. I was on stage giving my very first talk at the recent CILIP conference. Specifically, the ‘future’ leaders conference. Beyond the bright lights I could see terrifying ranks of brilliant librarians, managers, heads of organizations. All waiting for me to speak. Me, in all my crapness. As a librarian approaching sixty, I can hardly claim to be the future. Nor do I head anything or manage anyone. Yep. my imposter syndrome was in full swing

Just then, one of the other speakers leant towards me. ‘I’m terrified.’ they whispered.

Ah. Not just me then.

How did I get here? Sort of accidentally. In my work as a subject librarian at the University of West London I’m currently mentoring a Level Three apprentice in Library, Archives and Information Science. The course is accredited by CILIP, in liaison with Westminster Adult Education Service. UWL is one of the first HE institutions in the UK to offer this kind of apprenticeship placement.

My mentee is hard working, enthusiastic and talented – a delight to work with. But after some weeks into the mentoring, it dawned on me the process wasn’t working very well. This was definitely a ‘me’ problem. Mentoring can be a rather nebulous ‘warm fuzzy’ area. My interpretation of the role had been to inform my mentee about as many aspects of librarianship as I could think of each time we met. (A sort of verbal Supermarket Sweep). Basically, I was talking far too much and listening too little. Reading around the subject, I realized that coaching techniques – rather than mentoring – might be more effective. Coaching focusses on the importance of listening – as well as specific ‘powerful questions’ to get to the heart of whatever challenges an ‘on the job learner’ might be facing. Using these coaching techniques had helped me to become a much better listener – and hopefully a more effective mentor. And I felt that could be worth sharing.

However, I didn’t see myself as a ‘leader’ (and certainly not a ‘future one’) so I almost didn’t apply. I felt I simply wasn’t the kind of speaker that CILIP would be looking for. Applying was down to my teenage son who said ‘Go on mum. I never understand people who don’t apply for things. What have you got to lose’?

So, I did and – to my great surprise- my talk was accepted. And in fairness, the CILIP folk couldn’t have been more supportive. Louise Greener coached me via a zoom call with such professionalism and warmth it felt like talking to a friend. John Vincent, our chair, was a beacon of calm who put me instantly at ease. But still. Here I was. On stage. No way out now. (Unless I crowd surfed to the exit).

But hearing another speaker admit they felt terrified too helped me. I was sharing the stage with two other new speakers – Deborah Varena, Directorate Co-Ordinator of the Disclosure and Barring service and Marlène Rak, Subject Support Librarian, University of the West of England (UWE). Both were brilliant speakers who gave very interesting and different talks. (I wish I’d taken notes!) Marlene highlighted the progress UWE has made implementing inclusive practice into their library offer and

diversifying their collections. Deborah gave a powerful talk about juggling the commitments of work, professional networks and advocacy plus the holy grail of ‘work life balance’ when librarians have ever increasing workloads. Then it was my turn to speak. Despite my nerves I seemed to get through it OK (at least I didn’t have crowd surf!) and our talks seem to generate a lot of questions from the audience (always a good sign!)

One question in particular – from an audience member asking about ways staff in remote working roles can get support for their well-being - seemed to open up the floor to a general discussion about the importance of mental health. Perhaps in an increasingly uncertain, post pandemic working world open discussion about mental health challenges particularly resonate. John Vincent discussed how much he welcomes this change in workplace culture. John remembered (as I do) how in the nineteen nineties workplace poor mental health was a ‘secret shame’ often perceived as ‘weakness’ to admit to. The stigma was huge. Nowadays both mental health and well-being support seem part and parcel of an enlightened workplace – and rightly so.

Once the questions had finished, everyone headed off for refreshments whilst John, Deborah, Marlene and myself stayed on stage (and a few people came up to ask more questions!) I mentioned to Marlene I was pleased to meet a fellow subject librarian as a speaker – I had been worried as not being a manager I wouldn’t be seen by the audience as an authentic ‘leader.’

“But maybe leadership is not so much about management as how we lead in our roles?” Marlene suggested to me. “Whatever that role may be? Leadership is about much more than a job title.”

And I realised Marlene was absolutely right. Leadership is also about the problem solving and new ideas we bring to our daily workplace challenges. And as librarians, we are brilliant at doing this.

So, if – like me – you don’t see yourself as the sort of person who’d ever speak at a conference, I’d recommend being a new speaker. Even without a management title you have the force. You’re a thought leader. (Which sound a little ‘Star Wars’ so maybe best I stick with ‘librarian’). Come and speak at CILIP. You’ll be great. You’ll be terrified. I was. We can be terrified together. You’ll have something important to say.

Sarah Simpson, 23rd July 2023.