Action Research in the University Library: the “Front Office Project”

Introduction by Ilaria Moroni

April, 2012
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Summary

- Action Research: History and Practice, Characteristics, Process

- Front Office Project:
  - Objective, Team, and Method
  - Diagnosis
  - Planning
  - Action
  - Assessment
  - Sharing
Origins: Kurt Lewin (social psychologist), 1946

Developments: since 1970s-80s many studies and experiences of psychologists and educationalists; since 1990s scientific literature grows, mainly in the North America and in Europe

Applications: organizational contexts and communities; educational, training, and school contexts

Applications in the library: since 2000 information sciences literature increases; many studies and experiences in university libraries and on Information Literacy

See Moroni I., Action Research in the Library, JLIS.it, 2 (2)
Action Research: Features

- Tight interconnection between theory and practice, knowledge and change, analysis and action
- «Cyclic» or «spyral» research process
- Work group managed by a practitioner who fosters individual development
- Use of qualitative techniques to analyse the problems in depth and to stimulate reflections
- Pursuing of individual and collective changes (inner growth, relational and operative improvements)
- Importance of experience sharing
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Action Research: Process

- Diagnosis
- Sharing
- Team Making and Development
- Planning
- Assessment
- Action
The Front Office Project [FOP] aims at improving the perceived quality of library services; it’s one among the University Library objectives 2009/10.

The team is composed by six librarians from three library seats, and is managed by Ilaria Moroni, the person in charge of Training, Development and Communication Office.

The method that the Front Office Team uses, to achieve its objective, is Action Research.
Diagnosis activities (November, 2009 – April, 2010):

- **Benchmarking** among Italian university library services
- **Literature analysis** about library services and surveys
- **Quantitative survey** (776 questionnaires) to students and scholars on library services use and satisfaction
- **Qualitative survey** (47 interviews) to students and scholars on library services use, satisfaction and marketing
**Findings** from double (quantitative and qualitative) survey:

- **high satisfaction** for library services, mostly for electronic resources from scholars, and for staff from students

- **low use** of some services, mainly of website, electronic resources, reference, interlibrary loan and document delivery, due to little knowledge or awareness about services

- main user suggestions: **increase marketing** services and **information literacy** activities
Planning of actions to improve library services is divided in six fields:

- Marketing
- Information Literacy
- Reference
- Loan
- Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery
- Reading rooms

Action plan was approved by management and shared with staff of University Library in May 2010.
**Actions to improve library services** in Marketing:

- monthly newsletter, to scholars and administrative staff
- library news in **BNews**, to scholars and students
- Digital Library **Poster**
- promotional **bookmarks** on library services
- faculties and departments website analysis to add library information or library website link (see **Psychology** and **Education Sciences**)
- **introduction** to library services for first-year students
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FOP: Action [2]

**Actions to improve library services** in Information Literacy:

- monthly courses, interdisciplinary and by subject, organized by librarians
- courses on request from professors and scholars
- **Information Literacy webpages:**
  - guides and tutorial
  - courses schedule
  - courses support materials
  - courses registration
Actions to improve library services in reference, ILL and DD:

- six faculty maps for Central Seat
- guides (leaflets) and website updating
- frequent user questions analysis and email replys standardizing
- comparing among three seats, flowcharts, and email standardizing about ILL (Interlibrary Loan) and DD (Document Delivery)
Actions to improve library services in circulation and readings rooms:

- doubling of loan renewal
- suggestions on circulation services for new Code of service (in 2011)
- signs to respect silence in reading rooms in Central Library and in Science Library
- more careful shelving in Central Library open shelves
- temperature monitoring in Central Library

The actions ended in December 2010.
Qualitative and quantitative assessment, especially on strategic services for perceived quality:

- library services data analysis
- library courses data analysis
- survey on user perceptions of library courses
- survey on user perceptions of reference service
- survey on user perceptions of library service
Main assessment findings:

- slight increase of users for all library services
- larger increase of courses than previous years (+ 400% trained users)
- high satisfaction for library courses (8.5/10 points)
- high satisfaction for reference service (5/6 points)
- perception of library services more positive than previous years (see self-interviews, Good Practice 2011)
Internal sharing and reflection on activities:

- monthly group meetings, to assess the work in progress
- 360-degree feedback, to evaluate even the project leader
- sharing of thoughts, ideas and personal experiences on project and working group, to improve management
- emails to all the staff, to update about the FOP
- all-staff meetings, to share survey findings and ensuing actions
The FOP team learns through the working group, and the project fosters the cognitive and emotive evolution of every person. Here are some metaphors from the staff:

- the **project** is like “a mirror reflecting our work”, or “a cake that is made up by many ingredients, and rises”

- the **working group** is like “a ring-a-ring-a-roses of people stepping synchronously to the center”, or “an orchestra in which each instrument has to tune up with the others, producing something harmonious, led by the director”
External sharing and dissemination of experience in the relevant scientific community:

- news and reports in university library website

- reports in BOA (Bicocca Open Archive)

- report in ELIS (E-prints in Library & Information Science)

Contacts

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