Enterprising Libraries: digital events at Gateshead Council Library Service

As part of the Carnegie UK Trust’s work on the Future of Libraries in the UK and Ireland, the Trust wanted to explore the innovative ways in which public libraries can contribute economic wellbeing by supporting access to education, training and employment, and enabling people to fulfil their potential and enhance their quality of life.

This programme of work, Enterprising Libraries, involved the Trust giving £3,000 to Gateshead Central Library, a library that had already started to explore creative ways of encouraging enterprise and digital skills development. The Trust commissioned Shared Intelligence to conduct an independent evaluation of the activities run at Gateshead to ensure that lessons and experience from the projects were captured and could be shared with public library professionals and policymakers.

The project

Gateshead Council’s Library Service initiated a number of digital events in 2012. They ran their first e-Day in September 2012 – a day during which the public could access cutting edge technology and learn about their use. This event was held in conjunction with Makerspace (a local digital hobby club) and Vector 76 (a Gateshead-based digital firm). It was a whole-day public event held over the weekend in the large upstairs hall of the borough’s main library. This event was judged a success, with around 150 people attending it.

In April, 2013, Gateshead Libraries held their first Digital Careers event aimed at those aged 12+. The event and attracted 131 attendees. Key to the success of the event was the relationship between the Gateshead Community Learning Officer and staff at Newcastle based Reflections games studio, (part of international software group Ubisoft), Pitbull Games Studio and Northumbria University (who run a degree course in computer games design).

‘This is not classic digital inclusion work, where we are setting someone up with an email address for the first time, but this is broadening community access to genuinely cutting-edge technology. But not only that, we are opening up contacts for the public with a growing number of local companies looking to recruit locally.’

Principal Library Manager, Gateshead

Aims

The original concept for the e-Days and digital careers events was to increase access to digital skills and knowledge, and provide opportunities for local people to get a foothold into Tyneside’s fast-growing digital industries. The theory was that these day-long drop-in events, aimed at teens and under 30s and held in Gateshead Council’s Central Library, would:

- attract new audiences to the library;
- grow membership; and
- change perceptions of what libraries have to offer.

In doing so, the library service would enable attendees to experience new technologies first hand, meet people already working in digital industries, and ultimately improve participants’ chances of breaking into this highly competitive job market.
What happened and what role did support from the Trust play?

To capitalise on the success of the events described, in 2013, Gateshead Libraries asked to join the Carnegie UK Trust’s Enterprising Libraries programme in order to expand their digital events and activities, and make them regular fixtures. These activities have been led throughout by the Community Learning Officer, with the backing of her head of library service.

Between August, 2013, and March, 2014, Gateshead scaled up the e-Days and the Digital Careers events with Ubisoft, helped in part by the additional funding and support provided by the Trust. During this period, they expanded their initial events into the following programme of activities at Gateshead Central Library:

**e-Day 2 on September 7, 2013** (300 attendees)
The event took place as part of the British Science Festival in Newcastle. The e-Day programme time included sessions from previous partners and also Northumbria University and Ubisoft.

**A three-week computer-coding course for 11-16-year-olds** was launched at e-Day 2. It came about because Ubisoft had approached the library service about running it. The course took place in November 2013, and was led by one of Ubisoft’s software developers. During the course, 12 young people learnt Stencyl, and then used it to develop their own games.

**Makerspace days** were held in January and March, 2014 in collaboration with Makerspace (a digital hobby club) who led sessions in which participants built projects using Raspberry Pi, single-board PCs and 3D printers. Some sessions were specifically targeted at under-18s, whilst others were targeted at local school teachers.

**A programme of regular Social Media Surgeries** began in January 2014. Local community groups with only a modest ability in using social media were invited to drop-in sessions led by library service staff, to get help from local web-savvy volunteers. These are now regular bi-monthly events in the library coffee bar. All requests for help, and the help provided, are recorded on the surgery’s webpage.

The careers event became an annual fixture with a **second Digital Careers event in April 2014** (90 attendees) including sessions led by Ubisoft staff, Vector 76, and Northumbria University. As before, this was aimed at teens and young adults seeking a career in digital technology. It was also attended by people from local groups the Community Learning Officer had contacted with a view to future collaboration.

**A new strand of activities branded as STEMNET sessions** was launched in March, 2014. These were led by a volunteer STEM ambassador from Newcastle College’s STEM Ambassador network (a national science and technology network of volunteers). This arose out of a partnership with the STEMNET co-ordinator at Newcastle College.

More activities are now in the pipeline. Some built on existing strands of activities (such as e-Day 3 in September 2014 and more Social Media Surgeries), and others will be new strands based on more new partnerships. One new partnership in the pipeline is a Coder Dojo – a free volunteer-led computer-coding club for young people which comes as a result of a new partnership with Coderdojo NE.

Does the Gateshead project support enterprise and help people gain new skills, knowledge and experience?

‘In recent years, North-East England has seen more new technology company start-ups than any area of the UK outside London. The North East has
emerged as one of the world’s leading centres for digital games development and start-ups... [it is] a magnet for entrepreneurs and students.’

Invest North East England (2014)

‘I realise just how tough it is to get a job. Now you have to have the networks... Not just doing the work experience, but knowing Jordan [one of the Ubisoft developers who has supported the e-Days]. And that for me is what Jacqui [at Gateshead] has created here.’

Parent of 12-year-old at digital careers event

Supporting enterprise
The success of the North East’s tech sector in recent years has been due to an enterprising approach, in which people have used new technologies to solve problems, brought these ideas to market, and captured value to invest in further growth, in a region of the UK which has often struggled to create new enterprise.

In this context, Gateshead Libraries are enabling the next generation to learn from those just a few years older who are part of this growing sector; to get to know them, and become part of their network. Conversely, they have also provided opportunities for the local Ubisoft team, part of a multinational company, to contribute to the local community. As one Ubisoft developer said while volunteering at the April 2014 event: ‘I was helping teach... I thought it was a great time for the kids and parents to know more about the industry and I was impressed with some of the work I have seen on Scratch. I hope it helped.’

For Ubisoft and for Reflections Studio, the motivation was also to tap into a local talent stream to support their own commercial needs, creating opportunities for local people to enter a highly-competitive job market. What the lead contact at Ubisoft was looking for was an intermediary in the local community which he found in the library: ‘They have great ties to the community, and when I approached them about running a programming course, they provided me with facilities, support and most of all, promotion to fill every place. They really care about the community and want to make a real difference.’

New skills and knowledge?
‘I came to find out about game design, as it’s something I am interested in as a gamer. I have no prior knowledge in game design, but found out a lot of helpful things today – like free programmes I can download to try and play around with.’

Participant at digital careers event

One facet of Gateshead’s events and activities is about teaching people practical digital technology skills. This has included, for example, how to use the Scratch programming language to create games (65 children were taught this at e-Day 2), how Bare Conductive paint works and what can be done with it (34 children were taught this at e-Day 2), or how to create objects using a 3D printer (10 people were taught this at the March 1 Makerspace).

However, we have also seen examples of how these straightforward ‘teaching’ sessions also helped people learn how to use practical technology skills to create enterprise ideas. For example, the Vector 76 session at the digital careers events was simultaneously about teaching young people what the Oculus Rift does (and letting them try it on), but also how it could be used in commercial as well as public education projects. Similarly, the volunteers from Ubisoft helped young people understand how their love of computer games can become the route to a career if they make the right academic choices and develop the skills and personal qualities which games studios look for in recruits.

But this level of engagement with business can benefit from having the library act as a neutral intermediary and organiser. Or, as one of the library staff put it:

‘The library can do this without parents worrying about motives in the way they might if it was the games company themselves promoting an event.’

How is Gateshead building reputation, stimulating debate, and supporting innovation?

Building reputation
Gateshead Libraries are building a reputation for doing something genuinely innovative through digital outreach. This is evidenced in participant numbers, coverage in digital and traditional
media, and the number of requests from organisations and individuals wanting to collaborate or transpose Gateshead’s activities.

Participants

The e-Days and Digital Careers events in particular engage with people on a large scale. The first e-Day in 2012 attracted around 150 participants, and e-Day 2 attracted around 300. This included 198 who booked via the Council’s Eventbrite page, and another 100 alerted via Newcastle Science Festival publicity. People were drawn to the event by the chance to try out an Oculus Rift headset (a 3D gaming headset). Around 100 people queued to try it for themselves and to hear how Vector 76 were using it in commercial applications.

Some events have been smaller in scale, but useful in reaching more targeted networks. For instance, as a result of the Makerspace days, the Library is now able to reach the wider community of hobbyists connected through the Makerspace group. Similarly, a small Raspberry Pi programming session for teachers held in January, 2014, was attended by three teachers who between them hoped to replicate the workshop with over 1,000 pupils aged 10-13. The new relationship with STEMNET also involves a relatively small number of people, but may be of significant benefit because of the high-level skills they can leverage.

Media coverage

Gateshead Libraries have worked hard to explain what they are trying to achieve. The majority of activities have been documented on Gateshead Libraries Facebook page. They also made this short film explaining what the first e-Day was about and made another film about the first digital careers event also.

The link between e-Day 2 in September 2013, and the British Science Festival increased the visibility and reach of the activity in Gateshead. One local newspaper’s coverage of the British Science Festival only used photographs of the activities held at Gateshead. The festival organisers also used images from the library activities in their own publicity.

Requests to collaborate or find out more

The Community Learning Officer has received several requests from local organisations wanting to collaborate. Potential new local partners include other parts of Gateshead Council such as Digital Union (a council-led network for local technology firms), learning organisations such as Newcastle College, and groups such as an amateur radio group, Games Kettle (a peer-led network for computer games developers), and a group trying to establish Coder Dojo NE.

Within the library service itself, these activities have also generated interest from other staff wanting to develop similar workshops across the borough’s branch network. As a result, in the summer of 2014, staff in several branches ran activities based around Bare Conductive electronic paint as part of their summer activity programmes, following a training workshop led by the Community Learning Officer.

Gateshead Central Library has received various requests from further afield to find out more, which indicates a growing reputation. These include inquiries from academic researchers, conference organisers and library bloggers including www.publiclibrariesnews.com (which is widely read in the UK) to whom the Community Learning Officer provided a detailed submission. However, anecdotal evidence suggests there are still many in the UK library sector who are unaware of what is being done in Gateshead.

Supporting innovation

Some of the activities which feature in Gateshead programme are rare (or possibly unique) in UK public libraries, even though some initiatives such as computer and technology clubs, makerspaces, and social media surgeries are more common outwith the library sector.

Nevertheless, the activities Gateshead have
developed to proactively support young people to develop creative digital careers and connect with local digital firms, are rare in any setting. These activities place Gateshead Libraries alongside a small number of truly forward-looking organisations such as Young Re-Wired State or even Prof Mitra’s team at Newcastle University.

Many hope that activity to promote careers in the digital sector will increase rapidly in the coming years, accelerated by changes to the computer science curriculum in schools. Gateshead’s engagement in this agenda at this early stage shows the potential of the unique role libraries can play here, by providing accessible spaces in the community and building partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders.

Although there are other digital activities connected with public libraries’ core purpose, the digital careers activities may have created a role which no other type of organisation can fulfil as well as a public library.

**Does Gateshead’s project have lessons for other public libraries?**

The lessons from Gateshead fall under several headings:

**Leadership:** This innovative model of digital outreach in Gateshead has developed as a result of the vision and energy of one gifted and passionate individual, the Community Learning Officer, one who generates strong support and enthusiasm among colleagues. Her approach has been to go out and make connections with like-minded people across Newcastle and Gateshead – critically with Ubisoft, but also the hobby groups, other firms, schools, and universities. The individuals she has sought are those who share her vision of enabling young people to build their digital knowledge and skills and go better prepared into a job market which will only get tougher in the coming decades.

**Branding:** One disadvantage of this approach, however, is that there are now a lot of sub-brands including the original e-Days, Ubisoft events or Careers Events, Social media surgeries, Makerspaces, and now STEMNET sessions. The different names reflect the lead contributor or activity, but the overall mix of contributors often overlaps and is sometimes the same. It would be a missed opportunity if people got the impression of this being a succession of one-offs, when, in fact, it is a very active and well-established programme. It might be necessary at some point to rationalise the names of events under a single recognisable title or brand for instance ‘e-Day 3’ then ‘e-Day with Ubisoft’, ‘e-Day with Makerspace’, ‘e-Day with STEMNET’ and so on.

**Partnerships:** There are no formal relationships with schools, but there are links with individual teachers. Several teachers have attended e-Days, although some only came along in the first place as an interested parent. But the potential for greater links with schools seems significant. This links to comments from some parents about the fact these activities have inspired their children in ways that other forms of careers support simply do not: ‘The e-Day was the first thing in four years which grabbed his [her son’s] attention – I had to drag him out. I wrote to Jacqui and said thank you and that it was so great this was the library doing this.’

**Enabling culture:** All this has happened within an enabling culture rather than one of command and control. Or, as one of the Community Learning Officer’s colleagues explained: ‘It is instilled in us from the day you start . . . But not because of a clear instruction from the top – more because there are lots of people in the service who have worked it out for themselves . . .’

This enabling culture appears to have been a major factor in Gateshead’s success. The cost has been minimal and other library services should note this, but it has been essential for staff to have freedom to spend time developing activities (especially the larger events) which can take
several days of planning. Most of all, it requires a supportive management culture which allows staff to develop these new kinds of activity.

We heard that this is not simply about raising aspirations – many of the young people we spoke to already dream of a career in digital industries. What they lack are opportunities to prove what they can do, practical help to develop the skills, and chance to build personal contacts.

**Social benefits:** We were also struck by the social nature of the events and blurring between participants and the growing community of contributors. For instance, all activities at the large events are group activities. We also heard that people who showed an interest in Makerspace gadgets were quickly invited by the club leaders to come to a club evening.

Technology as a social activity is a real strength of Gateshead’s approach, and a departure from the traditional role of technology in libraries where it is set-up to be used in a solitary way, each user focused on a single computer (often facing a wall). We also heard people say how surprised they were that a library was doing this. Some only realised it was a library event once they were actually there. However, when they found out the library was behind the event, the typical response was that ‘it makes sense’ that this should be the case.

**Replicability**

The Gateshead model is about actively building relationships with local technology businesses and digital or ‘maker’ hobby clubs in order to create fun, sociable and purposeful events which engage young people, parents and teachers, and help build STEM skills and career opportunities. From the outset, Gateshead did not wait for organisations to approach her, she went out to build relationships with people she believed would help realise her vision. At every level, this is a social model that has created events at which people join group activities, make connections and collaborate around technology. It relies on an enabling culture from the top which encourages personal leadership. This, in turn, has stoked enthusiasm and supported the acquisition of new skills among other library staff.

With the exception of the library’s large hall, Gateshead has required little or no resources or special equipment beyond what contributors bring to events with them. We therefore see Gateshead’s activities as highly replicable in other library services. The only critical factors are having someone on the staff with the motivation, skills and attributes to build productive partner relationships, alongside enabling managers alert enough to discover, support, and encourage them.
Gateshead’s original logic model

Shared Intelligence supported Gateshead Central Library to develop a logic model – a graphical representation of the logical relationships between the resources, activities, outcomes and impact of a programme. The aim was to enable Gateshead to consider and reflect upon how they planned to reach their desired goal.

**Inputs:** Partnerships; e-Days; careers events with sessions led by local digital firms; and outreach to engage local schools

**Processes:** Existing partnerships are strengthened and new ones created; more library staff become involved in the e-Days and other digital events; and new ways to promote these activities are developed including through social media

**Outcomes:** people attend the events; number of partnerships increases; library staff skills increase; new promotion methods developed; local maker-groups helped to make links to schools; similar projects become easier; new skills used in schools; and library’s role in enterprise better recognised by other parts of council

**Impacts:** Skills for economic wellbeing developed in local community; more local people get jobs in growth areas; digital businesses use libraries as route to new audiences; games-making course leads to raised career aspirations and raised interest in working for Ubisoft

**Testing the model:**

- Number of events and number of people taking part
- Number of games produced as part of the Ubisoft course
- Number of media mentions and references in council documents
- Number of enquiries from other councils
- Survey of participants in Ubisoft course
- Interviews with partners participating in events