Workshops: How They Can Work for You

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Abstract

Congratulations! You've received your library degree! Now it's time to start learning how to do your job. People still think of librarians as women with glasses who stamp books. But the profession is a dynamic one and the expectations of how librarians do their jobs changes as libraries and information change.   The MLS coursework provides a strong foundation, but to be successful, librarians must continue learning or they will be left behind. Professional development is crucial to librarians and there are a myriad of ways to learn new skills to improve our job performance. This article will discuss workshops and how they offer a unique learning environment that enhances the librarians' understanding of a new skill   Workshops also provide librarians with the ability to effectively utilize the new skill in their job. This article will also discuss the benefits and challenges librarians may face with workshop participation.

Keywords: librarianship, professional development, workshops

Introduction

Many librarians may consider their MLS degree to be the final step towards a successful career in the field. That is not the case for the librarian of the 21st century. Obtaining an MLS is merely the beginning of a librarian's learning. Librarianship has changed and so have the expectations of how librarians do their job. As one library director said, "You can't plan for what you don't know, but if you don't plan for change, it will blindside you."[1]

Advances in technology have transformed the way information is accessed, organized and maintained. Libraries still have books, but many of these are now accessed electronically, along with periodicals and journals. For many libraries across the United States, electronic book collections surpass print collections. Similarly, electronic databases facilitate the user's ability to research from outside the library building. Along with the changing characteristics of information, librarian job duties have expanded. Librarians are often expected to perform duties outside "traditional" roles. For example, at many academic libraries, faculty librarians are expected to teach. Instruction may be a self-contained credit bearing class or an individual session where the librarian teaches students how to do research using the library's resources. In public libraries, librarians may offer similar sessions to their service population. Regardless of the venue, more librarians are teaching. Instruction requires librarians to learn how to design a lesson, as well as know how to present the material in a manner that students can easily understand. Librarians have been heard to say "I didn't go to library school to teach." Regardless of what courses taken while studying for an MLS, any library job will expect professionals to learn and apply new skills as part of employment.

Learning new skills and knowledge will help librarians keep pace with the

changing dynamics of the field. The NCLIS - National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, emphasized continuing education as a valuable method for librarians to improve their knowledge and become more "effective professionals."[2]   A 1985 survey of over 300 ARL librarians found that most librarians acquired their knowledge in library school and on the job. But continuing education and professional development accounted for over 27% of where librarians' best acquired their knowledge.[3] In that same study, librarians "supported continuing education as a valuable learning experience."[4] The MLS coursework provides a strong foundation, but to be successful, librarians must continue learning or they will be left behind.

In order to learn new skills and adapt to changes in the field, professional development is crucial to librarians. This article investigates workshops and discusses their unique learning environment along with the benefits and challenges librarians may face with workshop participation.   For purposes of this article, a workshop is defined as a professional development opportunity which lasts at least three hours. Courses often extend several weeks while webinars can last only an hour. In an effort to distinguish workshops from other professional development activities, a minimum time period is necessary.

How do you learn in a workshop?

Olin Library at Rollins College recently hosted an ethnography workshop sponsored by the Center for Library and Information Research (CLIR). Academic librarians interested in learning how to conduct ethnographic studies at their own libraries attended the workshop. The program began with a discussion of the reasons for conducting ethnographic studies in a library. During the two day workshop, attendees

were trained in different ethnographic techniques such as photo surveys, mapping diaries, interviewing and observations. Beyond learning about these techniques, participants also had the opportunity to practice them. For the observations, participants were assigned a specific location on campus and were told to observe what student subjects did and how they utilized the space. A select number of students were asked to complete photo surveys and mapping diaries in advance. Observers then practiced interviewing the subjects about their activities.

The ethnography workshop is a clear example of the advantages of workshop participation. Aristotle once said, "What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing."[5] Workshops provide a meaningful learning experience for librarians because they offer hands-on active learning.   They are content focused, giving participants an in-depth review on a topic. Workshops provide librarians the opportunity to learn, review, and apply the content as it is being taught. The ability to actually practice the skill as it is instructed gives participants the chance to demonstrate what they've learned.[6] In the ethnography workshop, members acquired information about ethnography and its importance in learning about library users, but participants also had the opportunity to practice how to do ethnographic research. "Learning by doing" is a primary advantage that workshops offer to librarians.

After the ethnography workshop, the Library Director encouraged attendees to apply the techniques learned to research their library users. This writer decided to organize an observation study to learn what users were doing in the library, as well as invite students to sessions to discuss their library needs. The ethnographic workshop provided knowledge, tools and the confidence to initiate and complete the studies at our

library. The hands-on learning aspects of the workshop gave this participant the ability to quickly apply the knowledge to my work.

During a workshop, participants are actively learning the content while simultaneously learning how to utilize it. Active learning increases the possibility that participants will retain the information and use it effectively on their own.[7] Additionally, workshops offer librarians the opportunity to gain new knowledge and practice what is being taught.

The workshop's instructor plays an essential role in the workshop's effectiveness. Nancy Fried Foster, Director of Anthropological Research at the University of Rochester, taught the aforementioned ethnography workshop. Dr. Foster has directed several anthropological studies at Rochester's River Campus Libraries and has authored several works on her research. Dr. Foster gave participants first-hand accounts on how she conducted ethnographic research, warned of possible pitfalls, and discussed participants' research interests. After the ethnography workshop, Dr. Foster was contacted to seek follow-up help for a local observation study. She provided valuable input on how to organize the study. Having an instructor who is well-versed in the topic enhances the learning environment and encourages participants to discuss and learn from each other.

Workshops are traditionally conducted in a face–to-face environment and participants attend because they have an interest in the workshop topic. A 2008 study comparing librarian's preference for training: online versus face-to-face revealed that overall librarians preferred face-to-face training.[8] In this setting, participants have the opportunity to personally meet the instructor as well as the other participants. The visual and formal learning venue promotes more interaction between the participants and the

instructor. The collaborative setting helps the participants build a network of contacts. At the CLIR ethnography workshop, librarians discussed their users and scenarios for conducting ethnography research at their institutions. The common interest in the topic combined with the personal interaction during the workshop generated a social opportunity to share information. Attendees could then follow up and keep in touch with one another even after the workshop ended.

Developments in technology have allowed for many workshops today to be offered virtually. The virtual setting reduces the cost of attendance, but the real gain from participating in workshops is lost. Creating that personal connection is not as easy in an online or virtual environment as it is in face-to-face workshop. The human connection of workshops is a significant benefit. Face-to-face workshops provide the opportunity to personally meet others with similar interests and learn not only the content covered during the workshop, but also connect with other librarians. These individuals will be valuable resources in the future. Furthermore, by dedicating time away from the office to workshops, librarians can focus on the content with minimal interruption. It is less likely for a librarian to leave an off-site workshop to address a problem in their library. In a virtual or online workshop, interruptions may be more difficult to avoid. With face-to-face workshops, participants can focus their time and effort on learning and practicing the content without major distractions.

Four local library staff participated in the ethnography workshop, but unfortunately that is often not the case. Workshops can be expensive and therefore libraries can only afford to pay for one of their staff to attend. Because of this limitation, any librarian who is given the opportunity to attend a workshop should be encouraged to

conduct a session for his/her colleagues on the topic.   The benefit is two-fold: the librarian gains knowledge from the workshop experience, and is then able to share it with his/her colleagues. The sharing of knowledge and skills also promotes the creation of a collaborative library where learning is encouraged and librarians introducing new skills or topics are valued for their contribution.

There's a workshop for that

There is no dearth of topics covered in a workshop session. This paper has focused on an ethnography workshop, but the author has also attended a management workshop, a gaming workshop, as well as several instruction workshops. All of these involved different forms of active learning to teach the content.

The management workshop involved role playing. The participants acted as library managers confronted with a challenging personnel issue. In one challenge, management had to address persistent tardiness with an "employee." The instructor, a management consultant, played the role of the "employee." The interactive and lively exchange in the challenges helped to learn different strategies along with ways to utilize them effectively.

The gaming workshop presented background information on the benefits of games, both traditional and hi-tech, as well as how to organize a game night at our library. The real fun came when participants were able to play video games. The organizer had arranged for the Gaming Club at her library to teach how to set up different game systems: Wii, Xbox and PlayStation. Attendees then played games on the different systems.

Earlier it was stated that librarians are teaching more today. A 2010 study of

librarians in the United Kingdom found that among the respondents, 79% taught large groups of students while 91% taught small groups.[9] Over half of the librarians in the same survey, 54%, had participated in short courses (1-2 days) to develop their teaching knowledge.[10] In my current position, instruction is a huge component of the job and the one which is the most challenging. We primarily teach one-shot 50 minute sessions where the course instructor asks librarians to teach students how to effectively access and utilize the library resources. Fifty minutes is a short time and making the session engaging, informative and useful is challenging. There author attended numerous workshops to help create better instruction sessions and improve teaching. In July 2011, this writer participated in the ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) Immersion Teacher Track Program. The program had several sessions dedicated to instruction and improving teaching skills. Other topics covered during Immersion included leadership, learning theory and assessment. The workshop time dedicated to improving teaching was found to be invaluable. During Immersion, an abbreviated instruction session was given to fellow librarians who then evaluated the teaching style. The constructive feedback and comments helped participants realize areas of strength and areas for improvement. In addition, by observing other librarians' instruction, new teaching techniques were learned which could then be incorporated into personal sessions. All the librarians in the program wanted to improve their teaching. Throughout Immersion, librarians developed valuable relationships and shared ideas, successes, and frustrations of teaching experiences. Participants felt comfortable to contact each other after the workshop for instructional advice and input to improve skills.

The aforementioned management, gaming and instruction workshops illustrate the

benefits of workshop participation. All three incorporated an element of active learning that helped participants absorb the content. All were held in a face-to-face environment that encouraged interaction between the participants and with the instructor. Furthermore, the librarians learned from each other fostering collaboration and the creation of new and valuable contacts.

Where are the workshops?

Librarians are excellent at sharing information. Many of the workshop notices are posted by librarians via listservs. The ILI (Information Literacy Instruction) and CLS (College Libraries Section) are listservs organized by the American Library Association (ALA) which are heavily relied on for professional development. There are many more available and librarians in any field can easily find one that interests them. Because these listservs are followed by librarians throughout the world, workshops may not always be conveniently located nearby. State library associations often organize workshops for librarians that focus on enhancing skills and contributing to job improvement. These associations are familiar with the library community and design workshops that serve the special interest of librarians within the state. Events are usually held at a headquarter office but may change depending on the topic and the level of interest. For librarians who find it difficult to travel far, local consortia are an excellent option. These groups offer workshops to area librarians which are inspired by the national dialogue, but tailored to librarians in a specific region. Our local library consortium continuously sends out notifications alerting us to upcoming workshops. Because it is nearby, we can plan to attend and because our library is a member, there is no charge for participation. These organizations offer the opportunity to learn new skills without traveling far.

But librarians should also look outside the library world for workshop opportunities. Workshops that are not library focused provide an "out-of-box" perspective on relevant topics that may interest librarians. Themes such as marketing, strategic planning, or fundraising are important issues to librarians, and learning strategies and techniques in these areas from non-librarians can help the profession create a new and more effective approach. Academic librarians who are assigned to work with a specific department on campus can also attend a workshop at a discipline-based conference. These conferences provide information on the research, publications and specialized skills within the discipline.[11] Attending a workshop in a librarian's subject areas will help them better serve the students and faculty in that department. Individual departments at many institutions often offer workshops to their employees.[12] Information technology departments or business schools regularly provide free workshops to faculty and employees. At Rollins College, the IT department offers individual sessions to learn programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Premiere. At these sessions, professionals learn new skills, receive free training and create contacts outside specific departments, thus increasing the presence of the library on campus and improving outreach efforts. By attending workshops out of librarians' "comfort zone," we gain valuable insight on acquiring new skills that are necessary for improving our job performance. Furthermore, such workshops also provide us with the opportunity to promote the library to non-librarians.

Barriers to workshop participation

Along with the benefits offered by workshops, librarians may encounter barriers. Workshop participation often comes with a price: time and cost. Time is very precious

and as librarians' jobs evolve, many find themselves increasingly multi-tasking. Between staffing the reference desk, updating and maintaining the collection, developing relationships with individuals or groups outside the library and writing for publications, librarians may think they cannot afford time away from the office. Attending a workshop means librarians miss time from work. The actual workshop encompasses the majority of the time away but travel time to and from the event is also a consideration. In addition, workshops may last more than one day. The aforementioned ethnography workshop presented this challenge. Although travel was not necessary to attend the conference, two days of work were missed. Similarly with the management, gaming and instruction workshops, several days were spent out of the office. Afterwards, a majority of time was spent catching up.

Librarians need to take steps prior to the workshop to avoid feeling overwhelmed from missing time at work. They can reach out to colleagues to absorb some duties with the intention of returning the favor at a future time.   I work in a collegial environment and my coworkers are willing to help me when I attend a workshop because they understand the value of the topic and know I intend to utilize the content to improve our library. Another strategy used to catch up on missed work is designating time in the schedule upon returning from the workshop. One can literally block off time, close the door and tackle whatever task one wants to accomplish, whether it is writing emails to faculty in a liaison departments or reviewing materials for the library's collection. Time away from the office can be a barrier for some librarians choosing to participate in a workshop, but with proper planning, we can reduce the stress of missing time and take advantage of the learning opportunity.

The cost of attending a workshop may be another barrier that librarians encounter, preventing them from attending one. Some workshops are part of a conference fee, which increases the cost of attendance. Others are self-contained workshops offered by individual agencies which may be less than conference workshops, but still involve a fee to the library. Although the cost may be a challenge, librarians must weigh the monetary expense with respect to the importance of learning a new skill and its value to their job performance. In the case of budgetary disputes, librarians need to state their case for workshop participation and appeal to their supervisor for support. Institutional support for continuing education is important among academic librarians seeking opportunities to improve their job performance. A 1991 survey of Oklahoma librarians reported that almost half of the respondents, 48.6%, received support from their institution to participate in continuing education programs.[13] Where librarians received institutional support, their participation in activities such as workshops was 30% higher than their colleagues who did not receive support.[14] The researchers indicated that institutional support for professional development encourages librarians "to make greater contributions to their institutions and to the profession as a whole."[15]

At the same time, librarians need to demonstrate to supervisors that time spent at a workshop is justified. This can be followed up after a workshop, by dedicating time to demonstrate to colleagues and supervisors how to utilize or implement the topic or skill that was learned. If a librarian wants the support of the library administration, it is imperative to follow through and demonstrate the value of workshop participation. After the Immersion program, a presentation was given to the Director and colleagues of the top three "takeaways" gained from attending the workshop. In the presentation, topics

discussed included learning outcomes, learning styles and how the program helped participants create a network of teaching librarians that could be called on in the future. Colleagues found it informative and the Director learned how the experience contributed to my desire to be a more skilled academic librarian. An administrator's resistance to workshop participation may be more from not seeing the benefit of the expense rather than a lack of budgetary support or professional encouragement.

Conclusion

Securing an MLS may qualify one for a librarian position, but to be successful librarian one needs to dedicate time to additional learning. Thus, professional development is necessary.   As information has transformed, so too have librarians' duties and skills. The changing aspects of our work combined with the changes in how information is organized, accessed and presented require that we learn new skills. Simply put, we are not the librarians your parents knew.

Attending workshops helps librarians learn new skills, improve their job performances, and better serve their users. The "learning by doing" nature of workshops gives librarians the opportunity to practice the skill as it is taught. The active learning allows librarians the ability to retain the skill and apply it to their work. The vast number of topics covered in workshops facilitates librarians' ability to seek topics that interest them and enhance their job performance. The face-to-face format of workshops provides librarians the opportunity to interact with other participants and the instructor, creating a valuable network. A variety of library organizations at the national, state and local level offer workshops but librarians should not limit their learning to these groups. Attending workshops organized by groups outside their discipline will help them think differently

about topics while at the same time promote the interest and importance of the library to

non-librarians. Workshop participation entails a monetary cost as well as a time expense.

These expenditures should not deter librarians from attending workshops. Library

administrators need to realize the benefits of their employees attending workshops and

should encourage them to take advantage of these learning opportunities. Similarly,

librarians need to demonstrate to their supervisors and colleagues that the money and

time spent at the workshop is worthwhile. Workshops allow librarians to dedicate their

time and attention to learning new skills that will improve their job performance and

contribute to the positive development of the library.

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