TeachMeet - Librarians learning from each other

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Abstract

Teaching and training skills are a core requirement for many librarians (1)- whether the teaching is delivered to library users or to colleagues. Formal training in education, while included in some librarianship courses, is not yet available in all librarianship curriculums. Gaining teaching qualifications can be a costly and time consuming process, which might be low on the list of priorities for the employing organisation. Learning from colleagues and sharing experiences is a valuable way of improving practice (2). TeachMeet is an informal event in which like-minded practitioners share tools, techniques and tips they have tried themselves (3)Librarians at University of Cambridge have adapted TeachMeet for their own professional setting, sharing experiences and encouraging creative approaches to user education and continuing professional development. This paper will give a brief history of TeachMeet, how librarians adapted the concept, and how one TeachMeet event was evaluated by participants and organisers.

Keywords: TeachMeet, continuing professional development, collaboration, user education.

Introduction

Increasingly librarians are teaching information skills or training users how to use particular online resources: 71% use training skills, and 50% use teaching skills (1). In the same report 63% of respondents expect to be using teaching skills a lot or a little more in 10 years time. Like teachers, librarians often teach in isolation but often lack formal teacher training.

Finding time to explore new technologies can be difficult, even if that new technology could end up saving time in the longer term. Expectations are that use of ICT (information and communications technology), and the need for online communication skills and web publishing skills will be increasing over the next 10 years (1) Sometimes it's learning small things that can have a big impact on productivity, efficiency and effectiveness – and these small tips can come from local colleagues if there is time to have the conversations.

TeachMeet is an informal event in which like-minded practitioners share tools, techniques and tips they have tried themselves (3). Librarians at University of Cambridge have adapted TeachMeet for their own professional setting, sharing experiences and encouraging creative approaches to user education and continuing professional development.

History and features of TeachMeet

TeachMeet was born in 2005 when three Scottish educators (who'd previously only met online) met in an Edinburgh pub during a conference to talk about their work, and what they had been doing lately, particularly in relation to new technologies in education. Ewan McIntosh, David Noble and John Johnston so enjoyed and benefited from the experience that the following year at the same conference they invited others to join them. (4) The concept has been very popular amongst teachers – 20 events were held in 2009, another 20 in 2010, and 39 were scheduled to take place in the first six months of 2011 (numbers correct at time of going to press, April 2011(3)).

The definition of TeachMeet is "*an organised (but informal) meeting (in the style of an unconference) for teachers to share good practice, practical innovations and personal insights in teaching with technology*" (5).

Key features include:

- micro presentations (7 minutes)
- nano presentations (2 minutes)
- random selection of speakers
- relaxed, informal atmosphere to encourage sharing of ideas
- opportunity to meet up with colleagues
- attendees should be able to get online

Presenters are encouraged to showcase a tool or technique they have tried themselves – ideally it should have worked and proved successful, but even talking about unsuccessful attempts could be a useful thing to share. Presentation can be in any style or format but the original Teachmeets did not allow PowerPoint. The more creative the style of presentation the better. Questions are encouraged throughout the event.

There is no hierarchy of presentations in that there are no keynote speakers. In some of the larger TeachMeets (which can take place in parallel with conferences) there are over 100 attendees (6) and there may not be enough time for all the proposed presentations, so speakers are called up in a random order.

Clearly, getting a small group of people together in a pub to talk about their work is one thing, but getting up to 100 people in a room with adequate technology for them to present their ideas is another – both in terms of cost and organisation. The ethos of TeachMeet demands that the event is free to attend, but clearly sponsorship or some source of funding can be useful to cover costs which might include venue hire and refreshments. However sales pitches from the sponsors are not encouraged.

Registration and publicity for events was originally all done via a wiki (3) but some of the larger events have started to use online event registration tools.

By being cheap to organise, free to attend and local in outlook TeachMeets can offer a convenient opportunity to meet up with colleagues outside expensive conferences or large scale training events. This is especially useful for new staff or those who work in isolation. It's a great way to share innovation and best practice, or talk about small points of learning that have made a significant improvement to working practice. It's also a rare opportunity for those working in different sectors to come together. The

potential for "cross pollination" of ideas and skills is huge, and the insight that is gained can be significant.

Creating an opportunity for first time presenters to gain experience in public speaking in a "safe" environment can be invaluable. Those organizing the event will also gain and demonstrate planning skills which could be valuable for career development.

TeachMeets began life as a way for teachers, who generally work in isolated circumstances, to meet up and share best practice. How does this translate to librarians adopting it for their own use?

Adoption and Adaptation of TeachMeet by Librarians

TeachMeet for Librarians was born on July 3rd 2010 - that was the date on which this idea, previously only used by teachers, became known to librarians. The first Librarian TeachMeet took place in Cambridge on Monday 27th September 2010.

In July 2010, while in conversation with friends who are primary school teachers (teaching 4-12 year olds) the author (IK) heard about a TeachMeet they were planning to attend. This event sounded like a great opportunity to meet colleagues and share learning. July 2010 was, coincidentally, midway through a collaborative e-learning course that the author was participating in: 23 Things (7) Librarians across University of Cambridge were working through a set of online tools, each of which required a blog post about it. Because of the benefits of learning from others experience as much as one's own, all the participants were encouraged to read and comment on each other's blogs. This fostered a great online community and communication in a way that had not been happening previously.

This was how the author came to post an entry on her blog about the concept of TeachMeet (8). In the spirit of 23Things, other librarians from Cambridge commented on the post (CB, KB, CC, NP) and expressed interest. A meeting was arranged for early August. After that things moved fairly quickly:

- a date was picked, (27 September) and a time (5pm till 7pm)
- a venue (St John's College, Cambridge) - capacity 40 which would help maintain an intimate atmosphere
- a post on the TeachMeet wiki was set up (9)
- a twitter hashtag was created (#camlibtm)
- funding was sought from two local library organisations (Cambridge Library Group(10) and CILIP East of England (Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals) (11)
- light refreshments were to be provided

The event was publicised in early August using twitter and blog posts by all of the 5 organisers (12)(13)(14)(15)(16)(17) and was fully booked within a couple of weeks. What particularly impressed the organizers was the positive reaction to an event that was a completely new concept. The atmosphere of collaboration and community fostered by the 23Things programme contributed, but given that some librarians from outside Cambridge University also signed up, this cannot account for all the appeal.

At the first Librarian TeachMeet 50 people signed up to attend though attendance on the day was 40. There were 11 presentations covering the following topics

- 7 minute micro-presentations:
    - Library inductions using the Cephalonian method
    - Some informal facebook research
    - 'Getting them early': database training in inductions
    - Prezi: an improvement on Powerpoint?
- 2 minute nano-presentations:
    - From School to Uni – transition skills
    - Adobe Captivate video tutorials
    - The new LAT (Librarians as Teachers) Network: bring your thoughts and ideas for its development!
    - 'Learning Hub' - EFL's (University of Cambridge English Faculty) Library blog for online help/tutorials
    - Using Flashmeeting (videoconference) technology
    - Setting up a project blog – checklist
    - Solving three banner problems

All the presentations were filmed and made available via YouTube (18) and powerpoint slides were posted to SlideShare (19).

Feedback and comments

An interactive audience response system was used to gather brief feedback at the end of the evening. This was very positive, with 24% (n=9/40) of attendees enjoying the event "hugely" and 73% (n=29/40) thinking it was good fun. Only 2% (n=2/40) really did not not enjoy the event (20). Attendees were also asked which of the ideas presented they were most likely to try themselves.

Two weeks after the event itself a request for more reflective feedback was emailed to all attendees. Response rate to this questionnaire was 30/38 (87%) and included some very detailed and considered comments. Respondents were asked about their expectations prior to the event and whether those expectations were met (see Table 1)

Table 1: Examples of feedback regarding expectations of Cambridge Librarian TeachMeet

Q: What were your expectations?	Q: Do you feel these expectations were met, and if so, why?
A few teaching tips.	*Actually, got more out of it than that. The opportunities to chat with others were good.*
I thought it might be a bit "lecturey" and to do with teaching techniques.	*No, and I was pleased they weren't. I enjoyed it and found it much more interesting than I thought I would. I liked the variety of content and presentation style, and the brevity of each presentation.*
I'd been to a similar thing before -	*No, they were exceeded. I thought the length of*

but more tech & design orientated and private sector - and from that my expectations were really quite low.	*time slots were very good. I felt it helped the more nervous presenters to know that this would literally be over in a matter of minutes, literally, which in turn seemed to relax them.*
	The content was a good mixture and there was plenty of value to be had, even if someone was presenting something I was familiar with, I could either learn from a different perspective or digest some of what had gone before.
	And also, there's nothing wrong with networking and building on the budding relationships formed during Cam23.

When ask if they had made use of at least one of the ideas presented 28 of 35 respondents (80%) said yes, and many had explored more than one. For those who had not explored any of the ideas the consistent explanation was "*lack of time*".

When asked if they would consider speaking at the next event, 29/35 respondents (82%) said yes, often citing the relaxed atmosphere as a good way for newcomers to get experience at public speaking. However most respondents seemed doubtful they had anything of interest to share: a typical response was *"Yes, if I had something to speak about"*.

Perhaps it was inevitable that answers to the question "what should we consider before picking a venue for the next TeachMeet?" would cover all possible permutations:
"Can think of no improvements to the venue you had."
"Room needs to be bigger"
"It was fine for me, not intimidating to talk in, a lecture theatre would have been a bit alarming"
There were many constructive comments which were taken into account when planning the second Cambridge Library TeachMeet.

Planning of the Cambridge Librarians TeachMeet 2

The original planning group of five gained 4 new members - this was particularly useful since other commitments meant that some of the original team could not be so closely involved. TeachMeet proved a good way of gaining experience in event management which some members found valuable for their continuing professional development.

Features of the second Cambridge Library TeachMeet scheduled for 29th March 2011 included:

- bigger venue and later timing (6pm till 8pm)
- more participants (60 as opposed to 40 attendees at first TeachMeet)
- more food (sandwiches and cakes as opposed to tea and biscuits)
- less strict on timings (micro and nano were used as rough indicators)

- more informal seating (tables of 8, rather than formal rows of seating)
- more networking and opportunity for questions to the speakers
- broader range of attendees (greater balance between librarians from University of Cambridge, Anglia Ruskin University, school librarians from the local area and corporate librarians)
- sponsorship was given by the Schlumberger Research Centre (which also provided the venue) and the Arcadia Project at the University of Cambridge Library.

Some of the elements remained the same - true to the TeachMeet ethos:

- short and very short presentations
- random order of presentations
- encouragement of a "back channel" (twittering, blogging) facilitated by easy access to wifi
- speakers were filmed and posted on YouTube, slides were posted to slideshare

The event was fully booked within one day.

Owing to the momentum generated by the first TeachMeet the planning group decided to move away from the original TeachMeet wiki and set up their own website (21) and to use Eventbrite (22) as a way of managing the bookings

For the second event talks covered the following topics:

- Micro-presentation
  - o   Tagging the Academic Library: Student awareness, use and perceptions at Anglia Ruskin University (speaker: university library assistant and recent LIS graduate)
  - o   Debunking the myth of the Google Generation (speaker: school librarian)
  - o   Jigsaws: A first step to academic essay writing in schools (speaker: school librarian)
  - o   Library Posters: Engaging your students (speaker: university librarian)
  - o   Embedding Information Literacy in a Competency-Based Curriculum (speaker: school librarian)
- Nano-presentations
  - o   Never write lists again! (speaker: university librarian)
  - o   QR Codes (speaker: NHS (healthcare) librarian)
  - o   Keeping it simple! (speaker: university librarian)
  - o   Using special collections for teaching (speaker: university librarian)
  - o   Using Tellus Magic to make access to subscribed resources easier (speaker: corporate librarian)
  - o   TeuxDeux (speaker: university librarian)

Some of the feedback from the first TeachMeet indicated that more time for networking would be appreciated, however the organizers were conscious that some people do not find it easy just to strike up conversations. A structured or semi-structured way to help networking was required: "human bingo" was the answer. Attendees were given a bingo sheet when they arrived, and were encouraged to find a

different person who fulfilled each criterion on the sheet. Prizes were awarded for the winning sheet. (more details are available (13))

A brief evaluation was made at the end of the event using the interactive audience response system. There was a 100% positive response when asked "did you enjoy TeachMeet2?" Most people enjoyed the human bingo: 69% thought it was "great" (38 of 50 attendees) but it was not universally popular (4% (2 of 50 attendees) thought it was "rubbish"). Attendees were asked "Which of the ideas in the talks would you most like to try yourself?" Every presentation attracted at least one person's intention to explore further. More reflective evaluation and comments have been sought.

Librarian TeachMeet beyond Cambridge

Since the success of the first Librarian TeachMeet other librarians got to hear of it via the authors' blogs and Twitter. Even before the second Cambridge Librarian TeachMeet had taken place University of Huddersfield librarians held their own event (23).University librarians in Newcastle (24), Brighton (25) Liverpool (26) and London (27) have events scheduled. Sheffield, Bournemouth and Leicester are also planning to hold TeachMeets soon.

In most cases the impetus has come from academic librarians, but the museum and archives sector have adopted the idea too: TeachMeet Museums (28) took place in February 2011.

A public Google calendar has been created listing all the TeachMeets planned (29). While each TeachMeet will likely have it's own twitter hashtag, tweets talking about TeachMeets in general can use #LibTeachM.

Conclusions
TeachMeets are an effective and inexpensive way to enable sharing of experience and networking of colleagues locally. They support continuing professional development for the organisers as well as the attendees, and can be a supportive environment to encourage first time presenters. Librarians around Britain are adapting them for their own ends and gaining huge benefits.

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