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Library Collaboration: International Perspectives. An Interview with Dr. Shimelis Assefa, Associate Professor, Library and Information Science, University of Denver

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Abstract

In conversation with Janet Lee, Dean of Libraries, Regis University, Dr. Shimelis Assefa, University of Denver, discusses aspects of library collaboration from an international perspective that cover both challenges and opportunities. Insights on collaboration in library science education are also offered.

Keywords: Ethiopia; International librarianship; Library education; University of Denver

Introduction

In *Collaborative Librarianship's* continuing series of interviews with members of the CL Advisory Board, Janet Lee, a founding member of the *Journal* team and copy editor, queries Dr. Assefa on various aspects of library collaboration in an international context and how collaboration might be addressed in library science education.

Dr. Shimelis Assefa's academic and professional journey began at Addis Ababa University, in Ethiopia. While in Ethiopia, Assefa worked in different capacities, including Science Librarian, Lecturer, Systems Librarian, and Chief Medical Librarian. He also worked as a consultant for academic institutions, international organizations, healthcare institutions, and private insurance companies in areas of systems development and backbone internet networking. After completing his Ph.D. in information sciences from the University of North Texas, Denton, in 2007, he joined the faculty at the University of Denver Library and Information Science program, a position he has held since January 2008. Assefa's teaching and research activities are anchored around two fundamental notions in the field of library and information science: 1) the nexus of human cognitive agency and the bibliographic universe, and 2) the interaction between work system and technology system. In both research strands, Dr. Assefa has published

peer-reviewed articles and presented papers at regional, national and international conferences. Dr. Assefa is a member of the American Society for Information Science & Technology and the Association of Library and Information Science Education.



CL: As a general, introductory question, what drew you to the field of librarianship?

Assefa: Well, this is an interesting question. I would say I was drawn to the field by accident. As freshmen at Addis Ababa University (AAU), in Ethiopia, students don't declare degrees. We just take common courses. By the end of the sec-

ond semester in June, all freshmen students go to a big hall where department chairs and school deans across campuses converge to talk about their respective degree programs. It is at this point that I and several of the colleagues who sat next to me listened to a Dean from the School of Information Studies for Africa who was breaking the news that the University is opening for the first time in the history of the country a program in Library and Information Science (major) and computer science (minor). The Dean, Mr. Getachew Birru, not only talked about the program, he went on to explain the significance for graduates from this program as trailblazers in leapfrogging the country to the information society. It is then that my colleagues and I decided to join the program. For me personally, listening to the dean about the country's transformation to an information society in an information age was quite captivating and I did not want to miss the opportunity to be among the first batch of select graduates.

CL: What was your path to becoming a professor of library science at the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver?

Assefa: Right after my undergraduate degree, I was hired by AAU Libraries. My initial appointment was to work in the Science Library as a user services librarian. This was followed by a systems librarian position at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, two positions I held for four years. While at JFK Memorial Library, the main university library system, I was given an opportunity to study for a MA degree in Information Science at the School of Information Studies for Africa, at the same University, AAU. Upon completing my MA, I was promoted to the position of chief medical librarian at the main teaching hospital and the *de facto* national medical library of Ethiopia. My time as chief medical librarian was very fulfilling and rewarding. In that capacity, I received three international scholarships to study for short terms spanning two to six months. These included study at the University of East Anglia (sponsored by the British Council); international training in medical informatics at the University of Natal, South Africa (sponsored by New England Medical Center and Tufts University); and a backbone internetworking fellowship at San Jose

State University (SJSU) (sponsored by the Internet Society). During the summer of 1999, the fellowship at SJSU gave me the opportunity to visit several of the tech giants in the Silicon Valley area. Aside from the formal training, meeting renowned individuals such as Vint Cerf, who is widely known as the father of the Internet, was quite an experience for me. It is at this point that I said I have to come back to the U.S. and pursue my doctoral degree. In 2003, I finally started my PhD studies at the University of North Texas, Denton. When I was about to defend my dissertation, as is customary for doctoral candidates, I started applying for faculty positions at as many universities as there were openings, including the University of Denver. I accepted a faculty position in the LIS program, Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver, a tenure-track position I have held since January 2008.

CL: As a library professional who knows very well the conditions in the United States and in Ethiopia, what are some of the different ways opportunities for library collaboration unfold in these two countries?

Assefa: It is interesting I am asked this question. The idea of content divide – that least-developed countries in Africa, including Ethiopia, have limited access to the scientific and technical global knowledge base and can contribute very little to it – is a research agenda near and dear to me. This major issue, I believe, provides a great opportunity for libraries in the United States and in Ethiopia to collaborate. As readers know, PubMed Central (PMC) is a free full-text archive of millions of pieces of biomedical and life sciences journal literature hosted by National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health (NLM/NIH). As of today, only Canada and Europe (initially UK PMC) have copied the complete archive of PMC and they now have their own versions (Canada PMC and Europe PMC). In the same vein, I was wondering why not an Africa PMC? Interestingly, four years ago I inquired about the possibility of an Africa PMC and exchanged emails with Dr. David Lipman, the Director of the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) at the U.S. National Institutes of Health. For various technical and legal issues, I was told NLM/NIH



has stopped entertaining such requests. I mention this precisely because these are the kinds of resource sharing schemes on which libraries in the United States and Ethiopia (and Africa in general) can work together.

In addition, as we all know, libraries in the United States are acquiring more and more digital resources as well as building digital libraries commonly called “institutional repositories.” A large number of the digital resources that U.S. libraries subscribe to have open access options where copies can be deposited in respective libraries’ repository systems. I personally believe with the right framework and processes put in place, libraries in the U.S. can share these openly available resources to libraries in Ethiopia, thereby playing a tremendous role in bridging what I call the content divide.

Another important area of collaboration can be in areas of professional development, skills transfer, and visitor exchange programs—in both directions.

CL: In what ways do Ethiopia (or Africa, generally) and the United States encounter hindrances to library collaboration?

Assefa: I believe the major hindrances come from lack of institutional culture to openness, lack of adequate financial resources, incompatible library systems (including integrated library solutions, hardware, and software), language, and poor technical infrastructure on the part of countries in Africa, including Ethiopia. For libraries in the United States, I believe the source of the hindrance stems from lack of understanding of the continent of Africa, in general. Africa is a huge continent and home for close to a billion people with a wide range of climates, languages, political systems, and levels of economic development. Moreover, libraries in the U.S. should not see their counterparts in Africa (including Ethiopia), only as dumping grounds for old and weeded materials. There is no doubt libraries in Africa can benefit greatly from meaningful and sustainable collaboration. If collaboration is built on the framework of partnership, libraries in the U.S. can also benefit from libraries in Africa by getting copies of local materials and other knowledge outputs that are coming

out of Africa. This type of library collaboration is not yet very common.

CL: Further, along this line, what could librarians in the United States learn from Ethiopian librarians about library collaboration, and what do you think Ethiopian librarians could learn from Americans about library collaboration?

Assefa: Strong alliance and consortia arrangements, document delivery and ILL schemes, strong professional associations at local, regional and national level, and a series of professional development opportunities are some of the things that librarians in Ethiopia could learn from Americans about library collaboration. On the other hand, librarians in the United States can learn from their counterparts in Ethiopia about library collaboration in areas around internationalization efforts, collaborative home-grown systems for automation, union catalogs, collaborative acquisitions, and, I believe, about doing more with little resources.

CL: Collaborative Librarianship is an open access journal. What is your sense of the importance of open access to scholars in the developing world? Should (and how should) scholars be encouraged to publish in open access journals?

Assefa: I am an ardent proponent of open access. Not only does open access offer wider and broader dissemination of scholarly outputs, it is also an engine for speedier diffusion of knowledge and innovation. Since the mid-17th century when the first journal appeared in Europe, the scholarly communication model has been dominated by a slow and lengthy publishing process that hindered maximum impact and wider dissemination of research outputs. Despite its limitations, no doubt the print journal has served well for over 300 years. With advances in Internet technology, the web has now become the chief medium to easily and effortlessly publish and disseminate and consume content. Most publishers now have some provisions for scholars to deposit and archive their work in their institutional repositories. According to SHERPA/RoMEO, a database that tracks publisher policies towards open access, out of 1,546



publishers in its database, 72% formally allow some form of self-archiving (<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo>).

Similar organizations, such as Research4Life (<http://www.research4life.org/about/>), a public-private partnership, are working to close the knowledge gap between industrialized and developing countries. Through its four programs in health (HINARI), agriculture (AGROA), environment (OARE), and innovation (ARDI), Research4Life is providing free or low cost access to over 44,000 peer-reviewed international scientific journals, books, and databases to developing countries.

These two initiatives and programs are clear indications that open access and collaboration at an international scale is allowing developing countries, including Ethiopia, gain access to critical scientific and technical literature that otherwise is beyond reach. For this reason I applaud *Collaborative Librarianship* for embracing open access as its *modus operandi*.

Finally, it is important that scholars are encouraged and supported in publishing in open access avenues. Academic and research institutions should follow the examples of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences that unanimously voted to implement a school-wide open access policy in 2008. Although several other schools at Harvard and other universities followed suit, embracing open access as a matter of policy is not widely and uniformly implemented across academic and research institutions in the U.S. The fact that major federal funding agencies (such as NIH) have adopted open access to non-classified research outputs that resulted from public money shows significant recognition of the importance of open access and the wider implications for researchers globally. Yes, it is important to require faculty to publish in open access journals and that is probably the first step in promoting open access journals. Equally, it is important to build an underlying policy and technical infrastructure for faculty and researchers to embrace open access. For example, the reservation that many faculties have about open access journals is due to perceived low quality and adverse implication for tenure and promotion. This can be eliminated if schools and uni-

versities adopt and embrace open access as a matter of policy. The article processing charges (APC) that many open access journals ask of authors is prohibitive and something needs to be managed either through universities and research institutions supporting their researchers or through university libraries working together with open access publishers, with an objective also to lower the APC.

CL: As a specialist in understanding knowledge structures, are there some knowledge structures that are better suited to thinking and acting collaboratively, or do other human factors determine the nature and scope of collaboration, library or otherwise?

Assefa: Ideally, if we take the human factors, institutional culture included, out of research, I believe collaboration can happen across disciplines and knowledge structures of any stripe. It is true, because of the nature of activities involved, the fields of science, technology, and medicine (STM) are heavily collaborative and are better suited to collaboration. However, the same level of collaboration can happen in the social sciences, the humanities, and the liberal arts in so far as scholars in these domains recognize and are aware of the benefit of collaboration. Libraries and the field of library and information science are not an exception. In library schools (including the University of Denver's Library and Information Studies), we use area libraries, museums, archives, and information agencies as our laboratories for practicums, service learning and even course assignments. I strongly believe that we prepare competent and knowledgeable professionals if we bridge the gulf between theory and practice. For this, collaboration between libraries and library schools is of paramount importance. It is true, the very first step toward collaboration is the willingness and commitment to go beyond our comfort zone and to see the other party as equal rather than rival.

CL: As one who teaches in a school of library and information science program, does library collaboration surface as an important issue among students or among the teaching faculty?



Assefa: Yes, collaboration is an important theme that is often discussed in classes and students are encouraged and given an opportunity to hone their skills. In group assignments and projects, and in class discussions, collaboration recurs regularly. In a more systematic manner, the DU LIS program and individual faculties infuse collaboration in course activities as critical 21st century skills that students need to master. As part of a systematic review of students' progress in the program, students complete self-reflective assessments on professional dispositions and several other dimensions, including interpersonal effectiveness and communication.

CL: In your interaction with students who are launching library careers, does collaboration factor into their values at all, and if so, do you think this emerges at an early stage or does a realization of the value of collaboration arise more later on as one becomes acclimated in a real-world library position?

Assefa: At DU LIS students have been made aware of the significance of collaboration and team work right from the very beginning when they attend general orientation, a few days before fall classes start. In the course of their study, as I said previously, students are expected to complete group projects that are intended to expose them to learn to work with others.

CL: Are there ways that collaboration could be better (or even newly) emphasized in library science programs in the United States, or do you think this is better left to one's own personal or professional interest after one graduates from library school?

Assefa: I believe there is room for further improvement to better emphasize the state of collaboration across LIS schools in the United States. Aside from the i-school and l-school dichotomy (that in my opinion is territorial), all ALA accredited MLIS granting institutions are bound by the same mission to produce well-rounded professionals who will advance learning and education through information services, regardless of their positions or where they might be working. LIS programs in the United States (while maintaining their respective identities)

can still work together to share ideas and processes to define and re-define what it means to prepare a library and information professional in today's globalized world. Such collaboration efforts can be reflected through the type, nature, and number of courses taught, practical skills emphasized, and so forth. A quick glance at the LIS courses across ALA accredited MLIS offering institutions in North America reveals that the content and types of courses in the core and electives are widely different.

I am sure the opportunity for students to actively participate in local, regional and national level professional associations and student chapters are important mechanisms by which students get to learn collaboration. I am also of the view that this should not be left to an individual's preference or to begin to think about collaboration only after graduation.

