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Assistance across Borders: American Academic Libraries in Afghanistan and Qatar

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Abstract

A recent outreach project brought together the [American University of Afghanistan](#) and four world renowned US universities with branch campuses in Qatar's Education City. Librarians in Qatar often collaborate with each other, but this unusual effort was the first time their collaboration reached across international borders to extend assistance to another country. The experience became a cultural exchange that brought together these dramatically different worlds. By utilizing technologies that make connecting and collaborating so easy these days, four librarians with backgrounds in public and technical services worked together to share their expertise, culminating in a learning visit by an AUAF library assistant to Doha. The sharing of skills and knowledge was a wonderful experience on many levels and made a distinct difference in a part of the world that needs and wants so much to change.

Keywords: Collaborative outreach; learning visit; cultural exchange

Introduction

In March 2009, senior administrators from the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) made contact with the Dean of Libraries at Texas A&M, who in turn volunteered the librarian at the branch campus in Qatar to assist the library at AUAF with staff training. It wasn't clear how it would work, but it seemed simple enough to make contact via email and initiate conversation to determine what was needed. Through a series of exchanges between AUAF Library Director, Mike Hanson, and Texas A & M University at Qatar Library Director, Carole Thompson, the details of a collaborative effort were outlined.

Initial conversations via email, Skype calls and web conferencing had identified their need to perform cataloging, both original and copied from sources. Resources in the library consist of a mix of donated, down-

loaded and purchased books, serials, government documents, non-governmental technical reports and other miscellanea, in print and electronic formats. With limited access to MARC records, a higher proportion of these resources required original cataloging. Impediments faced in the AUAF library were the lack of trained, experienced library staff and virtually no training opportunities in Afghanistan.

Every project benefits from collaborative input, therefore other librarians in Education City were contacted and invited to join the effort. Two of these librarians in Education City were originally from Iran and their first language was Farsi, one of the languages also spoken in Afghanistan. The language commonality would prove invaluable. The histories of Iran and Afghanistan are closely related, dating from the earliest days of the Persian Empire. The two prevalent native languages, Iranian Farsi and



(L to R) AUAF Library staff Laila Azimi, Stephanie Schmitt, Mike Hanson, Hamayoun Ghafoori, Fardeen Safdari, Wali Akhtari

Afghan Dari, would enable conversation when limited English skills proved to be confusing during explanations of complex cataloging concepts and procedures. Additionally, the former library director from AUAF, Jim Malone, had joined an Education City university and was also interested in this effort. Thus, a project team was born.

At AUAF, Mike Hanson had joined the library as director to head the small team, which included two local staff. Laila Azimi had joined the library early in its startup, and worked with Jim Malone during his tenure as director in 2007. Afghan citizen, Hamayoun Ghafoori, joined the staff in 2008 to work in technical services, having gained experience working with Non-Governmental Organization libraries in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The AUAF library had implemented Koha, an open source integrated library system, on a local Windows workstation. Soon after Mike's arrival as director, the ILS had become corrupted and the library lost all use

of the system for nearly two months. With no in-library technical expertise or IT support from an administration unaware of the technological sophistication required to support an academic library, Mike contracted with LibLime, Inc. to host an updated version on servers in the US. After the conversion from the self-installed version to the commercially supported online version was completed by LibLime, remote access to the OPAC, circulation, cataloging and other modules, was made possible. This would underpin the hands-on training in Doha, and enable cataloging of resources directly in the AUAF bibliographic database.

The greatest need was to provide training for copy and original cataloging, but how could that be accomplished given the distance, security issues in Afghanistan, requirements for travel and the lack of budget to support travel? Moving beyond simple emails, conference calls using Skype, a voice over IP software, helped facilitate group communication. To some extent, screen shots and simple communication were helpful, but there was a desire on the part of AUAF to send the technical services staff person for hands on training, as a jump start to the longer term support of the library project.

While only a three hour flight separated Kabul and Doha, other hurdles existed. In a country where many citizens flee to surrounding countries as refugees, it is not common to possess a passport. In Qatar, where coming and going is a way of life, everything begins and ends around passports, visas, and entry and exit permits. This collaborative effort needed a boost to move past these obstacles.

In working together, the four participating librarians discussed the possible roles of each of their universities, while staying within institutional policies. For instance, CMUQ could easily sponsor the visit visa, while underwriting the cost of meals was more easily supported at GUSFSQ. The cost of airfare was the largest problem. Members of the team contacted Reach Out To Asia, a sister organization in the Qatar Foundation portfolio, and a relief and rebuilding organization whose nine primary target countries include Afghanistan. When contacted, the ROTA staff was open to considering a proposal, although the project was outside their usual scope, and their involvement in libraries is limited in their target countries. A grant proposal was written and sent to ROTA, who agreed to fund and arrange the air travel between Kabul and Doha. In turn, AUAF library staff agreed to reciprocate as future contacts when ROTA staff investigate

and initiate support projects in Afghanistan. By hosting Hamayoun in our homes, the AUAF library was able to save many dollars for much needed materials. In July, the assistance crossed borders with a training visit by an AUAF library staff member to Doha, Qatar.

Background

Qatar is a small but well-funded Middle Eastern country in the Persian Gulf with a commitment to providing assistance to developing countries in the region, particularly in the area of education. To this end, a non-profit foundation was set up in 1995 to develop education in Qatar. Headed by Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, Qatar Foundation has brought six universities into its Education City, as part of the mission to develop and support education, science and community development. In addition to the universities, other educational projects include: Qatar Academy, a kindergarten through secondary school, the Learning Center for special needs children, an Academic Bridge Program, the Faculty of Islamic Studies, the Heritage Library, and a central library currently under development, along with several other special purpose units.

The idea to establish the American University of Afghanistan began in 2002, based on the success of other American Universities around the world. By 2006, supported in large part by USAID, the American University of Afghanistan progressed from idea to reality. The initial class of students began in March 2006 to improve their English language and study skills in foundation courses. As "the only independent, private, not-for-profit, non-sectarian institution of higher learning in Afghanistan," AUAF now offers programs in business administration, information technology, and general studies and it will graduate its first class in 2010.



Entrance to the University and its administration building, originally Soviet built and occupied.

In early 2009, the library had five staff members: a professionally trained librarian /director and four local staff with limited experience and no formal library education.

Academic libraries often rely on paraprofessional staff or student assistants in technical services to complete copy cataloging, while supported by trained professional staff. However, the situation in the developing countries of Africa and Asia is very different. Libraries are often managed and run without formally trained personnel, and local community members are given only minimal instruction in operational tasks. Very few professional-level library school programs exist outside of the developed world, and current technology requires currency of training and familiarity with best practices. In developing regions, inadequate budgets often keep facilities and services at minimal levels.

This can be contrasted to the rapid development of western university campuses and their academic libraries in the oil rich Middle Eastern countries in the last ten years. This has introduced professional staff and access to extensive online information resources into the region, and stimulated an increase of interest in library services.

The Learning Visit

While the initial collaboration was useful for setting a context and understanding the issues, it became obvious that faster progress would be made if a learning visit could be arranged for several days of one-on-one training. Remote access to the AUAF Koha system had been made possible during the conversion to the LibLime installation, which would allow training to include hands-on cataloging in the AUAF catalog. Hamayoun Ghafoori, responsible for cataloging and other technical services, traveled to Doha to enhance his skills and benefit from the in-person training and mentoring. He had attended high school in Peshawar, Pakistan, and completed English training and limited library training courses offered through the USAID/Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Project (APAP) in Kabul. His work experience in libraries was principally in non-governmental aid organizations and the Afghanistan National Assembly Library.

The primary learning goals for the two-week visit centered around providing the opportunity to observe the academic libraries operating in Qatar's Education City, and covering the principles and practice of original and copy cataloging, which were taught at the libraries of Georgetown University School of Foreign Service (GUSFSQ) and Texas A&M University at Qatar (TA-

MUQ). Some additional time was left for examining basic library operations and use of resources, particularly electronic, to be overseen by the libraries of Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (CMUQ) and Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar (WCMC-Q). In determining how training would take place, tasks were not assigned so much as identified and owned by participating librarians, whose skills were fairly evenly divided between technical and public services, technology, language and interpersonal skills. The librarians with the most cataloging and technical skills devised the training program, other librarians filled in by training in access and reference services, as well as arranging housing, transportation and cultural events.

Any spare time during the visit was to be filled with visiting other libraries, speaking to the community members at Education City about the status of education in Afghanistan, radio and newspaper interviews. Unplanned activities provided a means of carrying on satisfying and interesting communications in a mix of English, Arabic, Farsi and Dari through dinners, lunches, and museum visits.

Before the visit began, Arthur Smith, OCLC Middle East Support Services Director, was consulted to set up an account and authorization code for the AUAF library to access Connexion, OCLC's original and copy cataloging interface, and to test the import and export processes from OCLC to their Koha system. OCLC offers one year free access for new libraries in less advantaged countries. The librarians in Education City tested access to the AUAF online Koha catalog, to gauge how hands-on training in the bibliographic database could be handled, and to gain familiarity with the functional operation of the Koha system, the import process, item creation, and maintenance routines.

Technical Training

Hamayoun Ghafoori, the AUAF cataloger, was essentially self taught but very motivated and quick. He needed an opportunity to observe a mature and well-functioning library and, also, to obtain some rudimentary instruction in copy cataloging and integrated library systems.

Throughout the sessions with Hamayoun, the importance of face-to-face conversation in the Farsi (Persian) language was essential and allowed for immediate feedback both in verbal and non-verbal communication. While most of the technical vocabulary of librarianship was spoken in English, Farsi was used to contextualize the conversation by presenting descriptive terms and sentences that added detail to the information, allowing discussion of technical terminology and concepts in greater detail. Farsi was used both to contextualize the technical details and to create a backup context where a higher degree of communication comfort was possible, reducing stress and improving understanding. The combination of the face-to-face interaction and discourse in Farsi also permitted a greater degree of flexibility in providing feedback from Hamayoun to Zoreh and Bijan, so that additional information could be added as necessary until a sufficient level of understanding was achieved.

The one-on-one training began with an introduction to the Library of Congress and MARC, and systematic library procedures, including various methods of acquisition, with some emphasis on using book selection profiles to support the university curriculum. Discussion introduced a variety of vendor types, differentiating between new and used book sellers, serials resellers and how to evaluate and select commercial vendors. This led to extensive discussions of how best to create or load records from the various sources, whether from OCLC PromptCat, book vendors' databases or libraries with specialized Afghan collections.

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Zoreh Raen Frouzan (GUSFSQ library cataloger) and Hamayoun Ghafoori (AUAF)

After introducing the bibliographic, holdings and item records, Zoreh provided an overview of adding new records in an Innovative Interfaces' Millennium system, demonstrating the step-by-step process of identifying, selecting, exporting, importing and building bibliographic, holdings and item level records. This training was followed by an overview of the workflow at GUSFSQ library technical services that included unpacking the shipments, checking invoices, uploading records and invoice details and physical processing. Other workflows covered included batch import from OCLC, bibliographic tools, AACR2, LC classification and assignment of subject headings, explaining the relationship of the bibliographic records to the OPAC display, and reviewing acquisition workflow from selection to processing of physical materials.

Containing approximately 1000 records of primarily print materials, the AUAF bibliographic catalog had undergone a conversion by the LibLime technical staff from the manually catalogued local records to a current installation of a commercially supported online version of Koha. As with any conversion, cleanup projects were identified to

eliminate inappropriate data characters of unknown origin. For example, the string 'frey50' was found in many of the brief records following the main entry 100 data and was determined to require manual deletion, as was diacritics cleanup, such as 'Garc a M arquez.'

Examining the AUAF catalog showed that the OPAC did not display all the library holdings and several consultations with the LibLime trainer helped resolve this issue before the start of the training visit. In the OCLC Connexion software, local save files were created for AUAF staff use while importing records, and several macros were established for different item types in Connexion to make the copy cataloging process easier for the AUAF staff.

Texas A&M librarians took a completely hands-on approach, by connecting directly into the AUAF catalog to perform original and copy cataloging of records. Several emails were sent to the Koha trainer at LibLime to correct problems with records, and to report problems to the technical staff setting up the Koha installation for AUAF remotely. Several formats were reviewed,



Carole Thompson, TAMUQ library director, introducing Hamayoun Ghafoori who spoke about education in Afghanistan

including monographs, serials, government documents, and media, so that a broad perspective would be developed. All pertinent fields in the MARC record were described. Hamayoun was required to catalog several records, and to correct each fixed and variable field and tag. This hands-on practice permitted ongoing questions and answers in order to reinforce his experience editing records. Online artifacts were downloaded and several pages printed for use as examples, then manual original cataloging was completed by Hamayoun with prompting by the TAMUQ cataloger. A step-by-step walk through reinforced the procedure that would be needed to clean up inaccurate records and bad data.

Additionally, several key Z39.50-accessible library catalogs were added to facilitate record import, particularly those with strong Afghan document collections such as Library of Congress, Melvyl at California Digital Library, University of Arizona, University of Nebraska-Omaha and Columbia University, as well as having WorldCat as a resource and model.

The cultural collaboration

As part of the grant award, ROTA had requested that Hamayoun deliver a presentation to the Education City community about education in Afghanistan. Despite the timing during vacation season when Qatar is all but deserted, nearly 30 people came to listen to the descriptions of rebuilding schools and education in Afghanistan, where opportunities are limited but growing due to the intense interest of local populations supported by international efforts.

The diverse international community in Qatar, where nearly 80% of the country's population is expatriates, is globally minded and intensely interested in the events in the immediate and broader Middle East and Central Asian region. Much effort is expended by people in Qatar to be a part of solutions that affect lives in positive and productive ways. The message that Hamayoun Ghafoori brought was hopeful, and well received by educators and others.



Typical village school in Afghanistan

Interest grew rapidly as the word of the scheduled presentation spread. QF Radio (Qatar Foundation) staff requested an hour-long interview be scheduled with Hamayoun. Reflecting on his time as AUAF library director, Jim Malone added his thoughts and perspective to describe his experience there. A local Doha newspaper, *Peninsula*, featured the project in an article not only as a current event, but also to highlight the project as an achievement that demonstrates Qatar's global perspective and interest beyond its borders.



Hamayoun Ghafoori at QF Radio interview

To supplement the academic and professional activities, various tours and jaunts were planned to show Hamayoun around Doha, where a burgeoning cultural movement has introduced a Museum of Islamic Art and a restored and expanded traditional souq (marketplace). Also, no activity in Qatar is complete without a long and convivial meal. Zoreh Frouzan prepared traditional

Iranian dishes during the visit to introduce the group to the delights of Persian cuisine.

On the personal level, project participants worked comfortably together and established a bond that grew beyond the scope of the workplace contact, scheduling social events and engaging in discussions that developed ideas and possibilities. Having Hamayoun 'home-stay' heightened the sense that the project had taken on a more human, personal level, that our homes and lives were open to him as well.

Post visit and continuing collaboration

An unexpected outcome of the visit was the identification and transfer of a library security gate and sensitizing/desensitizing unit worth nearly \$30,000 USD, no longer used at the GUSFSQ library and awaiting disposal, but much needed in the AUAF library to address the porous situation at the library front doors. Not knowing if such equipment would withstand the extreme environmental conditions without air conditioning or heating to temper the blazing summer heat and chilly winter snows not to mention the omnipresent dust that permeates into every interstice in Kabul buildings, such a purchase was out of the question. By arranging for a wooden container to surround the units, the shipment of equipment arrived undamaged via air freight, has been operating effectively since, and has improved the operation and security of the library.

Additional contact has occurred since the training visit through Skype web calls, emails and questions posted to the Google group, Friends of the AUAF Library (friends-auaf-library@googlegroups.com) to allow broader collaboration. Starting a long-distance "Friends" group using email can provide 'armchair aid' and support for an otherwise under-resourced library staff in need of advice. Mike Hanson occasionally posts questions to the group seeking advice on how others might approach an issue the AUAF library is facing. For instance, when the library faculty committee was

struggling with the issue of cinematic and documentary DVDs that show scenes inimical to Afghanistan's prevailing conservative ethos, the answers to Mike Hanson's query to the Friends group served to support the collection development and evaluation policy that had originally garnered harsh and impassioned criticism, with validation from librarians operating in nearby countries of similar conservative environments. It is often librarians from the newer startup Middle Eastern campuses who answer, sharing their experiences and wisdom, as they have recently pondered the same types of issues.

A cataloger consultant, Sarah Ziebel, was contracted to spend three months at the AUAF library to work on the backlog and to continue the training of library staff. Now back in New York but continuing to work with AUAF staff remotely, Sarah accomplished more than expected. Based on her contributions and accomplishments, AUAF library gained permission to hire Stephanie Schmitt, as a full-time original cataloger/systems librarian in a permanent staff position.

Progress is incremental, but a collaborative effort can fill a gap, provide impetus, or jumpstart a solution. Says Mike Hanson, "From training Hamayoun to getting a consultant to hiring a full-time original-cataloger/systems librarian, I think the future of this library is pretty well set now." Jim Malone, planning to visit Kabul again for AUAF's first graduation in May 2010, may be able to initiate arrangements for another learning visit from an AUAF library staff member or to provide 'training the trainers' style instruction for information discovery and retrieval using AUAF resources and equipment.

ROTA staff were also pleased with the outcomes of the project after receipt of the assessment documentation. Lamis Sabra, ROTA Program Manager for Develop ROTAsia and responsible for developing projects inside Afghanistan reported, "Once our Connect ROTAsia activities begin in Afghanis-

tan we may be able to add activities relevant to the ROTA knowledge network." The exchange fits well into the vision and mission set by Qatar's rulers to assist educational efforts in Afghanistan. Hamayoun agreed to act as a liaison for ROTA staff in their future efforts to make contact with primary and secondary schools in Kabul, and to assist them when they travel to Kabul to initiate projects.

Communication has continued between all, singly or in groups, principally through email and Skype calls, and not only on the professional level. The personal relationships have strengthened, and engagement has matured to commitment.

Conclusion

Some projects begin and end without inspiration, but this one exceeded anything originally envisioned. One unexpected consequence was the heightened awareness by AUAF administration caused by the training process, the grant awarded by Reach Out To Asia, and the resulting radio and newspaper interviews. The attention paid by others to the AUAF library's achievements, the complexities of the tasks and the difficulties faced convinced the administration to agree to a short-term consultant and ultimately, a full-time experienced systems/cataloging librarian.

Paying it forward, the AUAF library is now beginning to look at how they can provide outreach, beyond merely making newly cataloged indigenous research reports accessible or by making modest book donations to other Kabul libraries. The area of knowledge transfer is the most important contribution that could be passed along and shared, by visiting other libraries in Kabul to offer advice, opinions and views on professional matters, and in the future perhaps, to offer structured training on technical service topics to interested Afghan libraries and librarians, with the goal of creating accredited courses and an officially recognized program.

Using collaboration as an interface to build common ground, it is possible for communities of librarians to contribute their knowledge beyond the confines of national borders to reinforce, encourage and sustain those in the field now working to construct a new history of achievement in spite of the destruction caused by decades of war or poverty. Sharing the wealth from our developed countries may be as easy and simple as sharing our knowledge using current internet technologies.

There are a number of locations where people are developing education programs and libraries, where a group of collaborators with expertise, interest and a spirit of curiosity and generosity could lend a virtual hand by offering advice. Startup efforts such as the American University of Afghanistan are beginning in Iraq, Serbia, and other Asian and African countries.

And at the heart of it, the hearts of librarians, in all the right places.

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