

Creating communities of practice: A shared culture of professional development

Amanda Binder

University of North Carolina Charlotte

Lareese Hall

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Abstract

Engagement in professional development activities is an expectation for many library faculty and staff. The ways in which librarians grow as professionals has a direct impact on their work within their institutions, as well as the development of the library profession as a whole.

Typically, professional development is encouraged and reinforced through a system of reappointment and promotion that is often measured by individual activities. The University of North Carolina Charlotte's J. Murrey Atkins Library is field testing a model of engagement that redefines professional development as a collaborative endeavor that supports individual exploration and growth while, potentially, impacting the profession. The focus of this new model is a philosophy of collective action and community building through the establishment and growth of library-initiated communities of practice.

Keywords

- Collaboration
- Communities of Practice
- Leadership
- Management
- Mentorship
- Organizational Change
- Professional Development

Introduction

Within academic institutions, libraries are interdisciplinary entities that function to support the teaching, learning, and research mission of an institution. Part of that institutional support manifests in the continued development of individuals who work directly (and indirectly) with library users.

Library faculty and staff are expected to engage in activities for their own professional and personal growth. This activity is, generally, referred to as "professional development" although it is defined differently depending on the audience.

Using the communities of practice developed at the J. Murrey Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina (UNC) Charlotte as a case study, this paper highlights a collaborative approach to professional development grounded in a model of engagement that looks beyond traditional participation opportunities such as professional membership, conference participation, and institutional committees and groups. The focus, instead, is on the future of the profession of librarianship and how library faculty and staff can shape their own scholarship and professional growth. Growth and learning can be collaborative, active, and engaged activities that develop the individual, foster community, and redefine the profession.

The following questions guide this discussion:

- What is professional development and how do we define it for ourselves, our libraries, and the library profession?
- How are libraries creating cultures of professional development that support personal, academic, and institutional growth?
- What are the opportunities and challenges in redefining professional development as a collaborative and experimental practice that enhances the library profession?

What is professional development and how do we define it for ourselves, our libraries, and the library profession?

Individual development within the context of daily jobs, future aspirations, and activities outside of traditional library work, can and should contribute to the profession. In a 2014 opinion piece for Library Journal online, Cheryl LaGuardia explains one of the challenges libraries face in addressing professional development: “The phrase ‘professional development’ is used liberally by librarians. It’s used so liberally and in so many different contexts that I’m not really sure just what it is anymore.”

Professional development often relies on individual engagement and recognition as a measure of success. To reconsider and restructure this thinking, libraries must support creative professional practice modeled and demonstrated from across multiple disciplines, methodologies, and platforms.

Based on the anthropological concept of “communities of practice,” and grounded in models employed in academic, nonprofit, and business environments, libraries can institute professional development communities that rethink and expand the definition of and support for professional development and engagement.

Identifying new approaches to the profession allows individual library faculty and staff to reconsider growth within scholarly, personal, and institutional constructs while providing library organizations opportunities to explore expanded definitions of successful professional practice. For the purpose of this paper professional development is defined as activities that contribute to the development of the library profession. This definition supports the growth of the individual within a larger community context.

How are libraries creating cultures of professional development that support personal, academic, and institutional growth?

Beyond time and financial assistance, librarians need supportive and collaborative communities to grow and flourish as writers, researchers, and contributors to the profession. Academic libraries have used various types of groups and organizational structures to support professional development and career advancement. Some groups focus on mentoring and tenure support, and different approaches to

mentoring, such as peer-mentoring groups (Cirasella & Smale, 2011), while others focus on specific areas related to research, such as funding or writing (Sassen & Wahl, 2014, p. 461-462). No matter what name is attached to these groups, or what format they follow, they exist to address the need for expanded definitions of institutional support for professional development within academic libraries.

One of the collaborative models that has been used to support professional development in libraries is communities of practice focused specifically on professional development. The concept of “communities of practice” is not new; the term was created by Lave and Wenger (1991). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) define communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). Three characteristics define a community of practice: domain, community and practice.

These people don’t necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs... However they accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other’s perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, p.4-5).

University of Idaho Libraries (2010) explored the Community of Practice (CoP) model for mentoring new academic librarians (Henrich & Attebury). When library faculty members were tasked with developing a mentoring program, they expressed “a desire for collaboration across departmental lines, support from senior faculty, a space to safely develop innovative ideas...” (p. 160). A CoP was created to help new library faculty achieve promotion and tenure, but there were also broader goals in mind, including

“collaboration, publication, research, and fostering relationships between faculty members” (p. 163).

The CoP model at University of Idaho Libraries involved monthly one-hour meetings, voluntary participation, a governing document and group agreement, and would be limited to library faculty. An informal survey of the CoP after one year of practice suggested that this model was beneficial to the new librarians at University of Idaho.

At the 2014 Annual American Library Association Conference in Las Vegas, NV, librarians Erin Dorris Cassidy and Angela Colmenares presented a model for collaborative publishing that was developed at Sam Houston State University to support academic librarians in tenure-track positions. Tenured and new tenure-track librarians worked as a team on a collaborative research and writing project. This model benefits individual librarians, the library, and the profession: Individual librarians learn about the research and publishing process; the library culture strengthens due to increased collaboration and communication between librarians in different departments and at different levels in their careers; and the research produced from these collaborations is stronger due to the combination of skills, knowledge and experience of the participating librarians.

In “StaffShare: Creating cross-departmental connection in the library,” Foley, Barbrow, and Hartline (2015) describe some of the challenges in making connections amongst colleagues in large academic libraries. Employees often find themselves divided by departments, responsibilities, physical space, and other factors. “Without intentional initiatives to foster cross-departmental communication,” they suggest, “staff may not connect with colleagues in different roles” (p. 26). StaffShare consists of three different programs that design opportunities for library staff to communicate and interact across departments: SkillShare offers a two-way job shadowing program; SpeedShare hosts speed-networking events; and SpaceShare organizes guided tours of different areas in the library.

The development of the StaffShare program at University of Michigan Libraries is an example of the ways in which libraries can support better communication between library faculty and staff

across departments, and the positive impact that developing these initiatives can have on the employees and their institutions. An edited volume by Blessinger and Hrycaj (2013) further supports the need for improved workplace cultures in academic libraries, including interdepartmental communication, collaboration and mentorship.

Case Study: Professional Development at Atkins Library

UNC Charlotte’s Atkins Library is one of 16 libraries in the UNC system. With more than 27,000 students, UNC Charlotte is one of the fastest growing universities in the UNC system. A projected growth of nearly 10,000 students in the next decade points to opportunities for the physical campus, generally, and the library specifically with expectations that staff growth will match (to some extent) the growth of the institution overall.

Atkins Library currently employs twenty-six faculty librarians, most of whom have non-tenure faculty status. Faculty librarians are provided with some financial support for professional development, and are expected to contribute in some way to the profession through writing, presenting, or other projects.

The Professional Activities Committee (PAC) at Atkins Library was formed as a library faculty committee in an effort to support professional development. Managed by library faculty, the charge of PAC is to, “promote the continuing education and professional growth of the Library Faculty... It shall also cooperate with faculty and administrative bodies concerned with university staff development.” Several years ago, PAC began to host workshops and panel discussions to support professional development of both library faculty and staff. A professional development blog - atkinslibraryprodev.wordpress.com - was also developed to share opportunities, highlight the professional work of library faculty, and create a platform for collaboration.

Although these events and tools created a space for discussion, it was a limited space, and no platform existed for ongoing conversations and collaborations between library employees. PAC was creating

opportunities and experiences for professional growth as an individual pursuit, rather than developing an actual living space for collaboration.

Communities of practice (CoPs)

Through the development of Communities of Practice (CoPs) PAC decided to rethink professional development and engagement by expanding the definition of “support” for it at the library. One of the goals in developing the CoPs at UNC Charlotte was to create a space that may not otherwise exist for library faculty and staff that encourages mentorship, cross-departmental connection, and collaboration. The creation of CoPs is an experimental model for professional development that reconsiders personal and institutional growth through community building.

Three CoPs were developed by PAC in the Spring of 2014 to focus on (1) presentations (2) professional writing and (3) grants.

Presentations - This community supports the presentation efforts of library faculty and staff. Participant goals may include presenting a lightning talk, poster session, conference presentation, or webinar.

Professional Writing - This community supports the writing efforts of library faculty and staff. Participant goals may include writing for a blog, website, newspaper, journal, book or conference publication.

Grants - This community supports the grant writing efforts of library faculty and staff. Participant goals may include identifying funding opportunities, writing proposals and managing grants at university, city, state and national levels.

Separate CoPs were created for each area to allow librarians to join a community that best fits individual professional goals and interests. Approximately 20 library faculty and staff signed up to participate in the CoPs. CoP participation is voluntary - with each community meeting once monthly and all participants across the three communities sharing goals and accomplishments online at regular intervals. Meetings for each community are scheduled at different times to allow for participation in more than one

community. Collaboration is further encouraged through an online platform for sharing goals and progress for all CoP members. Research and practice are the common themes throughout the CoPs.

PAC members serve as moderators of the CoPs - and collaboratively share the planning and overall conceptualization of these groups. Communication is managed primarily via email, the professional development blog, library faculty meetings, and an online platform.

Benefits and challenges

CoPs have the potential to encourage individual professional growth, create solutions to organizational issues and structures, and ultimately, improve workplace cultures in academic libraries. With all that CoPs can contribute to the development of individuals, institutions and the profession, they are not without challenges. Below is a discussion of the benefits and challenges of developing the CoPs at UNC Charlotte.

Informal assessments of the communities' progress were discussed during PAC committee meetings. These discussions resulted in experimentation with the format of the meetings, and the proposal to consolidate the communities. Several goals that will take longer and will also prove more difficult to assess include an increase in new faculty and staff retention and promotion, internal collaboration (how will we know what results from this space versus other meetings or encounters), and internal community building.

The monthly face-to-face CoP meetings create a space where participants can inquire about and respond to specific opportunities and ideas with input from other colleagues. At each meeting, participants are expected to share what they are working on, the progress of specific projects, or ideas for projects. Other participants often ask questions or make suggestions to help through the various stages of developing and completing projects. The benefits of these types of interactions are renewed connections between colleagues, shared best practices, and informal guidance and advice.

Several of the more experienced librarians who have participated, have learned from their colleagues while sharing their own institutional knowledge and professional experiences. The majority of CoP participants have been working in libraries for less than ten years, and in Atkins Library for less than three years. Creating a platform that enriches and supports participants of varied experiences is an ongoing challenge. The CoPs benefit from a diversity of knowledge and experience that participants bring to the conversations.

Expanded internal communication is another benefit of the CoPs. The CoPs include participants from almost every department within the library. Participation in the CoPs occasionally competes with other meetings, commitments, and priorities. A challenge for the library organization is to prioritize CoP participation as a critical and valued professional development and service opportunity. Added benefits to participants include recognition of their service in reappointment and promotion considerations.

The format of the meetings, and modes of communication, presents an ongoing challenge and opportunity for rethinking CoP structure. The CoP moderators have experimented with using the meetings as a space for open discussion, themed discussions surrounding a reading, work time for writing and practicing presentations, and guest speakers. There has also been some discussion among the CoP moderators about the use and value of the online platforms for communication, and the practicality and value of maintaining three separate communities of practice. Combining and reformatting the three CoPs into one may be more efficient while still supporting the initial project goals.

Introducing a new CoP model within an existing library structure is a critical challenge. PAC would have benefitted from hosting a discussion for library faculty and staff about the concept of CoPs prior to initiating the start of the project - thereby creating a broader base of interest and emphasizing the impact of collaborative professional development on the library and the library profession as a whole.

A challenge of collaborative professional development is stressing the importance of participation regardless of perceived relevance.

Occasionally, participants would not attend meetings if they did not need input on projects or felt they had nothing to contribute. It is critical for CoP models to demonstrate collective benefits through consistent participation regardless of individual needs. The benefit of this approach is a continued emphasis on the importance of overall collective growth as opposed to individual benefits. Conveying these multiple layers of purpose continues to serve as a challenge to the communities reaching their full impact and potential.

Like other libraries that have adopted peer-mentoring models, the CoPs at UNC Charlotte were not created simply to mentor new librarians or assist them with reappointment and promotion. These peer mentoring models have value for all levels of librarians, staff, and administrators within an institution, and for our institutions and profession more broadly. These models represent a vision for how the library could ideally operate or function if organizational hierarchies, institutional histories and cultural norms were reshaped and reconsidered.

What are the opportunities and challenges in redefining professional development as a collaborative and experimental practice that enhances the library profession?

The development of communities of practice at UNC Charlotte is an experiment in creating a new culture of professional development that supports personal, academic, and institutional growth. It builds on the idea of creating think tanks, laboratories, and work spaces as models of development within traditional organizational structures that support the growth and development outside of (as well as within) that structure.

Professional development activities by library faculty and staff that complement and support academic departments, institutional innovation, and research activities can market a library to library users, local communities, and the library profession at large. Experimentation in the library context moves beyond reliance on professional development as individual engagement or recognition as a measure of success. Shared professional development provides

an opportunity to expand definitions of success and ways in which performance is measured and goals are identified.

The CoPs at UNC Charlotte restructure librarianship from within and are intentionally a non-hierarchical model built on shared ideas, risks, and rewards. The CoPs are experimental, aspirational, iterative, and, hopefully, transformative. They connect library faculty and staff with one another and encourage employees to participate in the organization in new and diverse ways.

The challenge of this type of experimentation is that there is generally little space built into library organizations for the kinds of research and analysis that lead to innovative ideas and practices. For CoPs to truly be successful, a clear vision needs to be articulated and library faculty and staff need to prioritize participation. Encouraging new ideas and ways of doing our work cultivates a different kind of culture - one in which working together and helping each other to meet professional development goals is viewed as a service to the institution.

The future of the library profession rests in the hands of those who work in the field. Libraries have the potential to foster creative experimentation and thinking among library faculty and staff. Professional colleagues can and should be not only collaborators but also instigators, supporters, and sounding boards. This vision of the future of librarianship comes from the perspective of growth and learning as collaborative, active, and engaged activities that foster community and redefine the profession.

Organizations can and should encourage library faculty and staff to push beyond what they know (and are comfortable with) to engage in the profession openly, creatively, and with the future in mind. The future of the library profession (and, by association, of organizations, institutions, and individuals) is only limited by the ability of those within the profession to transcend and transform our current reality, and to dream beyond what we know.

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