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2011 Library Technology Conference [Review]

Anne Shelley
Illinois State University, aeshell@ilstu.edu

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Review

2011 Library Technology Conference
March 16-17, 2011
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Reviewed by Anne Shelley
Assistant Librarian
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN

The Library Technology Conference offers a variety of sessions that address how different types of libraries are using technology to manage resources and services. It also puts a critical spotlight on specific technologies that affect how users interact with libraries.

The conference was conceived by a group of Midwest librarians who knew that many Midwest libraries were using technologies in innovative ways but found it frustrating that one had to travel to far-away national conferences to see presentations from "the library across town." Originally called the Midwest Library Technology Conference, this annual gathering has been held at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota since 2008. In 2009, the regional designation was dropped from the title, and the event has since been known as the Library Technology Conference.

The conference was initiated with the following objectives:

1. Focus on changing technologies, how they are affecting libraries, and what users expect of libraries because of these changes.
2. Provide an opportunity for librarians from around the region to share what unique technology-based things they are doing within their library.

3. Provide a wide range of sessions, including interactive/hands-on sessions, from introductory level to more advanced, making sure that the sessions are of interest to all types of libraries (academic, public, K-12, corporate, special, etc.).

4. Keep the conference affordable so that all types and sizes of libraries can afford to send their staff, and offer scholarships aimed at small/rural libraries that most likely do not have professional development funds.

5. Focus on practical sessions where attendees can learn specific skills and then immediately go back to apply those skills in their own library.[1]

A steering committee serves in an advisory role for the conference, while a separate planning group organizes over 65 concurrent sessions in various formats, including traditional, lecture-based sessions, hands-on workshops, panels, and poster presentations.[2]

Each day of the conference begins with an invited keynote speaker, followed by three blocks of concurrent sessions. The first two breakout sessions of each day involve a presenter or panel speaking to an audience with the aid of some kind of multimedia; the final session of the day is longer than the others (1.5 hours) and involves some kind of hands-on technology training or group discussion about specific technologies (as a cost-saving measure, conference planners purposefully included these practical workshops as part of the regular conference schedule as opposed to pre- or post-conference sessions).

Each session is assigned a "technical expertise" rating of basic or intermediate, so registrants know ahead of time which sessions might be most appropriate for their skill levels with certain technologies. Breakout sessions are chosen by each attendee at the time of registration, presumably offering presenters some idea of their audiences and also giving conference planners some advance notice on which sessions might fit best in certain facilities. For the whimsical among us, this requirement seems to box us in— what if one begins working with a technology between registration and the conference to which an originally unselected session might now apply?

Breakfast and lunch are conveniently provided on campus and are included in the registration fee (mine was $115 for the two days).

Poster sessions and a technology petting zoo are offered concurrently over the lunch hour, and attendees have the option of arriving prior to the keynote sessions each morning to chat with vendors and enter a prize drawing. As one might expect, many

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[1] E-mail with Ron Joslin, Chair of Library Technology Conference Steering Committee and Systems Librarian at Macalester's Dewitt Wallace Library (accessed 1 June 2011).

[2] Session abstracts, presentation materials, and more information about the 2011 Library Technology Conference can be found here: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/libtech_conf/2011/. Given the conference being discussed, it seems relevant to note that while conference planners utilized separate event planning software for registration, all other information related to the conference appears on Macalester's instance of Digital Commons.

active tweeters contributed to the conference's Twitter stream before, during, and after the conference.[3]

Attendees at the 2011 conference were able to choose from an impressive variety of workshop sessions; topics included usability testing, creating a publication with Adobe InDesign, podcasting tips, and experimenting with different types of e-readers, as well as in-depth discussions dedicated to web-search strategies, decoding the complexities of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, virtual meeting and screen-casting tools, searching for data, and best practices for setting up and growing institutional repositories. The shorter breakout sessions explored many different topics, as well, including issues in e-book collection management, online reference for K-12 audiences, open-source ILS management, and ideas for leveraging different types of technologies from Prezi to Pachyderm.

My personal highlight of the 2011 conference was the first keynote session, in which speaker Siva Vaidhanyathan covered main points discussed in his recently-published book *The Googlization of Everything* (*and Why We Should Worry*). Though the talk (and the e-notifications sent to registrants about book pre-orders and an author signing opportunity at the conference) had a not-so-subtle "buy my book" undertone, the legal media expert provided a critical look at Google's motives and its three main roles in content delivery: rank and link (search), host and deliver (YouTube, Blogger, Buzz), and capture and serve (Books, Streetview, Earth). I think Vaidhanyathan missed an opportunity to put a greater focus on Google's algorithmic treatment of content farms, as just prior to the conference Google had responded to criticism of high PageRank values assigned to sites like Demand Media and Answers.com, which contain unsubstantial topical articles written by freelance editors who often have no knowledge of a topic. Overall, Vaidhanyathan gave an informative, engaging address that likely provided at least one take-away for every attendee.

Attendance at the Library Technology Conference has grown rapidly, from 245 in 2008 to 465 in 2011, when registration was capped at 450 and over 100 people were wait-listed. A conference that began as a way for local librarians to discuss technology in their work has ballooned into a fully-orchestrated two-day event that in 2011 drew attendees from 26 different states and Canadian provinces. While the largest group of attendees (74%) was from Minnesota, almost 15% came from border states, and the remaining 11% from all corners of the country and beyond.

In terms of library demographics, academic libraries had the highest attendee representation with 54%. Public librarians made up 16% of attendance and K-12 libraries, consortia, and museums/historical societies each represented around 7% of attendees. There were also attendees from government, law, corporate, and medical libraries. A limited number of scholarships are granted to applicants who are either first-time attendees, who work in a library that serves a population under 30,000, or who live within the primary conference region. Scholarship priority is given to those who meet all three criteria.

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[3] A tweet archive for the 2011 conference's hashtag (#ltc2011) is available at http://z.umn.edu/ltc2011.

In many ways, using Macalester's campus for the conference makes sense. It helps keep conference costs down for food, parking, facilities, and audio-visual needs for presenters. Conference planners—especially those affiliated with Macalester—are intimately aware of the facilities, equipment, and staff at their disposal, and they are bound by no contractual agreement with a for-profit hotel or event center. And when an event is held annually in the same location, "lessons learned" from previous years may be easily acted upon.

There are some trade-offs, however. A campus built for fewer than 2,000 students can only accommodate so many tech-crazy guests. Because not all classrooms can support the equipment needs of presenters and because not all buildings on campus are used by the conference, sessions are limited to specific facilities. Clearly, the wireless network dedicated to conference attendees could not handle the amount of traffic at this year's conference; it was dreadfully slow and unreliable. Additionally, the conference must occur during some break in Macalester's class schedule, which not only creates scheduling limitations for the conference but also might conflict with other campus operations scheduled during class breaks. For the 2011 conference, major construction on the campus's fine and performing arts buildings caused disruptions in pedestrian access, parking, availability of facilities, and, frankly, ambiance. These points are minor ones, however, as I've experienced far less-price-conscious conferences held in large hotels or downtown convention centers whose technological and physical infrastructures are supposedly built to handle such events but end up posing similar challenges to those discussed above.

There is no question as to whether there will be a 2012 Library Technology Conference, but conference planners have indicated they are considering alternate venues to the Macalester campus that might better accommodate the size to which the conference has grown. The 2011 conference chair speculated that this year's cap at 450 attendees was too high, and my observations of lack of seating during the keynote sessions, minor parking challenges, and long lines at lunch anecdotally support his thoughts. I also imagine that registration volumes caused some of the more popular breakout sessions to close early, potentially limiting the relevance of the conference for some attendees. An uncommon quality of this conference is its complete agnosticism toward any specific library organization or type of library. I guess one could argue that an event this heterogeneous—lacking even roundtables, interest groups, or topical tracks—could lead to lots of sessions being offered that don't obviously apply to the work of all attendees, but so far the Library Technology Conference's "something for everyone" approach has allowed presenters from major research institutions to learn how technology is being used in rural historical societies and vice versa. In addition, there are strong consortial arrangements in Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and the Dakotas that serve many small academic and rural public libraries. This price-conscious conference brings together librarians from these communities with a focused purpose to explore their peers' inventive, technology-based initiatives and projects. Finally, the conference is gaining some attention at the national level, and it is easy to see why: most libraries are using technology to some degree to manage their collections and connect with users, but there are ways to use technology (that you and I haven't thought of but someone else proba-

bly has) to increase efficiency, reduce costs, create useful products, enhance research results, and communicate more effectively.

With its 2011 meeting, the Library Technology Conference continued to serve a valuable function for the upper-Midwest. Potential attendees who live outside the region will need to make the same cost-benefit judgments that they would for any professional development that requires extensive travel. Regardless of location, I would encourage library staff members dedicated to attending the 2012 conference to register at the earliest opportunity, as spaces will fill justifiably quickly.