

---

Volume 16

Number 4

*Doing More with Less: Creative Strategies in the  
New Economy (Winter 2010)*

---

July 2014

## DIY Library: Connecting with the Library Community to Form Effective Collaborations

Carson Mischel

*NW Documentary Arts & Media*

### Recommended Citation

Mischel, C. (2014). DIY Library: Connecting with the Library Community to Form Effective Collaborations. *OLA Quarterly*, 16(4), 23-25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1304>

© 2014 by the author(s).

*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

# DIY Library:

## Connecting with the Library Community to Form Effective Collaborations

---

by **Carson Mischel**  
[carson@nwdocumentary.org](mailto:carson@nwdocumentary.org)  
Library Coordinator,  
NW Documentary Arts & Media

### Starting Out

In January 2010 I took on the task of building a resource center and lending library for a small non-profit organization, NW Documentary Arts & Media. At the time, I was fresh out of library school, brimming with enthusiasm and anxious to dive into the profession. I had worked as a volunteer with NW Documentary in the past and was already in love with their mission and the work they were doing. I was confident that I could make a valuable contribution by building a resource center that would benefit the organization's educational workshops and draw new members in from the community. The resource center would house a collection of reference books, non-fiction DVDs, offer research assistance and provide access to online resources. Looking back, I realize I must have had my green librarian blinders on as I did not fully anticipate the challenges that were headed my way as an inexperienced librarian flying solo in a small organization.

When I began working as NW Documentary's Library Coordinator, the existing library collection was very humble, housed on one small shelving unit, and mostly out-of-date. Although I had worked as a volunteer with the organization in the past, I had never paid much attention to the library collection until it was suddenly my responsibility. While studying this small, dusty collection with renewed purpose, a little hobgoblin of doubt appeared on my shoulder, questioning my every turn and doubting the efficacy of my vision.

To ease my doubt I did what every good library student would do in this situation, I plunged into research-mode. I searched through the professional literature for any information on being a solo-librarian with a small budget. I poured through the archives of blogs for personal accounts from librarians on building something out of next to nothing. To my disappointment, I found very little helpful information. Was I sailing in uncharted waters? That nasty hobgoblin of doubt was becoming more insistent.

I began contacting librarians in my community who were working in small organizations with small budgets, seeking their guidance on everything from building a collection to designing a database. This is where I finally struck gold. The people I spoke with were experienced, insightful, and more than willing to sit down and talk to me. Through these valuable connections I realized I was not alone and that we were all facing similar challenges with budget constraints. These conversations have led to collaborative library programs that build on our individual organization's strengths to bring our communities together. To date, I have worked with information professionals at the Oregon Historical Society and Bitch Media to create collaborative programs for our members, and have begun working with organizations such as Qcenter and the Independent Publishing Resource Center to plan future programs. I have learned that my most valuable tools for building a successful library and resource center with a very small budget are creativity and collaboration.

### First Connections

The very first connections I made with other solo-librarians in small, specialized libraries came about as a result of talking to other professionals in our field. When I initially began looking into building our resource center at NW Documentary I talked about the project to anyone who would listen. I had lunch with former colleagues, emailed the people with whom I had attended library school, posted to email lists, started a blog, and asked for advice from co-workers. Fortunately, I found everyone I spoke with about the project to be



enthusiastic and encouraging, and many offered advice and suggestions about other people or organizations to contact. These early conversations were more valuable to my progress than I could have expected and resulted in a world of networking opportunities that would eventually lead to the development of collaborative programming.

Professional conferences, library collectives, and planned social events for library-workers proved to be an excellent way to network with other professionals and find fresh ears with whom to share my vision and my apprehensions. Portland is home to a very tight-knit and active community of library professionals who host a variety of events throughout the year including Inter-Library Lush and the Annual Librarian Prom. Meeting new people at these types of gatherings opened a lot of doors for me, but I soon realized that additional learning opportunities existed outside these professional circles as well. Many small non-profit organizations, similar to the one I am working in, do not have the budget to hire an MLS librarian to run their resource centers and rely on volunteers or part-time “non-professionals.” These dedicated volunteers and employees are experts on their collections, their users, and all of the ins and outs of their library, but you will not find them waltzing around at the Librarian Prom or present on the Oregon Special Library Association’s email list. Once I widened my net, I met several new people involved in running successful small libraries.

In an effort to find solo-librarians in my area that have had experience with the same issues I was now facing, I began by searching for organizations similar to NW Documentary in size and budget. I searched online for arts & education organizations, small colleges, museums, historical societies, and other non-profits--browsing their Web sites for any information on a library or resource center. Many of the organizations did have resource collections and most of those had contact information for their librarian or resource center manager. From there I sent out simple, personal emails introducing myself and my plans for our new resource center. I received many positive responses and was then able to continue the dialogue with any questions I had (what do you use to catalog your collection? How do you handle donations?) as well as express an interest in working together in the future. Many of these email conversations led to face-to-face meetings where I was able to visit a variety of resource centers and discuss the challenges and successes we were all facing.

### **Planning Programming**

As I met with my fellow solo-librarians around Portland, it became evident that we were all struggling with planning effective programming with the limited time, space, and budget we were allotted. We were spending most of our time managing our collections and supervising volunteers and had very little time left for hosting programs--something we all felt would improve our resource centers and benefit our users. I began approaching these other librarians with proposed programs that would utilize each organization’s resources and appeal to our respective communities. As an example, NW Documentary hosted a program with Bitch Media that invited participants to use a selection of books and materials brought from Bitch Media’s library to develop a personal narrative which they then recorded in NW Documentary’s audio recording booth. The result was a fun afternoon in which people from the NW Documentary community and those from the Bitch Media community came together in our office, explored each organization’s resources, met new people, and were able to create an audio documentary. The collaborative programs I have co-hosted have been



incredibly successful and plans for future programs, including film screenings, discussion panels, creative workshops, and tours are in the works.

I have discovered numerous benefits to collaborating with these other organizations to bring successful programming to our library users. These programs have given our small organization the opportunity to bring all of our strengths, experience, equipment, and space to the table while working with organizations that supplement our weaknesses. Sharing planning and marketing responsibilities along with expenses has allowed me to offer more effective programs to my community than would have been possible had I tried to do it alone. Working with other organizations has given us the opportunity to increase our membership by introducing diverse communities to NW Documentary and our resource center. As an added benefit, our members have had the opportunity to experience a variety of other community organizations and services to which they might not have otherwise been exposed.

### **Looking Ahead**

It has been almost a year since I accepted the task of being a solo-librarian at NW Documentary and I am now more excited than ever about the future of our resource center. The hobgoblin of doubt has quieted considerably and my confidence has grown with each new experience. Meeting fellow solo-librarians and having the opportunity to collaborate with them has added both value and pleasure to my work. My colleagues and I have seen great success through working together and I have begun looking towards a future of collaborative opportunities that go beyond programming including marketing, grant-writing, cooperative cataloging, and sharing of resources. In a time when library budgets seem to be shrinking every day and staff-cuts are always a threat, learning how to be an effective and creative collaborator could be the difference between success and failure. Reaching out to my fellow library professionals when I was feeling most discouraged about the future of our library was the best thing I could have done--librarians are always willing to help. 🌿

