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It's Automatic: Library Automation as a Catalyst For Transformation

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Introduction

Between October 2018 and February 2019, the Warrenton Community Library began a transformation of library services. With the funding and support available through a 2017 voter-approved levy and a joint LSTA grant with the neighboring Seaside Public Library, this small coastal library was able to introduce a full suite of online services to its patrons. Just as importantly, Warrenton was able to join a shared ILS environment and facilitate patron access to a wider range of resources.

Previously, the library used card-based checkout. A simple MARC software application was used to create a catalog of bibliographic records accessible only to staff. In 2018, the license for the MARC database expired and the library no longer had a catalog of its materials. The collections became accessible only by browsing.

Warrenton patrons embraced the many outstanding services provided at the library: a diverse selection of resources, collection development that is responsive to patron needs, and a supportive, small-town atmosphere. However, it was time to embrace the opportunities afforded to Oregon libraries in the digital age.

This LSTA project, for which I served as Project Manager Librarian, resulted in many expanded services. These included circulation and expanded resource sharing in a shared ILS. Warrenton also joined the Oregon Digital Library Consortium, developed a new library website, and provided patrons with access to Gale databases.

For this article, I will be focusing on the systems and cataloging aspects of the project. Through the four months of automation work spent in Warrenton, I gained a new appreciation for the interconnectedness of library services, as the change in systems drove transformations both anticipated and unexpected.

The Path to Automation

The Warrenton Community Library serves the approximately 5,200 residents of the city of Warrenton, which includes the previously incorporated community of Hammond.

By the Public Library Survey definition, WCL's service area is considered a "Town, Remote," which is "more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area" ("Data File Documentation," 2017). WCL also meets the definition of a small public library serving a population of 2.5 to 10K (Swan, 2013).



The scale of Warrenton's service population is fairly common in the state. In Oregon, 76.2 percent of public libraries qualify as "small," and a total of 36 Oregon libraries were in the 2.5 to 10K range (Swan, 2013).

Many of the benefits and challenges commonly seen in small and rural libraries are relevant here. As noted by Swan et. al. in *The State of Small and Rural Libraries in the United States*, "Small and rural libraries, which are present in so many communities, serve a strategic role in extending public services to residents that may be hard to reach by other means," though funding and adequate staffing are common challenges in the growth of services (Swan, 2013).

For years, financial constraints required a heavy reliance on donated materials and volunteer labor at WCL. In this context, the library was able to provide basic services to the community, though with minimal computerization and limited collaboration with other libraries in the county.

Recently, however, a series of events precipitated transformation. In the summer of 2017, spurred by structural issues in its previous space, the library moved into a larger and more suitable building (Bengal, 2017). Then, in November 2017, the first increase to the operational levy funding the library in 15 years was passed by Warrenton voters (Frankowicz, 2017).

The larger space and increased funding facilitated improvements such as space for children's programs and two additional public computers. Staffing also increased from a baseline of 0.88 FTE in FY 2016–2017 to 1.665 FTE in FY 2018–2019, which enabled expanded services and longer hours.

In addition to a small but devoted staff, the library has a team of dedicated volunteers. These individuals support a wide range of library services, from building maintenance to tech support to social media.

In the numerous transitions that have occurred through the grant project, staff and volunteers alike have ensured the library's success.

Library Automation as an Engine for Institutional Change

One central component of the LSTA grant proposal was to bring the Warrenton library into the hosted instance of TLC Library Solution used by the Seaside Public Library. This would result in a shared catalog environment between the two libraries and enhanced access to resource sharing for patrons.

This choice of systems and collaboration necessitated a series of other decisions. Some choices were made internally, but many were made in consultation with the Seaside Public Library. For the first time, practices at WCL would have major impacts on a wider community. This consortial framework drove many positive innovations.

Weeding and Cataloging: Measure Twice, Cut Once

To prepare for automation, Nettie-Lee Calog, the Library Site Manager, performed weeding in print collections. I initially viewed any further deselection as outside the scope of the automation project. However, cataloging required us to handle every item, which provided another opportunity to assess these items.

We wanted to expend cataloging resources only on items that provided value to the community. A second round of weeding concurrent with cataloging became an unexpected



but rewarding process. The physical collections that resulted from these two rounds of weeding were refreshed and relevant.

There were many such moments throughout the automation process, as larger questions would arise within the context of cataloging or classification. In most cases, we had the best results by stopping to consider the options available and then making choices and changes accordingly.

With so much concrete work to accomplish on a tight timeline, I was cautious about taking this approach. However, these pauses for deliberate decision-making resulted in sustainable practices and better user experience. The iterative processes of developing and documenting policies, and training staff, were the most important pieces of this project, as they enabled the success of activities such as cataloging, processing, shifting, and circulation.

Local Libraries, Distinct Collections

Initially, it was expected that most WCL resources would already be held in Seaside, and that for the most part, Warrenton would use bibliographic records imported from OCLC by Seaside catalogers.

However, this turned out to not be the case. For instance, in adult fiction collections, only 38 percent of items in the WCL collection and 14.5 percent of items in the Seaside collection have ISBNs that exist in the other location.

One reason was a difference in acquisition practices regarding hardcover and mass market paperback editions. Seaside tends to purchase hardcover editions when possible, and Warrenton acquires paperbacks more often. Beyond this approach to format, the two libraries built unique collections, informed by the interests of their respective patron communities.

The difference in collections extends the resource-sharing potential of the two libraries. However, it also meant that cataloging the Warrenton collections was more labor-intensive than expected.

The program provided by our ILS vendor for rapid retrospective cataloging did not interface with OCLC, and its more limited databases often did not include the records we needed. Conventional copy cataloging, and original cataloging for local authors, was required during this project.

On our first pass, we often cataloged over 400 books per day and 1,000 per week. On the second pass, our pace slowed as the materials grew more complex and challenging. Thanks to our dedicated cataloging team, we added a total of 10,299 items to the bibliographic database in four months. The end result was Warrenton's first complete catalog of library materials, and a full suite of search and assessment tools.

Classification and Library Spaces

Library spaces and local classification practices are interdependent in every library. Choices in one area drive changes in the other, as we pursue colocation that works best for our users.

Are we going to classify by genre, by format, by audience? How will such differences be reflected in the catalog and in the division of physical space? Are we going to use Dewey, and if so, with what tools and local practices? Are we going to incorporate series numbering and, if so, for which resources?

These are all questions we considered prior to assigning local call numbers for various collections. We had to balance two factors: patron needs and long-term feasibility for a very small, volunteer, technical services staff.



We opted for Dewey in nonfiction collections. In most cases, we used class numbers from the 082 field in imported OCLC records. I also borrowed Dewey manuals from Seaside for use in original and complex copy cataloging. In the future, for nonfiction records without 082 fields, Warrenton catalogers will use the Dewey outline available online, the principle of collocation, and consultation with professional staff at Seaside to make local classification decisions.

Past practice separated biographies and autobiographies on opposite ends of the nonfiction section, using nonstandard numbering. We merged these sections under a basic 920 designation, in order to facilitate browsing of biographical works.

The children's and young adult areas were analyzed and redesigned prior to cataloging. Marian Rose, the youth services librarian at the Seaside Public Library, guided a second round of weeding and provided new ideas for spaces. We merged many previously distinct collections in order to streamline the processes of shelving and classification and facilitate patron access.

With the guidance of Nettie-Lee Calog and her knowledge of community needs, we also preserved some important subsections. A Pacific Northwest collection remained distinct, showcasing an interesting assortment of books about the area. We also kept a small collection of videocassettes, as many Warrenton patrons still use VHS players.

Physical Processing, Accessibility, and Collection Longevity

Due to changes in the organization of collections, and the development of uniform classification practices, we needed to relabel all library materials. At the same time, we had the supply budget to apply book jacket covers to hardcover books for the first time.

New spine labels, bright genre labels, and jacket covers enhanced the appearance of collections. We opted for minimal text and large lettering on spine labels in support of visibility and accessibility. As physical processing progressed, volunteers and patrons remarked on the visual effect. New physical processing workflows will also protect the library's materials from wear and tear, extending their useful lives.

Learning Curves

The scope of the project expanded out of necessity. In the end, it encompassed not only cataloging and staff training, but also a great deal of general collections and library policy work. The many other systems that had to be brought online took development time. There were also day-to-day demands such as staff scheduling, troubleshooting technology, and waiting for supplies. Due to the current levels of staffing, support for different processes sometimes hit bottlenecks.

Our initial estimated time of completion was January 31. We ended up extending the project through February 27, but even this deadline was tight. I devoted most of my last two weeks to documentation, training, and making sure professional support was in place. Ultimately, I was able to leave the WCL staff confident in their abilities to finish cataloging the last remaining materials, to finish physical processing, and to run the front desk.

In addition to the magnitude of the project, we had one significant setback. A portion of the item barcodes ordered for WCL overlapped with borrower numbers already in use in the Seaside patron database. This situation did not come to light until we were well into cataloging the adult fiction collection in Warrenton. Fortunately, due to the generosity of our technical services volunteers, we were able to handle the re-barcoding efficiently, losing little time in the long run.



Based on these and other experiences we had throughout this project, I gleaned three major takeaways for approaching large-scale transitions.

ONE: Triple-check everything, especially on critical matters relevant to multiple parties. Make sure everyone impacted takes a look at a configuration, process, or purchase.

TWO: When embarking on unprecedented projects, prepare for processes to take longer than expected, and to involve more steps and decisions than anticipated. Having enough skilled people with a professional outlook is essential for success.

THREE: Sustainability is an essential component of completion. I spent far more time than I initially expected on education, and organizing information for staff use after I left. Additionally, beyond written documentation, training, and project management, a long-term professional support network is vital for sustaining a large service upgrade.

Training and Staffing for Technical Services and Beyond

At the Warrenton Community Library, technical services tasks, including cataloging and physical processing, were, and continue to be, accomplished by volunteers. The typical volume of new acquisitions, approximately 50 items per week, is one reason this is possible.

Even more important, however, are WCL's exceptional copy cataloging volunteers. Cheryl Conway and Cindy Bellaque are retired math educators who have the requisite technological and problem-solving ability, and attention to detail, accompanied by the generosity to spend their free time immersed in MARC. Without volunteers with the aptitude and time to spend on cataloging, this model would not be possible. A necessary long-term goal for WCL remains: the introduction of regular paid staffing in technical services.

In training copy catalogers, including the two volunteers and Nettie-Lee Calog, I introduced core cataloging concepts in addition to the mechanics of the programs used. I was concerned that incorporating a significant amount of theory at the beginning could be overwhelming. Yet ultimately, I felt that getting the "how" of cataloging right in the long term required an understanding of the "why," while respecting the profession and the people preparing to dive into this work.

The learning curve was steep, but the Warrenton catalogers persevered. They quickly adopted a focus on sustainable, standards-compliant practices centered on the patron experience. I believe that the time spent on education at the outset and throughout the project helped empower these new catalogers to make good decisions with confidence.

Now that my part of the project is complete, Esther Moberg, the library director at the Seaside Public Library, is providing ongoing support to staff at WCL. This includes original and complex copy cataloging, and assistance with systems and ticketing. The establishment of a professional support network has been a necessary component of the transition to an automated, collaborative environment.

Libraries and Collaboration

Isolation can be a hazard for small libraries in remote areas, especially when access to specialized knowledge and resources is needed, as in technical services. However, there are many resources available to help libraries of all sizes.



Once an initial infrastructure of resources and space was established, the community of Warrenton was able to explore the myriad opportunities available. Pursuing these opportunities for support in enhancing services relied on a network of libraries and library professionals who were instrumental in making the transition to automation a success. These included the iMLS and LSTA grant program; Ross Fuqua at the Oregon State Library; Esther Moberg and the staff the Seaside Public Library; our ILS vendor, The Library Corporation; the State Database Licensing Program; and the Oregon Digital Library Consortium, to name just a few.

This collaborative, community-oriented spirit is one of the most powerful values of libraries and librarianship, and one which I am thankful to have encountered in all quarters throughout the course of this project. I encourage small libraries looking at the prospect of major changes in technical services to remember that there is an equally large community out there, willing to help and encourage along the way. 🐼

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