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Erin L. Davis
Utah State University

Danielle Theiss-White
Kansas State University

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GATHERING LEADERSHIP MOMENTUM ACROSS GREAT DISTANCES: CREATING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Erin Dini-Davis
Reference Librarian
Utah State University
Merrill-Cazier Library
3000 Old Main Hill
Logan, Utah 84321, USA
Telephone: (435) 797-2075
Email: erin.davis@usu.edu

Danielle Theiss-White
General Reference Coordinator
Kansas State University
K-State Libraries
219 Hale Library
Manhattan, Kansas 66502, USA
Telephone: (785) 532-5008
Email: dtheiss@ksu.edu

GATHERING LEADERSHIP MOMENTUM ACROSS GREAT DISTANCES: CREATING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Abstract

At the 2007 Mountain Plains Library Association Leadership (MPLA) Institute, held in New Mexico, USA, eight academic librarians formed an online multi-state, multi-generational community of practice. MPLA is a twelve-state library association within the United States. Using Google Groups™, the members formed an online environment called the MPLA Community of Practice for continuing development of the leadership skills presented at the Institute. These early-career librarians represent diverse educational backgrounds and work in libraries serving varied populations with differing disciplinary emphases.

The group meets monthly with each member preparing and facilitating online discussions, complete with personal assessments, topical readings, and questions. The Google Groups™ site is also used to discuss important library issues including sharing innovative practices, identifying useful resources, and discussing timely workplace issues. The group has been extremely successful not only at maintaining regular communication but also pursuing opportunities for continuing professional development. This paper highlights how librarians can develop and launch a peer-mentoring space using free online tools such as Google Groups™, Skype™, and Doodle™ from anywhere in the world. It also addresses current literature related to communities of practice, leadership topics discussed by the group, and personal stories about its impact on individual group members.

Introduction

How can an organization develop a library leader? Numerous library organizations across the United States have begun creating Leadership Institutes with the intention of developing leadership skills in our future library leaders. The Mountain Plains Library Association (MPLA), a regional, twelve-state library organization located within the United States, is just one of these organizations which provides leadership training in the form of a five-day Leadership Institute for public, academic, and state librarians. Eight academic librarians had the inspiration to form an online multi-state, multi-generational

peer mentoring community of practice at the conclusion of the 2007 MPLA Leadership

Institute. This paper addresses how librarians from anywhere in the world can develop

and launch their own virtual peer-mentoring space using free online tools such as Google

Groups™, Skype™, and Doodle™. It also addresses current literature related to

communities of practice, leadership topics, and personal stories of the group's impact on

individual group members. We describe the technology resources our online group uses

and provide information on how to access them.

Developing as a Leader

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, libraries and associations began implementing

leadership programs for librarians. The leadership programs' main goals were to develop

leadership skills, increase diversity in the library field, and recruit new librarians for the

future.[i] Leadership skills were not considered "desired skills or competencies" by the

profession until the 1990s when the concept finally started appearing in the library

literature.[ii] Additionally, the library profession still lacks a universally accepted statement

that describes desired leadership skills for librarians. In 2004 Mason & Wetherbee found

that there was no accepted "core set of competencies, experiences, or aptitudes… Library

leadership has typically been described more in terms of stories about individuals."[iii]

While no standardized vocabulary about librarian leadership has yet emerged, much

progress has been made in the field. Library leadership is now a popular topic in the

library literature and countless articles, books, and blogs have been published. Mason &

Wetherbee's research shows that more than twenty-one library leadership institutes were

established between the years 1996 and 2002. The MPLA Leadership Institute is cited

among their list of library leadership programs with its primary objectives listed as "leadership theories and behavior, change, risk, power, diversity, and collaboration."

2007 MPLA Leadership Institute

The MPLA community of practice was formed at the MPLA Leadership Institute at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico in Fall 2007. MPLA offers an annual Leadership Institute that is designed to help emerging leaders in the library community develop their full career potential. MPLA was founded in 1948 to assist librarians in their professional development by creating educational and networking opportunities. A regional organization, MPLA sponsors joint conferences with state library associations where librarians have the opportunity to learn from their colleagues in other states. At present, MPLA consists of 12 states in the United States--Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming.

Any librarian is welcome to apply to the competitive MPLA Leadership Institute. Maureen Sullivan, an organization development consultant in the United States, has led the Leadership Institute since 2002. Among the concepts Sullivan teaches with her participative, inclusive style are interpersonal communication, group problem solving, and leading from the middle.

Topics discussed during the five days of the 2007 leadership session include:

- Leadership
- Communication

- Managing Differences

- Risk Taking

- Power and Influence

- Leading Change

- Commitment

- Groups and Teams

- Project Management

- Personal Planning

Mary Bushing, Library Consultant & Educator, was the Institute Coordinator from 2002-2007. According to Bushing, creating a community of practice was one of the Institute's broad goals:

> "Networking and creating a community of professional practice was a key element in the structure and development of the institute… A number of these individuals have said what a difference it made in their lives to belong to a group with an intense shared experience who are outside of the day-to-day work organization and local political environment."

Our MPLA virtual cohort marks the first time in five years that librarians have formed an official community of practice at the conclusion of an MPLA Leadership Institute.

Forming the MPLA Online Community of Practice

The Leadership Institute assembles librarians with common interests in leadership. For the 2007 institute, twenty-nine emerging leaders from MPLA's twelve state library associations came together as participants. Attendees were chosen for their leadership

potential, previous leadership experience, and personal qualities they addressed in an application essay.

Since there were multiple academic librarians at the Leadership Institute, we met in an after-hours session to become better acquainted. We did not really put a name to what we wanted to accomplish, rather we instinctively felt the need to continue our discussions once we all went back to our institutions. The group shared common challenges of leading from the middle. Our main goal during the week of the Institute was to develop a mechanism to continue our conversations upon our return to our home institutions. We were concerned that we would quickly forget many of the leadership theories and tools learned once we returned to our hectic jobs. This decision resulted in the creation of an online community of practice. We realized that agreeing to "stay in touch" by informal networking would not be as successful as using an already established model like an online community of practice. Research shows that learning is a social process, which we learn at an early age when we attend school. Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave found that people "participate in frameworks that have structure. Learning involves participation in a community of practice."[iv]

What is a community of practice?

People constantly "share knowledge" without even realizing it – both in our jobs and in our daily lives. For instance, it is often easier to ask a colleague how to conduct a simple task in the library like placing a book on hold than to read the manual or help guide on

the Internet. In the same way, our group, much like other online groups, shares knowledge in multiple ways.

The term "community of practice" is based on the work of Barbara Rogoff, Jean Lave, and Etienne Wenger, all cognitive anthropologists. Wenger defines this as "communities in which there exists the sustained pursuit of shared enterprise."[v] A community of practice is a self-organized group, based on collaboration among peers that consists of three essential parts: "the domain, the community, and the practice."[vi] In our case, the "domain" is the group's common interest in library leadership topics and professional development opportunities. The "community" is our practice of meeting monthly online using Web 2.0 technology such as the Google Groups™ site and Skype™. Within our "community" we share knowledge and learn from each other. The "practice" means putting the knowledge that we have shared and learned from each other into practice by holding monthly Skype™ calls and collaborating to share our discoveries by writing articles for publication and preparing a virtual poster for ACRL. Developing a "shared repertoire of resources" is how Wenger further explains the "practice" aspect of a cohort. In our group, examples of this shared repertoire include advising one another about customer service issues, learning together about conflict management skills and staying abreast of emerging technologies.

Wenger refers to a working team as a "living curriculum…but learning in a community of practice is not limited to novices. The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone."[vii] While the concept of a cohort initially

referred to apprentices learning from masters, everyone in the group benefits from the exchange. According to Santo, knowledge sharing is not just "water cooler talk, instead, these exchanges are necessary for building the trust required to express a genuine vulnerability – to admit that one needs new knowledge."[viii]

One of the ways to keep a virtual team healthy is by nurturing the group. Internal leadership within the group is the easiest way to maintain momentum and keep the group nurtured and balanced. In our case, the group leader, Danielle Theiss-White, had the inspiration at the Leadership Institute and planted the seed for the cohort. The Leadership coordinators at the Institute nurtured the idea and prompted us to form a team that they in turn would join to monitor our progress. Even though they do not participate within the group each month, they do encourage us as we submit publications and give presentations, and they offer support and suggestions as needed.

Leadership within a team takes many forms, for many roles are present in a community of practice. Each month we have a different facilitator, providing each member with the opportunity to lead us in a discussion using Skype™. The facilitator selects the topic, assigns readings, and sets an agenda. In this way each person has a chance to affect change within the team. If one person objects to how a meeting is being run or the type of questions being asked, then he or she can change the course of the call for the next session.

Other leadership roles within the virtual team include the overall group leader who organizes the professional development activities, keeps the group on track by sending reminder emails before each monthly meeting, and ensures there is a facilitator lined up each month. Each of the members is a "resident expert" on various topics such as government documents, special collections, children's libraries, assessment planning, reference, web 2.0 technologies, and collection development. According to Wenger, "these roles may be formal or informal, and may be concentrated in a core group or more widely distributed. But in all cases, leadership must have intrinsic legitimacy in the community."[ix]

Collaboration Using Web 2.0 Tools

Web 2.0 tools have transformed libraries and the way people communicate with each other. Examples of Web 2.0 software include blogs, podcasts, wikis, and social networks, such as Facebook and MySpace. Librarians in professional associations, such as IFLA, are the perfect audience for creating a community of practice. Librarians have always belonged to associations and attended conferences to share best practices and knowledge with other librarians. But lately more and more librarians are meeting "virtually" on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, or Twitter, and the current economic climate makes these very cost effective forms of professional development or continuing education very attractive. Thanks to the plethora of Web 2.0 tools, librarians can now collaborate with other libraries worldwide with a click of a mouse button. According to Elizabeth Nelson, a Knowledge Analyst, "librarians have demonstrated a unique willingness to share knowledge with others, as revealed by the

sheer number of organizations devoted to librarianship and the close-knit networks of communication they engender."[x]

Social networking is not only the latest fad in libraries, but has become the way the "global village," or the Internet, operates. Facebook and MySpace and other social networking sites are where our library users communicate online and are important avenues for librarians to network with other librarians. In a December 2008 survey the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that the number of adult Internet users with a profile on a social networking site "quadrupled in the past four years – from 8% in 2005 to 35% [in 2009]."[xi]

Sharing information with other libraries by contributing to discussion boards, blogs, or online space such as Google Groups™ is gaining popularity in the profession. According to David Warlick, "It has become more important than ever for [librarians] to actually practice lifelong learning. And one way of doing that is to stay connected to the community of practitioners in order to get the latest information, the latest techniques."[xii] It used to be that "staying connected" meant reading the latest issue of a popular library science journal. Now, instead of merely consuming information, librarians are producing information as well. It is not uncommon for librarians in all types of libraries to create their own blogs or record podcasts and embed them into their online catalogs. Creating an online community of practice is another revolutionary approach that is gaining popularity in libraries as well as in the business world.

Free Online Tools

Have you recently met library colleagues with whom you would like to collaborate but whom you cannot meet face to face? What free or inexpensive tools are available to help facilitate this process? Recent social networking and business networking applications have expanded the ways in which groups can meaningfully communicate and collaborate across great distances. Many of these technological resources are free or inexpensive and easy to use, which also increases the potential for participation by many members.

Librarians can develop and launch a virtual peer-mentoring space using free online tools such as Google Groups™, Skype™ and Doodle™ from anywhere in the world. Countless collaborative technologies that are now available allow for authentic partnerships across geographic and institutional barriers. Technology resources used by our online group and information on how to find them online are provided in this section.

Email serves as an electronic way to communicate asynchronously with groups and individuals. In particular, the team used it to communicate after the Leadership Institute and continue to use it to receive notifications and updates to the group space.

Google Groups™ is a free, online Google product that is extremely easy to implement for a group space such as an online group. With Google Groups™, users can easily start online discussions, create web pages, and share files with a preselected group of people. The MPLA cohort uses the online workspace to share documents—such as articles and discussion questions—for monthly discussions on various leadership topics. It also

provides a collaborative workspace so that each group member can edit documents on their own time.

Skype™ is a free service that enables users to place telephone calls over the Internet. It is an easy and free solution for conference calling, which greatly enhances online discussion. Skype's™ conferencing capabilities compliment online discussions and engender a personal connection amongst members. One of our members commented, "The monthly conference call keeps our network connected on a personal level. There is a spontaneous and conversational approach to in-person communication that spurs creativity in a way that formal writing simply does not." (Heather)

Doodle™ is an online event scheduling and polling software. The MPLA group finds this especially helpful for coordinating multiple schedules over different time zones. A group member commented on the use of free technology: "Learning about the various ways to communicate (for free!) using Skype,™ Google Groups,™ and Doodle™ has been beneficial for me as a library professional, and I have taken the lessons learned from this group experience back to my work environment and shared with others and they have started using them as well." (Danielle)

Newcomers in the Profession: About Us

All eight members of the virtual team have worked in a professional academic position for less than twelve years, with most working in the profession for only a few years. The group was formed on the basis of desiring to learn leadership skills, to network with other

academic librarians from other states, and to keep the knowledge learned from the MPLA

Leadership Institute fresh in our minds. We are a multi-generational group of eight, with

the youngest being a millennial and the oldest a baby boomer. [See Appendix 1 for names

and university affiliation]. One of the group members commented on the group size:

"The size of our group is ideal because of our busy schedules. If it were smaller, those

who aren't as active from time to time would be more noticeable. If it were larger, it

would be more difficult to coordinate our calls." (Karen)

Group Mentoring and Coaching

Members of the group often find themselves offering advice for how to handle certain

situations or problems. Team members "coach" each other by sharing knowledge about

their specific library or state library association. We originally formed our cohort to

discuss leadership topics on a monthly basis and have recently covered topics such as

academic leadership, conflict resolution, library budgetary issues, and teamwork in

libraries. The facilitator prepares two to three articles for readings as well as questions

and/or a personal assessment for the month. Group members prepare ahead of time for

the monthly discussion and are ready to discuss the topic at hand when the facilitator

calls everyone using Skype™. We utilize Google Groups™ for preliminary discussion

before the meeting, using this group space very similarly to a course management system

like Moodle, WebCT, or Blackboard. Several members have contacted each other for

personal career advice such as when to move to another position in the library

organization, how to get an appointment to a committee, or for advice about tenure

review. At any one time a member may serve as a mentee to one group member and as a

mentor to another. One member noted, "Although we have different areas of expertise, we all work in academia and are benefited by the insight of our peers." (Heather)

Monthly Session Examples:

February Discussion Topic: Teamwork in Libraries

Sample Readings:

- Garber, P.R. and Mock, D. "Team Intelligence: Getting the Most from Teams in Your Organization" and "Reintroducing Teams" *Pfieffer Annual* 2004 (179-185).

Questions posed to group for online and Skype discussion:

1. What were some of the lessons you learned as a result of your experiences with teams?

2. How can you apply these lessons to future team efforts?

March Discussion Topic: Conflict Management

Sample Readings/Assessment:

- Conflict Management Style Assessment

- Bragg, T. Ten Ways to Deal with Conflict. *IIE Solutions*. 2004, (36-37).

- McNamara, P.L. Conflict Resolution Strategies. *OfficePro Magazine*.2003. http://www.iaaphq.org/ResearchTrends/Conflict_Resolution_Strategies_OfficePRO_Aug Sept_2003.htm

Questions posed to the group for online and Skype discussion:

1. What was your conflict management/negotiating style determined from the assessment?

2. Did it change or remain the same?

3. Do you deal with conflict differently at home versus at work?

4.   Describe one conflict situation at work. How did you deal with it? Were you

successful?

April Discussion Topic: Academic Leadership

Sample Readings:

- Strathe, M.I. and Wilson, V.W. Academic Leadership: The Pathway To and From. *New Directions for Higher Education*. 2006 **134** 5-13.

- Reyes, V. The Future Role of the Academic Librarians in Higher Education. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy.* 2006 **6**(3), 301-309.

- Young, A.P., Hernon, P., and Powell, R. R. Attributes of Library Leadership: An Exploratory Study of Some Gen-Xers. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship.* 2006 **32**(5), 489-502.

Assignment:
The initial assignment is to take a look at academic leadership, then discuss how it differs from general, traditional leadership scenarios. This could be a paragraph discussing how traditional leadership resources and studies did not fit your academic situation, a look at your initial impressions of leadership on campus and how they have changed over time, or just point out similarities/differences between academic leaders and those in the outside world.

Re-skilling and Technology

The monthly meetings start with a "round-robin" where each group member discusses

what is currently happening at his or her library. Many of us have learned about

emerging technologies, new research projects, or upcoming conferences by listening to

the members describe their current projects. For instance, several of our group members

have started using LibGuides™ and Libstats™ after learning how these tools are used by

other libraries in our group. We have also determined that several members of our group

are interested in collaborating on professional research, and a subgroup has been formed

to facilitate this process. One team member stated, " Group collaboration is yet another

leadership skill to master. It is encouraging that we have persevered with the group for

this number of months, already working toward achieving some of our goals that we outlined back in November." (Erin)

The cohort recently created an online poster for the 2008 Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Spring Virtual Institute describing our journey together.[xiii] Additional conference presentations include a collaborative workshop that five of us presented at the Kansas Library Association Conference in spring 2009.

Benefits of the MPLA Academic Community of Practice

MPLA team members cite many benefits from working together over the past two years, such as professional development, continuing education, professional networking and mentoring, and growth in technology knowledge. One member stated: "this free online activity provides many of the benefits of expensive travel and conferences, insight, shared experiences, and mentoring. Often at the big conferences, this is difficult to find, but we have a group already assembled by the MPLA experience. I hope this group continues the activity" (Robert). A team is more knowledgeable collectively than one person. People can share experiences, best practices, and innovative technologies that are implemented at their libraries. For all of us, the MPLA Leadership Institute is not just a memory or a conference bag filled with papers and notes that quickly gets shoved away and is forgotten. Instead, due to our efforts, we are part of a network of supportive colleagues who continue to be engaged in working together on goals and sharing professional information.

Conclusion

The MPLA cohort has remained successful for almost two years and members continue to work together on research projects, conference presentations, and committees. Finding and making the time to meet, outside of normal work hours, continues to be the greatest challenge for our group as we struggle to find a consistent monthly meeting schedule. Our group continues to utilize free Web 2.0 tools to conduct virtual meetings and hopes to grow and learn about new issues concerning library leadership. The group will continue to seek direction from current research in the areas of communities of practice, leadership development, and ways of communicating new knowledge. By embracing emerging technologies, our goal is to enhance the MPLA community of practice experience. This group stands as an excellent example of what a small group of interested and committed individuals to professional growth can accomplish.

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Appendix 1

MPLA Team Members:
Jennie Burroughs, Assistant Professor, Government Documents Librarian, The University of Montana, jennie.burroughs@umontana.edu
Erin Dini Davis, Reference Librarian, Utah State University, erin.davis@usu.edu
JaNae Kinikin, Science Librarian, Weber State University, jkinikin@weber.edu
Karen Neurohr, Associate Professor, Assessment Librarian, Oklahoma State University, karen.neurohr@okstate.edu
Holly Phillips, Electronic Resources and Access Coordinator, University of New Mexico, hpphillips@salud.unm.edu
Robert Russell, Electronic Resources Coordinator and University Archivist, Northern State University, robert.russell@northern.edu
Heather Smith-Collins, Curriculum Resources Librarian, Washburn University, heather.collins@washburn.edu
Danielle Theiss-White, Assistant Professor, General Reference Coordinator, Kansas State University, dtheiss@ksu.edu

Organizations

Mountain Plains Library Association
http://www.mpla.us/

MPLA Leadership Institute
http://www.mpla.us/leadership/index.html

Ghost Ranch, New Mexico
http://www.ghostranch.org/

Technology

Doodle™
http://www.doodle.ch/main.html

Google Groups™
http://groups.google.com/

Skype™
http://www.skype.com