Creating Community Online

Technology is shaping the next wave of professional development for librarians

by Steven J. Bell

For three weeks last September, 80 librarians gathered every Tuesday at 3 p.m. for an online learning experience. “Information Literacy and Collaboration with Faculty: How Blended Librarians Make It Work” was a webcast workshop series jointly sponsored by the nonprofit Teaching, Learning, and Technology (TLT) Group and ALA’s Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL).

What set this workshop apart was that its leaders used new technology to sustain the learning experience. The goal was to create an ongoing learning opportunity so that interested participants could continue to discuss the issues, explore new topics, share resources, and, most important, learn online and from each other.

For many librarians, an online learning community (OLC) represents the future in continuing professional development.

These communities take an entirely new approach, in which professional organizations offer framework and support for programs that are organized, scheduled, and conducted by the professional staff or hired experts. Although online communities also need the support of a technology provider to supply the appropriate learning software and infrastructure, they are largely grassroots gatherings begun by professionals who see an opportunity to deliver an ongoing educational experience for their colleagues. In this respect OLCS are entrepreneurial, although they are driven by the desire to fuel the sharing of information and knowledge rather than the pursuit of profits. These communities are likely to alter the way library professionals view continuing professional development.

Simply put, an OLC is a virtual environment where people come to learn together. While it can have a formal, almost classroom-like structure, it is more often informal and loosely led by a few individuals. Like physical communities, the members are drawn together by their mutual interests or the challenges they share, and the community thrives on social and intellectual interaction.

An online learning community can be supported entirely by a simple technology such as e-mail. But are online discussion lists learning communities?

Although they’re conducted by individuals who share a common belief and come together for a shared purpose, discussion lists offer weak foundations for learning environments. Lists serve well as vehicles for information-sharing, but persistent changes in knowledge or behaviors rarely take place there.

Learning is what distinguishes the OLC. Members of the community will develop new ideas and skills that enable them to create change in themselves and their organizations. Since learning also occurs in different ways, OLCS benefit from advanced communication technologies that support a variety of learning styles and formats, from basic discussion boards to far-more-sophisticated synchronous-learning environments that allow for the Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP), desktop applications sharing, online polls and surveys, whiteboards, and, of course, computer slides.

The first online library conference

In October 2003, the LearningTimes Network (learningtimes.net) sponsored the first-ever international library conference that took place entirely online. This five-day conference involved library professionals from over 250 libraries and 50 presenters. With library spending for conferences on the decline, online conferences provide a less costly opportunity for librarians to both present and attend programs. Online conferencing is more than just sitting in rooms listening to speakers: High-tech learning software allows conference-goers to interact synchronously and asynchronously with presenters and fellow attendees. Discussion boards allow participants to continue to share ideas in ways not possible at physical conference sessions, where we all go our separate ways afterward.

The LearningTimes Network consists of over 45 online communities and 45,000 members. Its Library Online Community has members from over 300 libraries. In partnership with ACRL and the TLT Group (an affiliate organization of the American Association of Higher Education), it has offered continuing education programs attended by over 1,000 librarians. According to Hope Kandel, technology coordinator for LearningTimes, one of the organization’s primary goals is to foster learning opportunities by connecting people to each other and allowing them to communicate comfortably and effectively. One of LearningTimes’ strengths is the production of live web-based events. Kandel says,
"We have found that producing these events helps build and sustain community membership by providing 'anchor points' for involvement and interaction."

**The Blended Librarian OLC**

Imagine that you and a colleague develop an idea that seems to offer great potential for creating transformative change within the library profession. It’s an idea you want to share with your colleagues, and you want to involve them in the process. But where do you begin? If you and your colleague are frontline practitioners who lack access to significant resources or organizational support, the challenges of organizing and promoting a new idea to the library profession can be overwhelming. John D. Shank, with whom I co-founded the Blended Librarian Community (BLC) (blendedlibrarian.org), said he considered a variety of communication media, including standards such as an electronic discussion list or an open-access electronic journal, but found both of them to be deficient.

Shank describes blended librarianship as a way librarians can achieve maximum integration into the teaching and learning process at any learning institution through the combination of traditional library science skills, information technology competency, and knowledge of instructional design and technology theory and practice. Blended librarianship shares a common goal with information literacy in seeking to help students to think and act more critically as researchers, but it focuses on using instructional-technology techniques to create learning objects and tools that allow faculty to help students achieve those learning outcomes. In this paradigm, the librarian is not necessarily the frontline educator but uses an array of skills to support teachers in advancing information literacy. "By providing course-specific learning objects to support an instructor's learning outcomes" says Shank, "we integrate ourselves into the course and can then more directly meet the information needs of the faculty and students."

In January 2004 Shank and I were asked by Steve Gilbert, president of the TLT Group, to develop a new online workshop based on blended librarianship for ACRLs information-literacy series. This development connected us with Kandel, as LearningTimes provides the technology for the TLT/ACRL online workshops. We believed that the LearningTimes technology could provide the perfect setting for a Blended Librarians Online Learning Community; that, combined with an initial source of membership from the TLT/ACRL workshop attendees, led to the development of the Blended Librarians community.

The Blended Librarians community grew slowly at first, but by the end of 2004 it had attracted close to 300 members. The key to growing and sustaining an OLC is member activity: If the community fails to continuously offer members a learning experience, it withers and dies. Since its inception, the Blended Librarians community has expanded its collection of discussion forums that offer members new information and an opportunity to exchange reactions and ideas. Most librarians have something to say, and the discussion board provides a safe and supportive environment where ideas can be expressed. Discussion forums can be a simple recommendation of an article or book citation or a complex debate on an issue of concern to the community. Chats and webcasts offer higher levels of interactivity to members who seek connectivity with others.

The Blended Librarian OLC uses chats—a strictly text but synchronous form of exchange—to allow members to discuss current issues or to have a real-time meeting to discuss the direction of the community. More formal events, such as a presentation by a guest speaker, use webcasting technology; this allows a speaker and members to talk over the internet as well as chat. Speakers can display graphics, hold mini-surveys or polls, conduct desktop sharing, push websites to attendees, or write on a whiteboard.

As the creators of the BLC, Shank and I believe our advantage lies in starting a community based around a developing idea. Blended librarianship is in its infancy, and we look to the community members to help the idea take shape and meaning. It is through that interaction and the offering of member events that we plan to keep members interested, involved, and part of a sustainable organism.

A regular agenda of events will help an OLC grow, but it takes more to create a true community environment that fosters member loyalty. When it comes to establishing and sustaining a thriving OLC, WebJunction (webjunction.org) is setting the standard. WebJunction, with nearly 9,000 members, calls itself "an online community

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**Recipe for a Blended Librarian:**

1 part *Traditional Library Science Skills*
1 part *Knowledge of Instructional Design*
1 part *Technology Theory and Practice*

**Collaborate well**

**Serves:** all of librarianship
for library staff where minds meet to share ideas, solve problems, take online courses, and have fun."

According to Chrystie Hill, WebJunction's community coordinator, the key to a sustainable community is member involvement. "Community members are involved in every aspect of our site and community development," she says. Along with an advisory board that represents library staff of all kinds, WebJunction members serve as discussion-forum moderators; regularly contribute articles, editorial skills, feedback, and suggestions, and collaboratively develop programming based on community needs.

Certainly, WebJunction benefits from the support it receives from OCLC (which, along with the Gates Foundation and other partners, created the program) and full-time staff to manage community activities; so how do grassroots communities achieve similar success and sustainability? At the Blended Librarians Community we are discovering that even with part-time moderation, it's our members that help to keep the community vital. Lisa Allen, reference and cataloging librarian at Kutztown (Pa.) University, joined the BLC after attending the ACRL/TLT Group workshop on blended librarianship and information literacy. Allen says, "I wanted to continue the dialogue with other librarians outside the network of my library colleagues." Acknowledging a trend within the profession to hire librarians with instructional technology skills, Allen added that she "wanted to be informed about issues regarding the adoption of new skill sets, and talk about how librarians can become more skilled in these areas."

Allen's regular postings to discussion groups and participation in community events are shining examples of member commitment. Any online community is challenged to get its members regularly involved in community events, and the Blended Librarians community is no exception. Kandel says that if "50% of the members who sign up for an online event participate, that's an excellent indicator that the community is doing well." Using WebJunction as a model, the BLC leaders plan to get members more involved in community roles while over time reducing the community's dependency on those who began it. As Hill states, "The community collaboratively builds itself. We avoid any us-them thinking, and our staff is merely a part of the community we serve."

A learning community may also grow from a shared problem or dilemma. The Copyright Advisory Network (CAN), a service provided by ALA's Office for Information Technology Policy, is based on helping members become more informed about copyright issues. While Carrie Russell, OITP copyright specialist for and a
coleader of CAN, states that it is yet to become a full-fledged learning community, she believes “One of the best ways to really learn something is to have to write about it. So when people do compose messages and provide their opinions at CAN, they really have to think in a different way. They have to explain copyright to another person. Hopefully, this learning will transfer to the day-to-day workplace.” For now, during CAN’s pilot stage, Russell doesn’t expect members to be much involved once their question gets answered, but she sees it eventually offering programs that will move CAN beyond a Q&A service.

**Reaping the benefits**

Is there any evidence that participating in an OLC is beneficial? The best answer to that question lies in the extensive research on the impact learning communities have on college students. In nearly every area and indicator of performance, students in learning communities demonstrate higher grades, better retention, greater engagement with others and the course material, and improved intellectual curiosity. From a teaching perspective, librarians who provide instruction services can benefit by improving their knowledge and practice of pedagogy. Active engagement requires a minimal time commitment, but participating in an online learning community provides good return on that time investment by connecting librarians with peers who can provide support and assistance. The spirit of collaboration that is generated online often carries over to the workplace, encouraging coworkers to share knowledge and build community locally.

All libraries serve communities, and librarians enrich those communities—be they neighborhoods or college campuses—through the services they deliver and the ways they involve themselves in community events. Just as librarians derive benefits from physical community participation, those gains can cross over into virtual communities and provide another good reason for OLC involvement. “As more of us are overwhelmed by too much information, too many attractive resource options, and too little time, we need better ways to develop and sustain meaningful connections with colleagues,” says the TLG Group’s Gilbert, who adds that “online learning communities are enabling us to enrich our lives and real communities.” What library leader would want to deprive their staff of such opportunities?

The OLC represents a new dimension in providing continuing professional education for members of the profession. Through the collaborative and sharing environment it creates, an OLC helps librarians to overcome any alienation or isolation they may experience in their own workplace. WebJunction’s Hill captures the magic of the OLC when she describes it as “taking the power of the web-enabled conversation, publishing, and learning, and putting it all together in a shared space that everyone can get to, regardless of where we are, and it’s all bolstered by trusted relationships and a collaborative spirit built up over time.”

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