

ACRL 2007 Conference Report
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The first notable event I attended was a panel session on Friday entitled "*Caution! Hazardous Substances: Recognizing and Deflecting Toxic Personalities in the Library Workplace.*" The ACRL program guide's description said that the presentation was "...based in part on a survey of academic librarians about the amount of toxicity in their organizations..." and included discussion about the survey results. The panel included 3 academic librarians as presenters with accompanying PowerPoint and a handout. The presentation was broken into three parts: comments about web responses to the survey, possible solutions to workplace toxicity, and case studies to be used in audience discussion.

The web survey used as the basis for the presentation involved roughly 3,000 participants who responded to a series of online questions. The survey confirmed that "toxicity" in the workplace did indeed exist (toxicity, as defined by the panel, is "reoccurring workplace relationship problems/issues due to combinations of factors"). The issue was not specific to any one department; it affected all departments in the library. Many respondents to the survey commented that workplace toxicity in part was based on gender issues (women working with women...surprisingly, the presenters mentioned that the most negative comments about female coworkers were made by female respondents) and managerial differences (from staff and managerial viewpoints).

Although this was an entertaining session (especially with regard to survey comments) I'm not sure how much practical information I learned. I did learn how to recognize toxicity better in department structures and relationships (such as: the suspicious absence of a person in a project where they should be included might indicate that that individual is "toxic" in the hierarchy) why it is important to recognize it (knowledge of situation is helpful to deflect future problems) but I didn't necessarily learn how to deal with or deflect toxicity once I recognized it.

The second notable session was a paper discussion, called "Librarians as Academic Leaders: Uniquely Qualified for the Job." This was also a lecture presentation w/and accompanying PPT and handouts. This presentation focused on the strengths of the librarian within the academic landscape- librarians are uniquely placed for leadership in the campus structure, since the nature of their work across disciplines with many different faculty members gives them advantageous recognition within institutions.

The primary goal of librarian leaders, according to the two presenters, was to break the librarian stereotype as a faculty member who job is to simply support the existing curriculum. Instead, it is important to stand out in collaborative work situations where you can be recognized first as a colleague and also (hopefully) as a leader. Librarians must find ways to be seen and heard outside the "four walls" of the library, either by leaving the physical space or by becoming a more active faculty voice through active workshops, websites, and service opportunities. The presentation also discussed obstacles to leadership overcome: time constraints, communication, lack of faculty status, and the lack of opportunities to contribute.

The next session I attended was "Digital Media, Learning, and Libraries: Web 2.0, Learning 2.0, and Librarian 2.0," an invited paper by David Silver, a Media

Services Professor from University of San Francisco. This engaging presentation was primarily lecture with some web examples. The presentation mainly focused on the medium of the Internet and new tools for communicating & presenting information: blogging, collaborative websites/intelligence (Wikipedia), web-pages-on-the-fly, social networks and the “new pedagogy.”

The speaker’s content mainly concerned these new electronic applications, but there were some specific examples that really caught my eye. One of the more notable was the “collaborative catalog.” A web page was created to showcase a graphic novel collection at a library- comments by users on the collection were used to guide further collection development. It was an exciting example of the shortest route between patrons’ requests and the library shelves.

In addition to websites, the speaker covered some assumptions of the new digital generation. Some assumptions- they are lazy when it comes to actual research (his view was that this was partially true, but it would be more accurate to say that the digital generation is narcissistic and we need to engage their interests and their perspectives, i.e. user-driven content), they are technically proficient (some are and some aren’t, but not every young person is a technical virtuoso, or necessarily interested in “living online”), they are multi-taskers (true), and they love social networks (true).

Mr. Silver repeatedly made the point that blogging and wikis and social networks are great levelers- the use of multimedia formats, instantly published online (weblog entries w/pictures) has a huge potential for change with the current generation of users, and it is controlled by the users directly. There is no overt control over content.

One of the most notable and useful presentations I saw at the conference was on Saturday- this was a panel session entitled “Who Do You Trust?: Wikipedia and the Authority of Anonymous Strangers.” There were two presenters, and the presentation was mainly focused on web examples and video testimony. The main topic, of course, was Wikipedia, and how its content & usage differed/aligned with its public perception. The presenters started with a web demonstration- in Google searches, Wikipedia was almost always of the top ten results in any results list when any term was entered in the search box- this showed that Wikipedia was powerfully relevant to any casual internet searcher. The presenters then showed video research they’d conducted at their institutions, which consisted of interviews with students, faculty, and librarians. Some of the more pointed questions focused on personal Wikipedia usage versus traditional reference sources (print and online encyclopedia), opinions on the veracity of Wikipedia entries, and the predictions about the future of Wikipedia and similar collaborative knowledge resources.

The results were astonishing: almost all the interviewed subjects (including the librarians) admitted that they almost never use traditional encyclopedias nowadays- several couldn’t remember the last time they’d used a print encyclopedia. Also surprising was the fact that students really did seem to understand the authority of information within Wikipedia; they did not trust it as a reputable sole source of information. Rather, they (and professors as well) viewed Wikipedia as a starting point to get a grasp of terms and subject material- they would verify the information they found at other sources and the external links provided by Wikipedia and Google.

It was clear to me from the presentation that Wikipedia, despite our professional reservations, is fast becoming a chosen source of students and professors alike. It can be

accessed anywhere, without a password or the need to be at a specific physical location. The Wikipedia database can possess inaccurate or outright fraudulent information, but users seem to be savvy enough to check with multiple sources to double-check info. Wikipedia is not arrogant or elitist; anybody with information can create an entry- in some cases this is a bad thing, but users tend to police themselves and some “amateurs” have excellent knowledge. No term is too lowbrow or non-scholarly to make the cut as a Wikipedia entry- in fact, it seems that Wikipedia is one of the few readily-available resources with popular culture information in an encyclopedic format.