

ACRL Conference, 2009

Pushing the Edge: Explore, Engage, Extend

Seattle, Washington

The 14th Annual ACRL Conference was held in Seattle, WA, a city clearly well-equipped for large conferences. Some 2800 people attended the conference with another 300+ in virtual attendance, which broke all previous attendance records. This year's conference theme was "Pushing the edge: explore, engage, extend" and it was also touted as the first green conference. There were some specific discussions and events devoted to "greening" our libraries, though I didn't take part in any. In most cases, the eat and drink ware were compost-able or recyclable.

This was my first ACRL Conference, and for the professional benefit and personal enjoyment I experienced, I hope it's not my last. The Conference was very well organized and the program was strong. I was unable to attend everything that interested me, but at least I have the option of accessing most of the conference content on the ACRL website, the same access to which virtual attendees were entitled.

I went to the conference to "push the edge" in essentially five areas: 1) online research services and resources; 2) personal communication and leadership skills; 3) efforts to understand better our users; 4) assessing reference services; and 5) achieving fuller engagement and collaboration with classroom faculty. I succeeded in all but one these areas. In the interest of improving my own communication and leadership skills, I was prepared to participate in a 3-hr workshop entitled "Art of strategic persuasion: essential skills for leaders," but found when I arrived that a pre-registration was required, and there was a long waiting list. Instead I attended an invited paper by Peter Herson, who spoke on the topic of student outcomes. His message seemed to be essentially a rally call to library administrators to think programmatically when it comes to the discussion of student (learning) outcomes and not just at the level of information literacy. True assessment, according to Herson, tracks student learning beyond course performance and numerical statistics, and reminded us that employers are looking for people who can think and communicate. Do our attempts to measure outcomes really get at these skills?

The biggest conference buzz surrounded LibGuides (LG), the first Web 2.0 application devoted to the creation of library (research) guides. I attended two such events that were packed (maybe 300 people?), and it appeared that roughly half of those in attendance were already using LG. There were seven LG-related sessions. Wheaton purchased LG over a year ago, and we think it is worthy of the attention it's getting. One contributed paper in fact set out to assess LG, asking "do the outcomes justify the buzz?" Their conclusion: Yep. The core of the paper was the results of a statistical comparison between LG use at Princeton and Cornell. The preliminary conclusions of this study suggest that 1) current LG authors (i.e. mainly librarians creating LGs) are not yet exploiting fully the 2.0-ness of LG; and 2) heavy use of a particular LG can be an indication of its inherent usefulness, but more often high use reflects the way it is promoted (or required) by the professor and/or librarian. In one example, the high "popularity" was due to the fact that students had to complete some assignments through the guide.

Librarians at Boston College and Grand Valley State University solicited feedback from students on LGs (and research guides in general), which suggested the following:

1. Students prefer course- or topic-specific guides
2. Students expect and desire both the descriptions of resources and searching tips

The full results of their surveys are available at <http://libguides.gvsu.edu/acrl09>.

Back in 2007 a group of librarians from the University of Rochester published the results of their ground-breaking student ethnographic study entitled, “Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester.” Others libraries, like St. Cloud University in Minnesota, have since adopted (and adapted) these methods in light of the lessons learned at the U of Rochester. Librarians from both of these schools discussed the merits of various tools and techniques, all of which represent attempts to build the most complete student profile possible, and from this knowledge of our users—so the logic goes—librarians can design more useful and effective services, tools and resources. Certainly some of what they learned about students at U of Rochester can be applied to students broadly speaking, but it is likewise true that significant differences among user groups may exist. There is no way of getting around doing your own study if you really want the most accurate picture of your students, and doing it “right” requires a lot of time and effort, but there are some simple techniques that can elicit valuable information about your students. The list of simple techniques includes putting out a flip pad with a question on it such as ‘Why are you in the library today?’, or choosing a space in the library to sit (or float) and observe, or conducting a “walk and count” study, looking to see what are the most popular spots, the number of laptops, the number of work groups, etc.

All the above reflects only Friday. Saturday was also very full, starting with an 8am panel session on Reference Effort Assessment Data (READ). My reference staff has recorded statistics of reference activity (e.g. type of query, time spent, etc.) on a couple occasions in the past four years, but we’ve never utilized READ. I now want to track reference statistics routinely, and hoped to find READ a suitable solution. I haven’t decided altogether but it is promising. We were shown an online form for entering this information at Northern Michigan University that interfaces with a MySQL database, which facilitates data analysis and graphing. According to the results of NMU’s READ statistics, 75% of all reference questions fell into the 1-2 level: 1) Answers that require the least amount of effort and no specialized knowledge skills or expertise, or 2) Answers given which require more effort than the first category, but require only minimal specific knowledge skills or expertise. Here are some uses of the READ data that were discussed:

- To help managers make staffing decisions, e.g. when to staff the service desks with professional librarians, or the overall number of staff needed
- READ as a knowledge database for training and for strategic planning purposes
- A tool that helps reference document the sometimes complex and difficult work they do

Following READ I attended another panel session. This time the topic was learning objects and how to conceptualize and execute them. The stated purpose: “participants will learn how to translate classroom instructional content into learning objects (LOs) in order to make learning available to multiple users on the go.” With LOs we can break down larger, more complex research activities (e.g. how to search and locate journal articles) into more manageable parts for users (e.g. how to identify a scholarly article) and place them at points of need on our websites, say, in 1-2 minutes “micro lectures.” Breaking it down more complex functions was referred to as “de-chunking concepts.” Panelists demonstrated a PowerPoint-based storyboarding and mind mapping technique to design a LO. To end with, they highlighted some free 2.0 applications that work well to execute and deliver LOs, including Trailfire (“... a collection of web pages, assembled and annotated by any Trailfire member, on just about anything under the sun.”), Hot Potatoes (“... enabling you to create interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and gap-fill exercises for the World Wide Web.”), and Brainhoney (“a social learning environment where anyone can teach a lesson on any subject.”)

Lastly, I sat down with colleagues over lunch and discussed our experiences and shared tips on how to build collegial and collaborative relationships with our classroom faculty. All seemed to feel that

a lot of work remained to achieve a vital and mutually-enriching level of collaboration, but there were stories of success, where librarians have been deeply integrated into the education process at the course level, sometimes even grading certain assignments. Another told of the success of informing professors and building relationships through a newsletter directed to individual departments. I share my work to meet every academic department in one of their departmental meetings on a cyclical basis. One librarian emphasized the value of studying faculty syllabi as a means of targeting those courses that demand a higher degree of library research for their assignments.

In summary, ACRL's 2009 Conference was very well planned and executed, and the conference content was very pertinent in addressing the burning issues in academic libraries. I plan to attend again in two years on the other side of the country: Philadelphia.

I wish finally to extend my sincere gratitude to the Libras grant committee for its financial support to attend the Conference in Seattle.

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