

LOEX 2010 Conference Report: Dearborn, MI

Joel Seewald, University of Michigan-Dearborn and Lesley Brown, University of Illinois at Chicago

LOEX went back home (or at least within easy commuting distance) for the first time in six years for its 38th annual conference, “Bridging and Beyond: Developing Librarian Infrastructure” in Dearborn, MI on April 29-May 1, 2010. After a Thursday reception, over 300 attendees had the chance to listen to a plenary speaker each morning, which then led to 46 breakout sessions to choose from on Friday and Saturday. Here are some highlights from the Great Lakes State.

The Value of Teaching in Learning

Brian Coppola, Professor of Chemistry at the University of Michigan, was Friday morning’s keynote speaker. Dr. Coppola, who has received numerous teaching awards, such as the 2009 Carnegie/CASE U.S. Professor of the Year, spoke to LOEX attendees about his teaching philosophy. This philosophy is embodied by a unique introductory chemistry class that he started teaching several years ago.

The basic concept of this class is: a student learns concepts better when there is a future need to teach the concepts to someone else, rather than when the student is only learning them for himself. Therefore, the need for the teaching must be known beforehand. This is the concept of explanatory knowledge espoused by Dr. Elaine Coleman and it is the core of Dr. Coppola’s teaching philosophy. The most common ways for instructors to have students “teach” is by having them write essays, present poster sessions, and take tests (assuming that the tests are more imaginative than multiple choice tests). However, Dr. Coppola wanted to create a more explicit and creative teaching situation for his students.

Dr. Coppola was inspired by his undergraduate days as both an art student and a chemistry student, where the approaches to learning were vastly different. In chemistry, the emphasis was on learning the facts and getting the answers correct. This is a convergent approach: follow a specific pathway to the one correct answer. In art, however, the assignments were along the lines of “draw your roommate’s foot.” These assignments were divergent:

because of creativity, everyone had the same assignment, but not the same results.

So, when Dr. Coppola started working on the instruction design for his first-year chemistry course, he decided he wanted “students teaching students” as much as possible. For example, he provided all his students a course pack of old exams, but no answer key. To develop the answers, he encouraged them to converse with each other, teach each other, and consult the literature in order to see what is and is not being understood. This helps students prepare for exams (the “teaching events”). Additionally, he wanted to provide an experience for the 10% of students who indicated that they are “science-motivated” (those who think they will go on to a career in science) without separating them from the rest of the class. He also wondered: “What does a chemistry studio look like?” and “Can I create a ‘draw foot’ assignment for chemistry?”

The result is an optional honors experience for the science-motivated students that incorporates aspects of an art class. Small groups of the science-motivated students spend an extra couple of hours per week, led by students who have previously taken the class, posting and debating the results of assignments that have no clear answer. These assignments cause much anxiety because students are used to getting the correct answer. These sessions, therefore, aren’t about grading papers, but about the debate encouraged by the peer review of the assignments.

Another technique used in the class is the creation of video enhanced podcasts by the science-motivated students. The process of creating the podcast involves storyboarding, collaboration among team members, and peer review. The end result is a very accurate explanation of the question, not just an answer. The process allows the students much creativity.

Dr. Coppola no longer teaches the class; it is so popular that other professors want to teach it. The “science motivated” option also doesn’t lack students interested in doing the extra work.

Civic Engagement: Where Do Libraries Fit?

The Friday dinner panel discussion consisted of Dr. Addell A. Anderson of the University of Michigan Detroit Center and Dr. Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Associate Provost for University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University. These two academics have evolved into administrators over their tenure at the largest educational institutions in the state of Michigan. The title of their panel discussion was “Academic Institutions and Civic Engagement: Where Do Libraries Fit?” Prior to having attendees discuss some of their own work-related experiences and activities with local communities, both Dr. Anderson and Dr. Fitzgerald provided background on University of Michigan and Michigan State University outreach activities, as both institutions have opened academic centers in the city of Detroit. During their discussion both speakers answered four questions prepared by the moderator:

- Why did two large universities choose to get involved with Detroit?
- What are your goals?
- What have you accomplished?
- How can libraries take the answers to these questions back home and make a difference?

As attendees shared their experience with civic engagement and outreach it was obvious that more academic libraries are working to address this matter. While many libraries have found it challenging to implement meaningful outreach programs (especially at a time when so many academic institutions are experiencing shrinking budgets), librarians are doing what they can to help their local communities. For example, one library had a “campout” in the library (with tents and everything) for kids from the community, while another library works closely with School Media Specialists in their area to help high school students with the transition to college and academic libraries. In closing, Dr. Anderson and Dr. Fitzgerald stressed the importance of collaborating not only with other academics, but also partnering with other public and school libraries to ensure the success of students at all levels and the community as well.

The I-Society

For the Saturday morning plenary speaker, Dr. Hermina G. B. Anghelescu from Wayne State University presented on the challenges and opportunities librarians face in this ever-changing I-Society/E-World. Dr. Anghelescu detailed the many challenges librarians face in the 21st century. A few examples that she listed were shrinking budgets, migrating collections, new technologies, diverse users and user needs, and information literacy initiatives. In order to rise to the occasion and meet such challenges Dr. Anghelescu believes that librarians must recognize the value that we add to search engines, databases and library collections. She has also traveled extensively for her work with the library, particularly in central Europe, and she shared stories about her experience working with various librarians and libraries in Romania, noting the disparity between relatively strong access to information in the United States with the lack of access where she has traveled abroad.

The Saturday morning presentation was an appropriate beginning to the last day of interactive and breakout sessions, and provided a good insight into the diverse experiences librarians encounter all over the world. It was very inspiring to be addressed by a speaker as accomplished as Dr. Anghelescu and quite motivating to realize that the list of challenges she presented were also opportunities to be pursued.

Breakout sessions & interactive workshops

Library instruction can have many different forms in the online realm (e.g., creating online library tutorials, embedding in a class through courseware, and teaching for-credit online courses). Tim Bottorff and Andrew Todd, librarians from the University of Central Florida (UCF), addressed “How Do You Count That?: Statistical Reporting of Online Library Instruction Activities.” After searching the literature for guidance, the UCF librarians found they would largely be on their own to develop their library’s guidelines for quantifying online instruction. Thus, UCF focused on identifying and counting what of their online instruction is analogous to face-to-face instruction (e.g., if a student turns in an assignment or a quiz). However, these guidelines meant that a lot of

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their online instruction did not officially “count.” Were there other ideas or solutions?

It was hoped that other libraries had been through the process of determining how to quantify online library instruction and that someone already had the answer to counting online instruction. The majority of this LOEX presentation was a discussion of this next step, the results of an exploratory survey to determine what other libraries are counting as instruction. The survey (307 usable responses) showed that statistical counting of instruction varies greatly: there is no consistent way of measuring online instruction. The presenters hope their work will help stimulate an association, such as ACRL, to create consistent definitions and guidelines that allow institutions to accurately compare statistics.

The session, “Follow the Rubric Road: Assessing the Librarian Instructor,” by Ned Fielden of San Francisco State University (SFSU), highlighted the development of a rubric for review for tenure-track instruction librarians. Library administration at SFSU wanted a better way to give both a formative review of feedback and a summative evaluation. A rubric, a “glorified checklist,” allows one to get a lot of information from a small tool. It’s relatively easy to use, if designed well, and standardizes the evaluation process.

After a classroom visitation by a reviewer, the data from the rubric is given to the instructor (the formative part). For the summative part, the reviewer uses the rubric to craft a standard letter for the personnel file. On the surface, the letter looks the same as the letters in use previous to the rubric, but now the reviewer makes sure to write up a standardized, wide-ranging set of facets covered by the rubric. Most instructors feel the rubric makes for a better review, as it increases fairness and allows instructors to know the assessment criteria.

Another thoroughly enjoyable session was “Technology Classroom Design: From Idea to Reality,” presented by Vanessa Earp and Paul Earp. The presenters set four goals for the session: introduce key questions one should ask prior to implementing technology, identify departments typically involved within the library, address issues of cost for projects, and learn strategies for

dealing with techies. Their talk discussed some of the challenges, disappointments and lessons that were experienced while redesigning/renovating classroom and library space. The attendees were able to see results of two classrooms that had recently been redesigned at Kent State University, with floor plans and numerous pictures to illustrate the presenters’ points.

What made the session particularly enjoyable was that Paul, the Computer Support Assistant at the University of Akron, offered his expertise from a technical, non-librarian perspective. Practical suggestions, such as make sure to consider heating and cooling capabilities because computers will dramatically change room temperatures and do not place computers on the floor as it subjects them to potential damage from cleaning crews and dust, were tips non-techies might not have considered. Both presenters also recommended weighing wants versus needs when designing a new space – indicating that it may be best to consider a “multiple stage implementation.” This was not just a presentation of the latest technology and gadgets used in instruction, but delineated important questions that should be asked prior to undertaking a major project like redesigning a space, such as “Are you using an existing space (renovation or new construction)? How much money do you have? Who do you need to work with on your campus? What kind of time-frame are you working with?”

A final noteworthy session was “Librarians as Improvisers: An Improvisational Approach to Teaching Information Literacy,” an interactive session that was very engaging and amusing. The goal of the presenters, Anthony Stamatoplos of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and Edward Trout of ComedySportz Indianapolis, was to share improvisation tips to help instructors be more responsive while providing library instruction. Stamatoplos and Trout began with a few improvisational warm-ups like “Zip, Zap, Zow” and “Bunny, Bunny, Bunny” both of which were as wacky as their names, but definitely got all the attendees up and ready to participate in the next exercise – one word storytelling. Overall, this session was a great example of training the trainer, as the exercises were not necessarily intended to be directly implemented in the classroom, but rather to help instruction librarians think on their feet and to take in feedback from their audience. With these im-