

The Quarterly Interview: Melanie Sellar

Marymount College and Librarians Without Borders (LWB)

-Edited transcript-

LOEX: *Before we get into your extensive volunteer work with LWB, please tell us about your full-time job.*

Sellar: I work as the Education Services and Reference Librarian at Marymount College in Palos Verdes, California; it's a small liberal arts college located outside of L.A. I've been here about two years and I'm responsible for the information literacy program. Additionally, I work the reference desk about 10 hours a week.

Last year, I led a campus-wide service learning project where Marymount students from multiple courses and clubs supported an inner city school library in L.A. Our school is very big in service learning and experiential learning.

When did you first do teaching and instruction, including for those in underserved communities?

As both an undergrad at McMaster University (Ontario) and then as a library school student at the University of Western Ontario (UWO), I was a teaching assistant for a Linguistics course; in between I did some technical writing, teaching others how to use software. I think what I kind of recognize as a common thread is teaching is about translation. I like to translate ideas and make them understandable for other people. Somebody once said to me, and I like this expression, that librarians help make sense of the world – and I think we do.

After graduating from UWO, I was at the Univ. of California Irvine where I was the community outreach librarian. I was responsible for the program that provided a college experience for middle and high school students at some of the local underprivileged districts. In the morning they would do some library research and then in the afternoon they would do some hands-on activities related to that research.

I think in academic libraries we still tend to define ourselves by our collections and we need to make sure we step back and realize libraries are about the exchange of ideas and learning. It's about connecting people with ideas and sometimes that hasn't always been the main priority, perhaps because it's harder to quantify and to measure that impact.

What is Librarians Without Borders' mission?

Our mission is to improve information access and equities in the world and the model to do so is to organize and empower students to work with communities to address their needs. We're definitely an action-oriented nonprofit.

How long have you been involved in LWB and how did it start?

I have been involved since the beginning, about six years ago. A fellow teaching assistant when I was getting my MLIS at the University of Western Ontario shared with me that it was his dream to build a library for the medical and nursing students back in his hometown of Huambo, Angola. It made sense to me - he has a need and we are MLIS students who can help address it, so why not help him? So I brought the idea forward to our student council and, though it was originally conceived as a one-time project, everyone was excited about it and our enthusiasm and ambitions quickly grew and we said "Why not have an organization that's dedicated to this?" Soon we got ourselves incorporated federally in Canada.

What did you learn from this first project?

Our partner Jorge was a graduate student in Canada, but he did go back to Angola eventually; communicating with him there was certainly very challenging. He didn't have readily available internet or telephone access, so we couldn't necessarily get through to him. But we did have some successes. When Jorge first came to me he himself just had an idea, he didn't know how to go forward with it: how does one set up a library, how does one think about it? So we really talked with him about finding a community partner, an official entity in Huambo, and finding a space for it. We worked with him to try and give some shape to his idea. I think often times people might think of Librarians Without Borders, "Oh, they are about book donations." Now doing book donation might be a component of it, but we are about more than that. It's really about library development and the needs will vary with the project.

That is a good distinction to help clarify what LWB does. Providing donated materials in native languages is only a typical starting point. LWB is more focused on offering managerial and professional know-how, and where necessary in your latest projects, about helping actually construct buildings. Along with being a physical place where books and technology are kept, library's also have a whole organization, a culture, that need to be developed. The template for your bigger projects is "How do we actually set up a library that will be a sustaining enterprise going forward"...is that accurate?

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Exactly! Our conversations with Jorge revolved around, “Yes we can bring some initial books to your collection” but beyond that, “How are you going to support that?” So, for example, we talked about different micro businesses that could exist adjacent to the library to create some revenue so they could then go forward and keep this going themselves.

So what have been some more recent projects?

In the last couple of years we have had a number of successful projects carried out by our students, particularly in Costa Rica and Guatemala. Last year was the first time that we sent students abroad, so that was really a great accomplishment. After a lot of prep work throughout the academic year, the students in the summer built a library in a small village of about 1000 people in Costa Rica.

As part of this long prep work, they did collection development for the library’s young readers by helping pick the books and then raising money for them from academic sources and book publishers. Then they went to Costa Rica for two weeks to physically build and set up the library alongside the villagers. They leveled the ground, dug holes, grouted the floors, raised roofs, and helped build the shelves.

The Guatemalan library, located in the city of Quetzaltenango, had different needs, at least at first, as they wanted our help in creating an action plan -- in learning how to run a library. They had no experience, no context for a library there: how should we design this space, how do we organize the collection, how do we catalog it? In 2010, 11 LWB student volunteers traveled to Guatemala to deliver their recommendations and this year even more volunteers from most of our schools will go down to help build it.

How is LWB operated and structured? Who does all this work?

It’s all by volunteers, who are either professional librarians employed at schools across Canada (or Canadians not in the country, like myself) or Canadian students in MLIS programs. We have an executive team, which consists of officers who manage the organization and of liaisons to our student committees (I am the Co-Executive Director). We also have a four member board of directors. Then, we have the student committees, who do a great deal of the actual, on the ground work for our various projects.

What schools is LWB currently at?

There are student communities in five places: McGill University, University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, University of Western Ontario and Dalhousie University.

How do students become part of LWB?

Students who are interested in forming a LWB student committee at their school can apply to get this designation through the LWB Executive Team. LWB appoints a librarian, who is typically a recent graduate who was involved on the student committee when she was in school, to act as the student committee liaison. The students’ schools support them by doing such things as providing meeting space, opportunities to present and discuss their work, and support for fundraisers (e.g., UWO gave \$1000 to the collection development fund for the Costa Rica library).

How do the student committees operate?

Each student committee works on two different kinds of projects, local and organization-wide. For local, that means projects run solely by each individual committee, such as working with the libraries of nearby First Nation communities or working with groups overseas, such as the University of Western Ontario shipping Braille reading material for a school for the blind in Nigeria. In addition to local, every committee contributes to what we call the overarching project, projects that span the whole organization and require more coordination with the liaisons from the exec team. This year’s large project is the trip to Guatemala, which was incubated by the McGill committee last year and now the whole organization is involved, contributing different pieces to it. Twenty-four students as well as three exec team members are going for almost two weeks.

Do students do this for academic credit or get stipends (e.g., for travel)?

Currently, they do not get credit. Some students are using their LWB projects as context in their classes, such as doing papers on the information seeking behaviors of Guatemala children, but they don’t get currently credit for the LWB work itself. Now that we have some successes, the Executive Team and Board will work on formalizing Librarians Without Borders more into the curriculum so that students could get some credit for this work. It is just wonderful experiential and service learning that they’re doing - they’re taking what they are doing in their courses and applying it to

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Since LibGuides allows embedding, this solved my issue. Thus, not only does Jing solve my virtual storage and access problem, but it also gives me all the embedding codes I need.

Conclusion

Free online applications are useful if your budget is limited, or if you need to create something quickly without budget approval. While many people may be concerned about the quality and long-term support of web applications, these freebies often reflect the most current trends and behavior of online communities. If evaluated thoroughly, they can help encourage involvement of distance users and give more Web presence to your subject guide.

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solve real problems. Also, the work we do is often international, which can help broaden the curriculum for students.

As far as money, we really have dedicated students - they pay for themselves. They are doing this on top of their school work, out of love of the idea and commitment for the mission. In future years we would like to be able to offset some of those costs through grants or scholarships.

If a student or librarian wants to get involved with LWB, how do they get involved? Can they be from outside Canada?

It's always initiated by the person – they contact us. A student will say: "I'm really excited about this, how do we go about setting up a committee ourselves?" Right now we are not able to do that with schools in the United States, but we are starting to look into how to set ourselves legally up in the U.S. As far as timing, I'd love to tell you "We'll be in the U.S. in two years," but really we need to be able to have the

(QR Codes...Continued from page 7)

1 <http://net.lib.byu.edu/~mjw243/audiotourhandout.pdf>

2 <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7250/>

3 <http://catalogue.library.ryerson.ca/record=b1966691~S0>

4 <http://iii.sonoma.edu:2082/record=b2007214~S12>

5 <http://www.saclibrary.org/?pageId=59>

6 <http://infoguides.sdsu.edu/people/ppl.php?id=3>

Footnotes

1 Research Methods in Music MUS7260
<http://hkbu.libguides.com/MUS7260>

2 A search in the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database for Meebo yielded 23 results, but a search for Plugoo only retrieved one short article with a brief mentioning of it. A quick glance on the guides in Springshare's LibGuide Community also showed that the free IM used by most librarians was Meebo and only very few used Plugoo.

3 Griffis, Patrick. "Building Pathfinders with Free Screen Capture Tools." *Information Technology and Libraries* (December 2009): 189-190.

resources to support that. A focus this year is really looking to raising money for the organization. In the past we've done that through private individual donations, but we are starting to look at grants through our partner institutions as well as corporate sponsorship that can allow us to keep doing the good work that we've been doing and to take on additional institutions.

To learn more about and support the work of Librarians Without Borders, including about their trip to Guatemala, please see: <http://www.librarianswithoutborders.org>
twitter: lwb_online

7 <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7250/>

8 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/25095603@N07/5021688103/in/set-72157625028207818/lightbox>

9 <http://wvutoday.wvu.edu/n/2011/2/16/qr-codes-connect-wvu-students-with-library-resources>

10 <http://lib.byu.edu/sites/qrcodes/group-study-room-reservation/>

11 <http://independentrockstar.com/2040/qr-codes-posters-matt-moran-band/>

12 <http://designnotes.info/?p=2568>

13 <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/deborahm/QuranposterACRL2011>