

SETTING SAIL WITHOUT A MAP: CREATIVE COLLABORATION FOR A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

KATHRYN L. VENDITTI AND JUDITH P. WILLIAMS

“Let’s put on a conference!” It certainly sounded easy enough. It started with an early childhood educator and a handful of librarians who shared an interest in literacy and a passion for picture books. A planning committee was formed with representatives from several university departments, the public schools, the university bookstore and our library. The novelty of the idea attracted a wide range of presenters, including authors, illustrators, commercial artists, publishers, educators, public librarians and others with connections to picture books, through museum work or as collectors. The *Art of the Picture Book Conference* took place in May 2006, at Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio. The two-day conference drew a total of 158 attendees from eight different states, featured award-winning authors/ illustrators as keynote speakers, and offered 35 breakout sessions. The conference was not billed as an information literacy conference, or even as a literacy event. However, by involving co-curricular programs and community partners, and by marketing to many different constituencies, we were able to offer a variety of techniques to develop and enhance literacy. Presentation opportunities allowed our university students to showcase their comprehensive information abilities. Crossover into various disciplines created wide interest and networking opportunities, and resulted in increased library visibility across campus.

As librarians, our primary motivation for participating in the conference was to forge new partnerships and creatively network in order to enhance our opportunities for expanding our instruction program. As many instruction librarians know,

one of the greatest challenges for information literacy programs is finding the connection to an audience of students, usually via the teaching faculty. When the two of us began working at the Ashland University Library eight years ago, there were few BI classes scheduled, and certainly nothing that could be considered an “information literacy” program. During our first year at Ashland, we attended the ACRL Institute for Information Literacy known as the “Immersion Program.” What we learned at Immersion gave direction to our professional careers, and to our goals as academic reference librarians. Over the next few years, we expanded our instruction program. A comparison of data from Ohio’s independent colleges and universities, drawn from the 2004-2005 ACRL annual library survey, found that we offered the second highest number of classes per librarian.

Unlike instructors in other disciplines, we discovered that we had to sharpen our marketing skills in order to keep the program alive and flourishing. Other librarians may be familiar with the marketing gambits we tried over the years. We offered in-service workshops to faculty in order to persuade them of the importance of scheduling library classes. We joined unrelated campus committees in order to subvert the agenda and bring up the need for information literacy. We ambushed unsuspecting new faculty to convince them that they should quickly schedule library classes before they are closed out. These methods are tremendously successful, but inevitably we find ourselves back at the drawing board, as faculty converts leave the institution. Each fall semester we start anew with a fresh batch of incoming professors. In 2005, we were eager to join in planning the *Art of the Picture Book Conference*, an unusual networking approach for us, as it was designed not only to build relationships with cross-disciplinary faculty at our own institution, but also to build relationships with community groups, public libraries and the public schools. However, our venture outside the library

*Venditti (Reference and Instruction Librarian) and
Williams (Reference and Instruction Librarian)*
Ashland University [Ashland, OH]

and academia proved to be challenging as we discovered that individuals from other professions each maintain their own unique expectations and visions concerning conferences.

We both had previous experience with organizing, from the state-wide annual conferences of the Academic Library Association of Ohio, to workshops for interest groups, the Friends of the Library and nonprofits. We felt well-grounded in event planning but neglected to take into consideration that our experience had been focused on a rather homogeneous group - academic librarians. The first inkling that there might be a difference in conference cultures resulted from a conversation we had with a colleague who is a professor of nursing. We commented that we enjoy the laid back atmosphere of library conferences, where everyone dresses casually and comfortably. Our colleague was shocked at this admission. At professional nursing conferences, she related, the attendees dress in sequined gowns for the evening events! Talk about culture shock! (Do librarians even own sequined gowns?)

This conversation made us aware of the possibilities of difference. Still, we were unprepared for some of the stumbling blocks that arose as the planning process progressed. In hindsight, we realize that we had a certain arrogant mindset about the "right" way to plan conferences, and were reluctant to let go of our ideas, or to be open to other ways of proceeding. In preparation for this LOEX presentation, we looked at some of the literature on conference planning to add to our own experience. We found the expected articles addressing concrete planning details, but there was very little written about cultural differences. One of the most illuminating articles was written by Margaret Mead, who actually looked at the international conference process from an anthropological perspective. She cautions against allowing experienced conference planners to subtly manipulate others who are new to the process, and advises that the planning should proceed in such a way as to allow all committee members, regardless of culture, to actively participate at each stage (Mead, 1960). We wish we had found her article before our event. Although we were not working in an international arena with diverse ethnic groups, we found that many of the same issues applied right in our own backyard with partners of different generations, professions and specific academic disciplines. It would have been much more productive if we had entered into the process with an awareness that the key to creating new partnerships is to be willing to listen to new ideas and to be open to alternative methods of accomplishing the same goals.

Although we mostly think of conference planning as a chronological and hierarchal series of tasks, we would like to focus on some of the major cultural issues that should be considered in order to reap the rewards of collaborating with partners from different backgrounds. We found that the areas where we needed to be most conscious were communication, expectations, and motivations, and have provided a few examples below.

COMMUNICATION

We found that cultural communication issues fell into two main areas: interpretation of terms used and the

accepted means of communication. In discussing multicultural conferences, Margaret Mead states that "each detail of form and phrasing carries a different freight of meaning to the participants" (1960, p. 9). Our conference program was divided into two groups of speakers: four keynote speakers, who were invited, and 35 breakout presenters, who were selected through a competitive elimination. We soon discovered that the term "invited speakers" carries different meanings for professionals from different fields. To us, "invited speakers" are compensated individuals who do not need to go through the proposal submission process. You can imagine our consternation when other committee members shared that they had "invited" colleagues to submit proposals. We feared that those receiving the invitations might take them as confirmation of acceptance. If so, the ratio of invited speakers to presenters could shift precariously, with serious implications for the budget, programming and the proposal selection process. We weren't sure until the final moment whether we would have unexpected speakers showing up.

On a similar note, we discovered, almost too late, that a committee member drop-out had magnanimously invited a friend to speak, a talented artist on the speaking circuit who penciled us into her calendar and, quite naturally, expected her rather hefty regular speaking fee. We didn't find out about her alleged booking until she called for conference specifics. Again, differences in cultural understandings and lack of communication threatened the smooth workings of the committee.

We also discovered surprising and significant cultural warps in the committee members' beliefs about the optimal way to promote and communicate the conference. With our Ugly American attitude, or rather, Ugly Librarian attitude, we assumed that everyone in the world uses the same media to which we respond. For library conferences we have always appreciated the convenience of electronic methods of communication - email, online forms and conference web pages. As a result, our efficient curriculum librarian/webmaster immediately created a logo and a conference web site that she conscientiously updated almost daily as information was added. We sent out calls for proposals and preliminary conference announcements via the listservs designated for public librarians, academic librarians, authors and illustrators of children's literature and to the appropriate academic departments at regional universities. We pumped the education faculty for their relevant listserv addresses with no response. It became clear that not all academic disciplines and certainly not everyone from the nonacademic community uses electronic media as we do. We found that a large percentage of professionals in the field of education are more comfortable with the print format. Our committee members from that field pressed us to print paper flyers and hand-distribute them to the public school teachers and in the academic community. To us, the concept seemed to compromise the effective use of electronic communication and sounded like a needless expenditure of time and money. However, if we had paid closer attention to the expectations of those committee members, we would have been more aware of what future challenges we could expect from the presenters and attendees.

The barrage of phone calls we received from presenters representing an innovative grassroots museum exemplified this issue. Their life experience exceeds that of most students, but their technological experience was limited. They wanted us to mail out our confirmation of their proposal, then a conference flyer, then copies of the conference program and then directions, all of which were available on the conference web site. It became clear to us that they were at their breaking point when they wailed that this was such a difficult project for them and that “they had even had to spend several hours signing up for Yahoo!” in order to participate in the conference. We were bewildered. We ourselves rarely use Yahoo, and were stumped by their lament until we realized that they had never before used the internet or had an e-mail account! Evidently, someone had suggested that they use Yahoo as a provider to access the conference web site and forms. This was an important lesson for us. In the future we will be more sensitive to the fact that there is no single acceptable method of communication. If we want a project to run efficiently, be inclusive, and to attract as many participants as possible, then we should communicate via the preferred methods and media of those participants.

Within the committee, it became clear that we had differing ideas of how we were to communicate and coordinate our responsibilities. We were used to a checklist approach, scheduled meetings, a balanced delegation of tasks based on skills, and email discussions moving toward consensus and shared vision. However, this conference was planned more informally with few scheduled committee meetings and tasks assigned arbitrarily. Communication about task delegation or completion was merely insider information within individual departments, resulting in confusion and duplication of effort and time.

EXPECTATIONS

We learned that each individual brings different conference expectations dependent on past experiences in his or her own professional culture. Our expectation was that every attendee and presenter would pay the registration fee, and we tried to emphasize that issue on all of our communications. However, we had people show up who had not registered, or thought that their registration and lunch would be pro bono. These included a university administrator, accepted breakout presenters, and noncontributing committee members. Additionally, we were extremely inexperienced with some of the more commercial presenters with whom we dealt. We knew them only through their proposals and didn't recognize that several were well-respected individuals with expectations of recognition and privileged treatment. We also discovered that in the field of education, conference attendees traditionally pre-register for breakout sessions, unlike our own library conferences, where sessions are chosen at the last minute and standing-room-only is part of the fun. We were startled to discover that these participants had been fruitlessly looking for the method of pre-registering, and for the program to arrive in the mail. We had not met their expectations, and we were incredulous at the suggestion, which in hindsight is not a bad idea at all.

Not only should planners be savvy about their partners' expectations but they should be realistic about their own. Ashland University was building a beautiful brand new, hi-tech education building and our committee members from the Education Department had convinced us, in spite of our reservations, that it would be ready in time to serve as the main venue for the conference. We understood that as a department, they were emotionally invested in believing that construction would be completed, but we thought it was prudent to “expect the unexpected” and diplomatically convinced them that an alternative plan should be in place. When, one month before the conference date, we were notified that construction delays would prevent our use of the venue we had publicized, we adapted quickly to the change, moving the proceedings into other buildings we had lined up “just in case.” New locations were assigned for the breakout sessions, new parking maps and directions were posted, and the program was redone. Even a minor change can have a domino effect, with the ability to topple all carefully laid plans.

MOTIVATIONS

We found several differences in the motivation of both conference planners and participants that interfered with our understanding of roles and impacted productivity. We were not prepared for “ulterior motives” for participating in this project. In our experience, conference participation, whether as a presenter, attendee or planner, is an essential, expected contribution to one's profession. We were surprised that only a handful of the members of the planning committee ultimately took on the actual work, mistakenly assuming if someone volunteered to serve on the committee, he or she would contribute. However, we discovered that in some academic departments, it is acceptable to be a committee member in name only, a collegial nod to padding a vita that might be reciprocated at a later date.

We should not have been surprised to discover that the motivation of some of our more commercial presenters, in particular the authors and illustrators, was to promote their products, as opposed to the more altruistic academic motivation of sharing their insights with their professional community. Had we been more aware of their motivation, we would have been better prepared to meet their commercial needs in providing a display space or suggesting that they register as vendors rather than presenters.

Throughout this entire process, we learned to take into consideration the ideas that others brought to the table. “Those to whom the style is familiar will react in awkward and unpredictable ways when confronted with the inexperience of the newcomers” (Mead, 1960, p. 11). This certainly described us at the outset: we were confident that our ideas would be not only welcomed, but also adopted as the best ways to proceed. To our surprise, we were often confronted with the different perspectives of others, and sometimes we were humbled - not always a bad thing. Overall, we learned to be more sensitive to the expectations, motivations and preferred means of communication of our partners and guests.

At the end of the day, as we accepted the accolades of presenters and attendees alike, we felt that our efforts were highly successful. We had many requests for information for the next *Art of the Picture Book Conference*. Participants enjoyed meeting well-known speakers and networking, especially the aspiring authors and illustrators. Ashland University enjoyed exposure to new populations in new ways, and the library has shared in that exposure. According to the conference evaluations, the event was a wonderful success and the library continues to experience ongoing ripple effects from the experience.

In conclusion, we would encourage other librarians to explore the possibility of planning a cross-disciplinary conference. You will find that the benefits far exceed the occasional pitfalls that arise from miscommunicated cultural

expectations. One of the greatest ongoing rewards can be the broad network created beyond the library. By being aware of and respecting differences, you will come to appreciate and perhaps even adopt some of the procedures used by your conference partners. Who knows, you might even be tempted to wear a sequined gown at the next library conference!

REFERENCE

Mead, M. (1960). The Cultural perspective. In Capes, M. (Ed.) *Communication or conflict; conferences: their nature, dynamics, and planning* (pp. 9-18). London: Tavistock Publications.