

APPROACHES TO CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE SPECIAL LIBRARIAN IN THE INTERNET AGE

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Abstract: Developments in information technology and networking are providing new ways of supporting continuing professional development and lifelong learning from one's work or home location. This paper provides a brief overview of: the role of synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies in supporting learning; how library and information science professional associations and other organizations are using emerging technologies to support continuing education for librarians; and how individual special librarians can take best advantage of these new opportunities.

Professional Development

In the Special Libraries Association document on *Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century*, one of the personal competencies (2.10) states: "The Special Librarian is committed to lifelong learning and personal career planning." This includes being "committed to a career that involves ongoing learning and knowledge development," taking "personal responsibility for long-term career planning," and seeking "opportunities for learning and enrichment." [1] Such professional development may involve a range of activities aimed at enhancing knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Formulating a professional development plan involves analyzing one's work and identifying individual strengths and weaknesses to determine which skills can be built upon and which require improvement. Increasingly, the trend across all professions is to deliver professional development activities through distance learning as an alternative or supplement to face-to-face activities.

Technologies

As technology advances, new possibilities for pursuing professional development activities at times and places convenient to the learner emerge. Taylor [2] identifies four generations of delivery technologies for distance education as follows: (1) the correspondence model—print; (2) the multimedia model—print, audiotape, videotape, computer-based learning, interactive video; (3) the telelearning model—audio teleconferencing, video conferencing, broadcast TV/radio and audio teleconferencing; and (4) the flexible learning model—interactive multimedia and computer mediated communications. With the advent of the World Wide Web, a wider array of options for computer mediated communications has emerged. In particular instruction may involve asynchronous communication (bulletin boards, email), synchronous communication (streaming audio and/or video, text chat, coordinated navigation of Web resources), or some combination. The Web-based technologies offer an opportunity to design instruction that incorporates many of the features that are typically associated with face-to-face instruction: individual and group work, discussions and lectures, learning from

both the instructor and other students, presentation and sharing of instructional materials, and monitoring and facilitation of student activity by the instructor.

The full range of technologies identified by Taylor are being used to support a variety of learning opportunities of potential interest to special librarians. Learning may be either self-directed or pursued as part of a group. It may focus on a one-time event, such as a videoconference on a topic of current interest. Alternatively it may involve a non-credit course extending over several weeks or months or a series of courses making up a certificate or degree program.

Activities

A number of approaches to professional development are possible. Those which can entail some use of technology include: keep abreast of listservs and publications available in electronic form for current awareness; pursue continuing education (providers may include professional associations, library systems, vendors, academic institutions); participate in professional associations (service on committees and contributions to publications such as newsletters may take place electronically even if it is not possible to attend annual conferences); engage in mentoring as mentor or mentee; and earn an advanced certificate or degree. Many of the traditional techniques of professional development can be expanded in scope and sped up by incorporating the Internet into the process.

Providers

Organizations engaged in delivery of professional development activities through some combination of distance learning technologies include professional associations, vendors, and educational institutions. For many this is a comparatively new arena, so offerings are still somewhat limited when compared to face-to-face learning opportunities. But the number and range of providers and the variety of programs offered continue to grow.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) Strategic Learning and Development Center is sponsoring an increasing number of opportunities to “learn where you are” through distance learning (<http://www.sla.org/content/learn/learnwhere/index.cfm>). Their Virtual Seminar Series uses Web-based visuals and audio conferencing. SLA Video Conferences are broadcast live from Washington, DC to sites located in or near many major cities in the U.S. and Canada. Technology kits (e.g., The Complete Intranet Source for Information Professionals; Getting Started on the Internet) support self-paced learning through a workbook, resources, guide, CD-ROM accompaniment, and mentoring.

The Medical Library Association (MLA) has a number of distance learning programs (<http://www.mlanet.org/education/telecon/epub/index.html>) sponsored by their Continuing Education Committee. The theme of these programs for 2000-2001 is “The Myth and Reality of Electronic Publishing”. Activities accommodating distance learners included a teleconference, a discussion list, and journal clubs. Journal clubs provide individuals a chance to explore a topic of interest with other professionals. MLA has developed guidelines for electronic journal clubs, in which members in different locations

select, read, and discuss electronically a set of articles on a topic of common interest (<http://www.mlanet.org/education/telecon/jcguide.html>).

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) has launched an Online Lyceum in collaboration with Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Library Affairs. Its purpose is to provide, via distance learning, affordable and innovative professional development opportunities (<http://www.arl.org/training/lyceum.html>). The Online Lyceum offers two types of professional development programs—Collaborative Learning Events and Self-Paced Instructional Modules. Collaborative learning events incorporate elements of both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous interaction with course facilitators and a global peer network of up to thirty learners via a course bulletin board, chat rooms, and regular mail. Self-paced instructional modules are designed to meet the needs of learners who want to work entirely at their own pace. Features of this mode include: interaction with a course facilitator via the submission of assignments which are reviewed and returned with feedback; increased use of multimedia components to enhance content presentation; and completion of courses entirely at the learner's pace.

The OCLC Institute has initiated its OCLC Online Library Learning series (<http://www.oclc.org/institute/oll/index.htm>) with a Web-based course on "Cataloging Internet Resources Using MARC 21 and AACR2". Designed for self-paced and self-directed study, the course covers current cataloging rules and MARC fields that are essential for libraries to provide efficient, effective, and uniform description and access for selected Internet resources using traditional standards and practices. Each of the course's 28 interactive lessons contains learning objectives, instructional materials, real-world examples, and quizzes and tests that provide immediate feedback. Lessons provide references and links to authoritative documentation and standards.

State libraries or library systems may sponsor distance learning opportunities. In Illinois the Illinois State Library sponsors satellite teleconferences and subsequently makes the tapes available (<http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/library/isl/training/video.html>). The Illinois State Library and the twelve multi-type library systems throughout the state of Illinois have videoconferencing equipment for use in training, continuing education, and meetings (<http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/library/isl/training/videocon.html>).

University departments, such as schools of library and information science, are also beginning to offer Web-based continuing education opportunities. For example, the School of Library & Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison offers an interactive continuing education course via the Internet on Virtual Collection Development (<http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/slis/academic/ces/vcd.html>). The course Web site provides the means to post assignments, do readings, and discuss the topics with other students and the instructor. Drexel University's College of Information Science and Technology offers an online professional certificate in Competitive Intelligence (<http://www.cis.drexel.edu/grad/ci>). The Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign offers a distance learning scheduling option for earning a master's degree (<http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/gslis/degrees/leep.html>). Courses include both synchronous sessions and asynchronous communication via bulletin boards. Pennsylvania State University has a separate distance learning division, their World Campus, with a number of programs such as a Webmaster Certificate (<http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/pub/webmaster/index.shtml>). Hands-on coursework allows students to develop a portfolio of projects.

Lifelong Learning

A recent article in SLA's *Information Outlook* [3] offers advice on how to get the most out of a distance learning experience, such as making plans to share your learning with others. Selection among the options available should reflect both the relevance of the content and the effectiveness of the mode of delivery as a means of learning that content. In particular, one should consider the potential benefits of individual vs. group learning and of asynchronous vs. synchronous communication.

The Internet provides access to a much broader spectrum of people and a wealth of knowledge from many fields, thus adding an important new dimension to professional growth. [4] Bell identifies strategies for developing a personal current awareness program that draws from disciplines beyond library and information science. [5] His *Keeping Up Web Page* (<http://staff.philau.edu/bells/keepup>) is designed to help library and information science professionals develop and maintain a program of self-guided professional development. Whether pursuing self-guided study or participating in an online course, special librarians engaging in professional development activities are finding ways to enhance their value to their organizations. As Bender observes, a special librarian "must embody commitment to service excellence, to lifelong learning" and "must actively seek challenges, opportunities and professional alliances." [6]

References

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