

Sharing Our Expertise: Benefits of Professional Development for Strategic Planning

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Introduction

Imagine a beautiful Fall afternoon in the Midwest. Sixty-four staff members gather together in a sun-filled library meeting room. A buzzing excitement is palpable. Brief opening remarks conclude. Now the engagement environment is set: interact with a colleague at a poster session about e-portfolios, discover an emerging technology used for instruction during a lightning talk, participate in a round table discussion about video streaming ... and more!

The Learning and Teaching (L&T) division of the University of Michigan Library (Ann Arbor) gathered in November 2013 to creatively share our achievements, and to brainstorm about how these activities could align with newly articulated Library goals. Framing our division-wide staff meeting as an internal conference (using poster sessions, lightning talks, and round table discussions) offered layered entry points to connect with these new goals. Our intention was to create an engagement space that provided a professional development context, with a specific focus on our divisional services, tasks, projects, and initiatives. At the end of that beautiful Fall day, conference outcomes far exceeded our expectations, and the format highlighted the power of storytelling as a way to connect, to communicate, to be authentic, and to inspire as well as a method to promote individual professional growth.

Background

The L&T division focuses on services and partnerships in support of the University's learning initiatives and teaching activities. We connect students with library resources, services, and spaces throughout the scholarly communication life cycle. We partner with faculty in the exploration of emergent pedagogies, educational technologies, and media applications.

These activities, services and partnerships are impactful because our diverse staff — from librarian to student employee to technologist — bring their expertise, varied background, and commitment. Through their work the Library's and our division's goals are realized, allowing us to align with campus directions.

The Library's goals cover three aspirational areas: relevance of our library in a digital era, engagement with core campus missions, and leadership around diversity initiatives. As the L&T division, we wanted to develop cohesion and shared vision for our daily activities and our programmatic directions with these library-wide aspirations. In other words, we wanted to develop a strategic planning process. In order to do this, we recognized an important step in our process would be to further build and expand our expertise amongst ourselves.

What approaches could we take to achieve this cohesion and shared vision for expanding our expertise? Should we set priorities, align resources, strengthen

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operations, drive toward intended outcomes, and incorporate flexibility to better respond to changing environments? What formats should we deploy: all day workshops, retreats, perhaps consultants? To answer these questions, we formed a small planning team, whose charge was to develop and deliver an meaningful opportunity to discuss goal alignment and future direction.

This event planning team offered and rejected typical meeting formats and techniques for strategic planning, such as invited speakers or focused skill development retreats, as they quickly realized that the obvious strategies would not be enough to create an authentic environment for engagement. The planning team decided a staff meeting was needed but one where we relied on our own expertise to provide the content. Additionally, by providing our own experts to lead, moderate or present content, we could keep costs to a reasonable level.

To help us brainstorm about content and format, the planning team crafted goals for this division event:

- to provide an opportunity and an environment for all staff to connect to each other
- to provide a format that would allow staff to share their ideas, activities, and their professional values
- to provide an environment where staff share information about the wide variety of projects, activities, programs or services in which they engage to support the Library's missions and goals, and
- to promote professional development by hosting a division-wide staff event mimicking a professional conference

The answer to our question of “how do we do this?” started to take shape as we sought ways to combine expertise building opportunities with professional development opportunities. Two primary ideas that surfaced in discussions included storytelling and a mini-conference.

As we explored the notion of storytelling, we learned that storytelling techniques were useful in a

higher education context as a method to learn. As described by Eilert Craig (441):

Individuals gain a better understanding of one another through the use of concrete examples rather than through vague abstractions and generalizations which have no relationship to life's experiences, since the sharing of experiences through the device of storytelling enables individuals to build the bridge of understanding between one another. This facilitates commonality and the shared resonance of experiences. The story provides the framework and context for individuals to better understand others by providing the key to their own vast index of experiences. Thus, the listener is able to relate in a meaningful way to the teller's point of context by working through personal experiences that result in a more profound and lasting understanding than would have been possible with a generalization.¹

Combining the pedagogy of storytelling with the expectations of professional presentations offered a unique way to bring together our expertise and reflections on our practice, while employing a thematic structure to support direct connections between those daily activities and Library aspirations. The mini-conference theme of “Sharing our Learning & Teaching Story: Creating Understanding, Opening Pathways, Enabling Engagement” crystallized.

Planning the Mini-Conference

This mini-conference theme—“Sharing our Learning & Teaching Story: Creating Understanding, Opening Pathways, Enabling Engagement”—required a storytelling format to bring all the event goals together. We identified three different types of storytelling formats, within the framework of what one would experience in a professional conference, specifically, lightning talks, poster sessions, and roundtable discussions. By having multiple formats in a single mini-conference we enabled individuals to build on existing presen-

FIGURE 1
Poster Session Titles

Poster Sessions:

- How We Stack Up: Undergraduate Research Award Winners' Use of Library Services & Collections Shapiro Browsing Collection
- What Does InDesign Have To Do with Ancient Greek?
- Student Explorer: Leveraging Learning Analytics to Support Academic Advising
- Advancing the Learning, Research, & Publishing Power of Our Campus through Teaching
- Librarians as Professors: Credit Courses & the Research Library
- The Power of Peers: Exploring the Outcome of UM Library's Peer Information Counseling Program
- MPortfolio: Engaged & Integrative Learning...on Steroids!
- Library-Faculty Engagement: A Social Graph of Interactions
- Shapiro Undergraduate Library Journal Collection Redesign
- The UM Library & Learning Communities: Partnering for Student Success 2013

FIGURE 2
MPortfolio: Engaged & Integrative Learning ... on Steroids! Presented by Carrie Luke.
Photo courtesy of Jennifer Brown



March 25-28, 2015, Portland, Oregon

tation skills, explore new presentation methods, and practice active listening and engagement.

The planning team shared instructions for submitting proposals with our division, in order to provide a consistent approach to the mini-conference theme for everyone, including those staff members who might not have had an opportunity to attend or observe a professional conference in the past. The planning team defined the mini-conference formats as:

- **Lightning talks:** present a specific topic in 5-minutes, quickly informing the audience, using a small set of slides/media.
- **Poster sessions:** present a specific topic, using short text with graphical elements and answer questions about your topic posed by individuals.
- **Round table discussions:** moderate a small group discussion about a topic of interest. The purpose of this format is to allow a group to discuss an issue, share opinions, ideas, strategies, solutions, etc. Key points or highlights will be captured by the group for further sharing within our unit.

We asked L&T staff to submit proposals as individuals or in teams, hoping we could further model a professional collaborative effort. Proposals were simply constructed: provide a title, an abstract (300 words or less), the format (talk, poster, roundtable), and the area of focus related to Library aspirations (that is, relevance as a research library, engagement with campus, and diversity leadership). We encouraged colleagues with experience to provide feedback to those with less professional experience, and using our division expertise, we provided support to print out posters, again to model successful collaborative effort.

The Mini-Conference

During our two hours together, L&T staff participated in poster sessions, lightning talks, and round table discussions that highlighted our activities, achievements, and aspirations.

Poster Sessions

The mini-conference began with engagement around eleven poster sessions on topics ranging from for-credit library courses, to undergraduate use of leisure collections, to e-portfolios. This informal, unstructured activity allowed L&T staff to visually see the variety of impactful activities in which our division was involved at the time, while offering a chance to converse with each other about specifics. Poster session presenters not only had an opportunity to share their expertise with a willing and interested audience, but also had an opportunity to understand how their individual and group activities anchored the division's impact on student learning and faculty teaching, through conversations with their colleagues.

Lightning Talks

The second part of the mini-conference agenda was devoted to eight lightning talks. These five-minute presentations quickly introduced the audience to our activities around campus engagement and academic support, and how our work impacted students and faculty in positive ways. The opportunity to tell our stories in a succinct way allowed for a representative array of content, from a diverse set of presenters.

Round Table Discussions

The third and final part of our mini-conference concentrated on the round table discussions. With eight table topics, L&T staff members were able to participate in any topic of interest to them. A discussion about promotion of video streaming services to mentoring the next generation of library professionals to the library's future role in digital badging, and more, successfully drew people together to talk about areas of our work. The benefit of the round table discussions was structured time to ask questions and to share our diverse, broad and varied perspectives.

In order to permanently capture all the activities from our mini-conference for those few staff members that could not attend, we collected PDFs of the posters, a video recording and the slides of the lightning talks, participant notes from the round table discus-

FIGURE 3
Lightning Talk Titles

Lightning Talks:

You Belong Here: Programming at the Library

What Do They Want To Know? Understanding the Nature of Question Asking in the Ask a Librarian Virtual Reference Service

There Must be a Better Way! A New Tool for Faculty to Incorporate Video into Teaching and Learning

Killer Apps and Secret Agents

Teaching Undergraduates in the Library

The Digital Gutenberg Press

Creating an E-book: Percussion Students Explore a New Way of Teaching Musical History and Performance

Leveraging Research to Advance Campus Environmental Sustainability

Advanced Podcasting Room in the Duderstadt Center

Mini-Comics Day at the Dude: Connecting Collections to Classes & Community

Sharing our Learning and Teaching Story: 3D Printing

FIGURE 4

What Do They Want To Know? Understanding the Nature of Question Asking in the Ask a Librarian Virtual Reference Service. Presented by Karen A. Reiman-Sendi. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Brown.



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FIGURE 5
Round Table Discussion Titles

Round Table Discussions:

How to Better Promote the Video Streaming Content and Services Offered by the Library

The Special Challenges of IM Reference

Raising 'Em Right: The Value of Training/Mentoring the Next Generation of Professionals

MOOCS, Technology, and Michigan: Exploring Online Learning in the Library

Digital Badges as a Catalyst for Reshaping Higher Education

Teach to the Future

Higher Education, Commitment to Diversity, and Library Services: Meaning, Implications, and Future Direction

When is a Research Library like a Maker Space?

FIGURE 6

Round table discussion. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Brown.



sions, and photos taken during the event, for broader sharing with our colleagues via our staff intranet. By providing an archive of our activity and discussion, we carried forward the mini-conference theme of “Sharing Our Learning & Teaching Story.”

Cohesive and Shared Vision

The outcomes of sharing our story on that beautiful Fall day were both expected and unexpected. We achieved what we set out to do. We created an engagement space where professional development occurred, perspectives and expertise were shared, and programmatic connections revealed. Storytelling did indeed offer a framework to bring together our aspirations with reflective discussion, pedagogical strategy, and peer learning. It was an inexpensive and effective way to invite staff into discussion about how and where our daily activities enable and align with library-wide goals. The mini-conference format opened up possibilities for how to further involve staff with strategic planning while modeling professional expectations and experiences. The primary drawbacks to this approach were that it took staff time to prepare submissions and materials, and some staff were better prepared to speak before an audience due to more experience with professional presentations.

Through the content and presentations, it was readily apparent that staff were contributing to library and campus initiatives, sharing their voices in the broader discourse, connecting their daily activities to goals, networking in new ways with colleagues, and imagining how they could share their ideas in other professional venues. At this event, it was clear we were more than just a collection of reporting lines. We were and are a community focused on service and partnerships in support of scholarship.

It was with this realization that we concluded the mini-conference. Upon further reflection, we came to realize there is value in:

- looking for connections between individual daily responsibilities and division or library goals

- sharing what we do with each other in informal and formal venues
- showcasing and recognizing each other and our activities in a professional format
- taking the time to appreciate, to celebrate and to lean into the value of each other’s work

The opportunity to gather together in supportive environments, to share our knowledge, and to articulate future directions has positioned us to move forward in alignment with the Library’s aspirations. Our mini-conference was not just another division meeting where we talked at each other, merely reporting out on our activities; it was an acknowledgment of expertise and an investment in our future. We achieved a cohesive and shared vision.

Conclusion: Ten Concepts to Consider

Imagine a beautiful Fall afternoon on your campus. Opening remarks for your library’s strategic planning or goal setting session have just concluded. What happens next? How will you create an environment for engagement? Our case study offers the following concepts to consider when creating your session:

1. Understand where you are and where you want to be
2. Articulate what you want to achieve during the session (e.g. particular outcome, theme)
3. Be open and welcoming to varied planning approaches
4. Make the session planning a community-owned process, and invite people into the conversation at different phases
5. Understand your library’s boundaries, such as timeline, expenses, commitment, readiness to engage
6. Be confident that your own expertise has value
7. Leverage engagement methods to draw out varied staff styles, level of interest, experience, and knowledge
8. Have fun
9. Align all the of the above
10. Recognize that this is an iterative process and be ready to do it again

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Works Cited

Craig, Eilert Abrahamson. "Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool in Higher Education." *Education* 118, no. 3 (Spring, 1998): 440-451. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/196424157?accountid=14667>.

Note

1. Eilert Abrahamson Craig, "Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool in Higher Education." *Education* 118, no. 3 (Spring, 1998): 441