

# Expanding horizons – developing the next generation of international professionals

TANIA BARRY AND LOIDA GARCIA-FEBO

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Today's global library village includes overseas collaboration between colleagues in various continents seeking to provide effective forums for new librarians. This paper features lessons learned as well as recommendations for colleagues undertaking events involving international collaboration. These are based on the authors' experiences whilst coordinating a conference for the development of new professionals internationally. Additionally, excerpts from interviews to librarians participating in international efforts are included.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

- Poll new librarians to identify topics of interest
- Select partners capable of managing various areas
- Analyse potential outcomes to proactively tackle issues
- Document planning and organising
- Do not be afraid to try new things

## Background

The featured conference was an all-day event hosted by the *New Professionals Special Interest Group* (NPSIG) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in partnership with IFLA Management of Library Associations Section (MLAS), and hosted by the Swedish School of Library and Information Science (SSLIS) in Boras, Sweden. The ticketed event included opening and closing keynote speakers, lunch, five time slots with concurrent sessions and closing refreshments. It also involved coordination between colleagues in Australia, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the USA. One of the main purposes was to further the mission of NPSIG of IFLA in continuing to develop the next generation of international professionals.

IFLA NPSIG was established in 2004 to provide a forum for students and recently qualified professionals to discuss issues of interest to further their careers and promote involvement within the Association. The group works with senior library leaders and librarians worldwide to organise events during the IFLA World Library and Information Congress and other LIS-related events. They also partner with IFLA units to foster mentoring programs. Additionally, the NPSIG seeks to encourage the use of Web 2.0 technologies to promote online conferences and exchanges among librarians worldwide.

The planning of the conference originated over lunch during the first-ever IFLA pre-conference hosted by the NPSIG in conjunction with the *Continuing Professional Development and*

*Workplace Learning Standing Committee* (CPDWL) in Bologna in 2009. Tania and Loida had just met, but had heard of each other's work from opposite sides of the globe.

The idea of a joint collaboration flowed naturally and the concept for a conference in 2010 started to form. Tania and Loida communicated frequently during their time in Italy and agreed to collaborate as co-convenors of the 2010 NPSIG pre-conference. Both agreed that having convenors from different countries was an ideal opportunity to promote professional involvement with IFLA and would have a twofold effect. There was the potential to serve as role models – having two relatively new professionals organise a successful international conference from different countries would be inspiring to other new professionals and it was hoped that the conference would be less daunting because of this, thereby encouraging other new professionals to participate and present. The title *The Global Librarian* was chosen to reflect these aims.

Discussion of the core conference committee took place during these initial conversations and coordination was completed within a few weeks. Sharon Uthmann from Australia and Almuth Gasteringer from Norway also agreed to participate.

## Lessons learned

As organising events across borders and organisations becomes more common, there are several suggestions that should be factored into the planning and implementation process to guarantee successful programs for developing the next generation of information professionals. Colleagues coordinating events may have conflicting expectations of what needs to be done and how best to achieve it. They would need to expand options according to the groups involved and their capabilities, as well as considering requirements and prerequisites of differing regions of the world.

The following are recommendations resulting from the planning of the NPSIG conference in Borås:

### *Identify the right partners.*

Joining forces with organisations such as

universities and library associations increases the overall management capacity of the event, such as coordination of registration, provision of technology for on-site and off-site speakers, and organisation of handouts and supplies to attendees. These organisations can quite often lower planning costs which can then be passed onto delegates. Partnering with the SSLIS was vital to manage on-site arrangements involving catering, equipment, registration and handouts.

### *Plan for the unexpected.*

A conference structure covering all possible scenarios provides guidance for non-organisers to continue coordination of events as needed. For example, when a family emergency prevented one of the convenors from arriving prior to commencement of the conference, the established plan, including all contingencies that were factored in, meant that the conference program could still proceed.

### *Secure sponsors in the early stages.*

Obtaining sponsorship is a key part of successful conference planning. Funding, financial or in-kind, can heavily subsidise an event and lead to lower registration fees for attendees. This is of extreme benefit to new professionals who may not be in a position to fully cover all associated costs with attending a conference. Identifying and outlining potential benefits to future sponsors early in the planning process is critical in securing funding and fine tuning details well before the conference date. Just prior to *The Global Librarian* commencing, confirmed sponsors withdrew with no notice, resulting in the organisers modifying costs, whilst working with partners to retain other areas as planned.

### *Store documentation remotely.*

This allows for simultaneous collaboration and ready access to necessary documentation needed by the organising committee. Students, teachers and many professionals are using the cloud to develop projects, write articles and research (Bull & Hammond 2011, 38). In terms of conference planning, this practice makes reviewing proposals and creating program structure by colleagues in distant regions of the globe more manageable.

*Be willing to compromise.*

It is beneficial for all parties involved to reach an agreement regarding venue, speakers, length of program, catering and other elements involved in the planning of an event. Each individual may have diverging views on how to plan a conference; however they can easily reach a consensus through minor compromises. Several venue options were discussed by the committee, all with varying benefits, making a potential decision more protracted. The SSLIS was selected after everyone involved agreed it was accessible by main ways of transportation and was not too far from the WLIC IFLA Congress taking place the same week in Sweden.

*Practice mutual respect.*

Regard for cultural differences and an understanding of local conditions and needs is vital to identify ways to collaborate with diverse groups (Schnuer and Satgoor 2005, 267). There are quite often instances when a particular approach is more effective for working with a specific demographic, country or association. The key is to use elements intrinsic to these groups to produce successful projects. As part of an organisation working with international colleagues, the Convenors discussed all potential scenarios to address any issue before the conference and provide the most inclusive event possible.

*Tailor themes for your target group.*

Select topics that new professionals want, rather than those the committee believes they need. Polling new professionals, formally or informally, is a good way of compiling data about their needs, skills and areas of interest. At the same time, reaching out to library decision makers can contribute by ascertaining requirements they are looking for in new librarians. Topics for *The Global Librarian* were selected using this reasoning and included how to internationalise careers, new librarian paradigms, mobile librarians, real-time librarians, and advocating library associations to include new professionals in their agenda.

*Involve students and first timers.*

Conferences targeting new librarians are ideal

forums for first time presenters. Likewise, welcoming student participation enhances their understanding of the profession. Their collaboration in conference planning can also add varied views to logistics, technical aspects and permeates throughout all aspects of the event. To highlight this point Sebastian Wilke and Dierk Eichel, two LIS students from Berlin, became NPSIG Convenor and NPSIG Information Coordinator, respectively, in 2009. Soon after, they joined the planning of the event in Boras, developing a website to promote the conference as well as running sections of the conference on-site.

*Consider virtual sessions.*

These are of enormous benefit for speakers and delegates unable to attend the conference in person. By providing the alternative of Skype for *The Global Librarian*, a speaker who enriched the conference content was able to take part. Coordinators should be able to set up parameters about this type of participation. Another alternative worth exploring is to live-stream sessions, dependent upon technology capabilities.

## International relations

Coordinating conferences and events to promote the growth of new professionals is a way of providing professional development for new librarians to become leaders (Garcia-Febo 2007, 77). Featuring topics of interest to them means that these events enrich their professional growth. At the same time, organisers increase their experience in the areas of negotiation, partnerships and flexibility.

Work done to continue moving new professionals forward internationally is inspiring at both a personal and professional level for the coordinators and the participants. As Barbara Ford, Director of the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs expressed, 'coordinating projects, conferences or sessions with colleagues internationally is very rewarding because it helps to provide a broader and deeper perspective on issues. Libraries and librarians around the world face similar issues, opportunities and challenges. We can learn from one another since approaches

and perspectives differ. In a world where globalization is a given, it is essential to be able to work together and discover innovative ideas through collaboration.'

Ford's words support research findings which also consider the way library professionals are understanding internationalisation in light of a more globalised profession (Becker 2006, 295). Librarians are connecting with others across the world to remain updated, gain skills and increase job opportunities. At the same time, as shown by the organisation of *The Global Librarian*, new librarians are turning to the internet and technology in order to liaise with others from around the world. These tools have provided a structure to internationalise careers and to aid the development of the next generation of professionals (Bradley 2009, 11).

In the same way that doors open to receive new librarians into international conferences, opportunities are also provided for first time presenters. Jessica Hernandez, a recently qualified professional working in Washington DC, personifies a new graduate seizing timely opportunities. She spoke at her first international conference during the IFLA Congress in Puerto Rico in August 2011, presenting two papers. According to Jessica, 'There is a tendency for new professionals to focus on their more local organizations because we are just learning about the field and working to get our foot in the door. However, my experience at IFLA has changed that, and I look forward to seeking out international collaborations and opportunities from this point on.' After the IFLA Congress Jessica reconnected with colleagues from Romania to replicate their summer school for young professionals. Corrinne Hills, another recent graduate working in Brisbane, Australia, corroborates Jessica's experiences. Corrinne presented at the IFLA Congress in Sweden and says: 'The experience of presenting to such a large audience was daunting but that they were far more knowledgeable on the topic than I and still wanted to hear what I had to say was an amazing confidence boost.'

The networking opportunities that arise from being involved in international events play a

key role in the development and success of the future of new librarians. Bringing together representatives from varying library sectors gives everyone the opportunity to enrich their professional careers.

Engaging new graduates in opportunities such as these also gives them a unique, firsthand perspective of what is happening in libraries around the world. As Almuth Gastinger conveyed, 'Usually one only listens to the presentations that are chosen by the organisers, but this time I could read all proposals and therefore get more knowledge/information of what happens in libraries around the world.' Working with new professionals and talking about the importance of international cooperation and exchange has resulted in Almuth presenting a poster session with a colleague at the 2011 IFLA Congress on 'Innovation through Internationalisation'.

As new professionals progress through their careers, these connections become an essential element in their professional development. In fact, networking is one of the main reasons given for attending conferences (Vega and Connell 2007, 503). Another reason is professional rejuvenation. Librarians receive a better understanding of international trends within the industry, also giving them opportunities to observe, consider and reflect on new practices they encounter, in turn taking this learning back to their workplace. Importantly, the opportunity to learn is there, as Almuth stated, 'I like challenges, you just learn so much even if you make mistakes (of course mostly because of making mistakes).'

However, sometimes these benefits and opportunities can be thwarted by the recent budget constraints experienced by libraries and colleagues in various continents. Travel, registration, lodging, food and transportation are main areas to consider when attending conferences (Koury 2011, 253). Costs related to these could be a decisive point for speakers and attendees. Hence, it is becoming a necessity for conference committees to consider including live-streaming sessions thus providing an alternative for those unable to attend. At the same time, virtual sessions are an effective means for

sharing news about projects, models and trends worldwide. Careful planning however, would still make both virtual and in-person events enriching experiences for everyone involved (Bell and Shank 2006, 50).

## Conclusion

International conference planning to develop new professionals is a tremendous undertaking that carries the responsibility of providing attendees with tools that would help them select the right path for their careers. The benefits and opportunities for organisers and attendees are potentially endless, but only thorough coordination of professional and social components can guarantee success.

New professionals attending international conferences benefit by being exposed to different views through the interaction with colleagues from other cultures, regions and library sectors. They become aware of models and services developed by others and could potentially replicate them in their home countries. Additionally, they can connect with experienced librarians attending these events to seek advice, with the potential for development of mentor-tutor relationships.

Whilst librarians attending the conference benefited from exchanges with international peers, the organisers established many new networks including delegates, employers, library associations and global representatives. New processes and technologies were trialed and evaluated, creating a newer model for future events. As a result, their professional networks expanded internationally and collaborations with colleagues from various regions of the world increased.

Being open to new approaches and trends maximises opportunities to achieve goals. Overall, librarians everywhere must continue to develop the next generation of international professionals by joining forces, reaching out to like-minded partners and connecting with students and new graduates.

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**Tania Barry** is Mill Park Branch Manager at Yarra Plenty Regional Library, Victoria, Australia. Tania has spoken nationally and internationally on librarianship as a first qualification, early childhood literacy and community engagement. She is currently working on a project researching the uptake of librarianship by school leavers. Her areas of interest include early childhood literacy, professional development, workforce planning and mentoring. Tania is actively involved in the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and is Co-Chair of the ALIA Careers Advisory Committee. She is a member of ALIA Victoria, ALIA ePortfolio and VALA, and was a member of the VALA Committee in 2010. She convened the 4th ALIA New Librarians' Symposium in 2008.



**Loida Garcia-Febo** is the Coordinator of New Americans Program at Queens Library, New York, USA. Loida speaks internationally about human rights, access to information, advocacy, services to diverse populations and new professionals. She received the ALA 2010 Elizabeth Futas Catalyst for Change Award and was named 2007 Mover & Shaker by *Library Journal*. Loida is currently ALA Councilor-at-Large, Chair ALA Committee on Membership Meetings, a member of IFLA CPDWL, and advises IFLA's New Professionals SIG which she co-established.

