



Building (New) Professional Communities

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— **Management of Library Associations with the New Professionals**
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Abstract:

As the local group for the Australian Library and Information Association in Australia's largest city, ALIA Sydney has a challenging brief encompassing the diverse spectrum of librarians across the many hundreds of libraries and other workplaces in Sydney. The experiences of the ALIA Sydney committee form a case study of successful engagement across the professional spectrum, including many new professionals, pointing to successful strategies for building strong professional development communities. This paper reflects upon these strategies using a theoretical framework, and makes recommendations for how the library and information industry can encourage and reward engagement and ongoing professional development at all levels of the profession.

Library associations around the world are struggling to stay strong and relevant. Faced with budgetary woes and changing member communities, new strategies must be developed to support the profession in dynamic and engaging ways. (Abram, 2006; Allen, 2012; Lachance, 2006) Volunteer contributions have the power to be more valuable than ever and many associations have a largely untapped asset in the form of their members. These members range from established senior professionals who can offer experience and expertise, to students and new professionals who can not only provide an energetic and engaged workforce but also offer a unique perspective on the future needs of the profession. The experiences of the ALIA Sydney committee form a case study of a successful volunteer-run professional development community that engaged professionals across the entire spectrum of experience including the newer sections of the profession. By reflecting on

these experiences using the communities of practice research literature, this paper explores barriers for potential volunteers and makes recommendations for creating strong, vital and sustainable professional development communities.

Professional Development, Libraries, Communities and Social Learning

Librarians and other information professionals are working within a swiftly changing world filled with rapid technological transformations and an evolving client base. To remain functional, effective and relevant, librarians need to be committed to lifelong learning and skills development, a centrality reflected in much of the research literature (Broady-Preston, 2010; Broady-Preston & Cossham, 2011; Brouns et al., 2011; Cossham & Fields, 2006). There are many different forms of professional development. Community based professional development, or 'social learning' can be particularly enriching. (Blakiston, 2011) "Social learning refers to learning from other people, by other people, in a social setting" (Brouns et al., 2011, p. 301). Whilst it has been very effectively demonstrated by the rise of social networking, social learning is not a new concept. People regularly share knowledge in their day-to-day lives using group structures to work together towards common goals. (Dini-Davis & Theiss-White, 2009; Henrich & Attebury, 2010)

Social learning is also closely linked to the key aims of many library associations. In his 2006 paper, Abrams (2006, p. 15) identified that: "Library associations exist for three main purposes: networking among members, providing professional development opportunities and advocating for the profession and our users." All three purposes focus on sharing knowledge, both within the profession and outside of it. However the real value of professional associations is not just as a knowledge hub but as a connective force. More than employers and other organisations, associations have the opportunity to create connections for building and sharing knowledge. Traditionally this would occur at large-scale conferences, however with tight budgets many associations need to find other ways to support their communities. One option to increase member offerings in these areas without significant increases in costs is for associations to capitalise on their connective value to help members help themselves by creating communities of practice or learning networks.

A community of practice is a useful theoretical framework when exploring volunteer-run professional development groups as it is based on common elements rather than a definitive structure (Miller, 2011). This allows discussion to focus not on the activities of these communities, which will vary from group to group, but rather on what is needed to sustain and support the community as a whole. On the broadest level, the elements of a community of practice are a voluntarily formed group, a common goal or interest and willingness to share and/or create knowledge in a safe environment. (Henrich & Attebury, 2010) By exploring these elements using a practical example, a greater understanding can be developed of how library associations and other organisations can engage their community to create productive, sustainable social learning environments.

The ALIA Sydney Experience

ALIA Sydney is a group associated with the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) that services Sydney, a very extensive city of 4.5 million inhabitants. ALIA groups are a volunteer run offshoot of the wider national professional association which share a common interest or geography. They are 'run by members, for members' and generally operate with significant independence and flexibility, although there are certain reporting requirements (ALIA, 2010). ALIA Sydney had existed as a group in a number of forms, however in 2011 was relaunched with aims of building a new ALIA Sydney community and a new program of low-cost professional development events that would fill a niche in the Sydney library and information sector. Over the course of 2011, they produced eight events, many of which sold out and all of which were met with a hugely positive response. In a 2012 study, the author demonstrated that ALIA Sydney was successful in its aims whilst also providing an engaging and enriching experience for the committee volunteers and the wider community (Byrne, 2012).

ALIA Sydney matches many of the defining characteristics of a community of practice. They are a voluntarily formed group, consisting of a core organising committee of ten volunteers and an outer community of attendees who chose to come to ALIA Sydney events on their own time. They gather together based on a common interest to produce and attend events about ideas, issues and projects from the library and information sector and both share and create new knowledge within a safe and welcoming event environment. One attendee commented, "ALIA Sydney has really re-energised the ALIA professional development environment in Sydney. The committee is very welcoming and great hosts, introducing people and making networking happen in a very natural way." (Quoted in Byrne, 2012, p. 6) ALIA Sydney matches another community of practice characteristic by having learners who can be categorised as 'newcomers' and 'old-timers' (Rosenbaum & Shachaf, 2010). Within ALIA Sydney's community, participants would shift between being newcomers and old-timers, occasionally taking both roles simultaneously, a phenomenon also noted by Miller (2011). The status of newcomer or old-timer was based on knowledge at hand rather than experience which meant that the diverse ALIA Sydney community, ranging from students and new professionals to senior members of the profession, all had something to learn from one another.

Pulling down Brick Walls: Identifying Barriers to Volunteering

ALIA Sydney's experiences form a case study of a successful volunteer run professional development community. When explored in conjunction with the research literature and the feedback from the ALIA 2010 National Advisory Congress themed *Making a contribution: Volunteering for ALIA* (ALIA, 2012) a clear picture begins to emerge. "People work naturally in communities of practice if they have 'seeding structures' such as rules, symbols and perspectives that act as focal points around which they can identify and interact" (K. Byrne, 2012, p. 423). There are a number of barriers for potential volunteers, especially those new to the profession. These barriers can affect both the likelihood of

someone volunteering in the first place and volunteers throughout the volunteering process. It is important to identify these barriers and the support needed from associations or other organisations to break them down to entice new volunteers whilst keeping existing volunteers engaged and rewarded. By providing much needed support, associations and other organisations can create communities that support their organisational goals at very little cost and great benefit to the members.

Time

The first, and perhaps most clearly defined barrier is that of time. Mentioned by seven of the eight ALIA Sydney committee members surveyed for the 2012 study (Byrne, 2012) and discussed heavily at the ALIA 2010 National Advisory Congress (ALIA,2012), this was by far the most prevalent personal concern for both potential and existing volunteers. As professionals with jobs and lives, many members have conflicting demands on their time. Concern over time can be expressed in relation to committing time and finding enough time and is often amplified by geographical elements. In the ALIA Sydney example, the size and structure of the Sydney region means that some members could be travelling for two hours each way to events.

Members can perceive challenges with time as so significant that it can prevent them from ever becoming involved or from continuing as volunteers, as in the case of one ALIA Sydney volunteer who did not continue for a second year. They commented “I really enjoyed the new-look ALIA Sydney and feel that there is now a renewed energy for ALIA Sydney events. Colleagues have commented on how much they have enjoyed the events so that's rewarding in itself. I would have liked to have committed more time to the events, but balancing it with full time work and studies was just bad timing... I would like to be involved again at a later stage if I had more time to devote to the committee.”

Time is a challenging barrier, as organisations can't give individuals more time. However, organisations can provide structures which ensure that the volunteering roles have clearly defined boundaries. This allows potential volunteers to make informed choices and existing volunteers to manage their commitments. “By means of clearly defined boundaries, communities promote the collective good to outsiders and encourage ongoing interaction”(Kester et al., 2007, p. 201). Boundaries are about respecting the contribution volunteers are making and ensuring that they feel like their work is manageable and targeted to make the best use of their time. There are a number of support structures that may assist such as writing position descriptions as these place limits around the commitment each volunteer is making. Another important aspect is ensuring that all centralised processes such as budgets and submissions are well planned with long lead-times and clear guidelines. This ensures that time asked of volunteers is well spent and minimises feelings of frustration at bureaucratic tasks.

Entry/Exit Points

A related barrier is a perceived lack of clear entry and exit points for volunteers. There is a “tension between the leadership need to sustain a [community of practice] and the conflicting goal of a flat structure in which all members’ contributions receive equal consideration.” (Henrich & Attebury, 2010, p. 162) Often new members can feel left out by existing volunteers, not through malice, but rather the ease of working with familiar colleagues. However no-one wants to volunteer in the same capacity forever and so increasingly, evidence of effective succession planning has become a significant consideration for both potential and existing volunteers. This was raised at the ALIA 2010 National Advisory Congress (2012) with potential volunteers identifying they did not know how to get involved. This raised concerns that volunteering opportunities were not promoted sufficiently. At the same time, long standing volunteers reflected sometimes feeling trapped in their roles as their pool of volunteers shrank when individuals moved on.

Succession planning should be essential for any volunteer group, just as it is essential in any workplace. Effective succession planning is not only about managing entries and exits but also about ensuring that the group remains fresh with new ideas and energy. It is particularly important when creating succession planning structures in a volunteer organisation to ensure that the leadership roles change regularly as well to ensure that new voices are heard. When roles become available, they should be advertised widely rather than funnelling in only professionals with existing connections to the group as demonstrated by ALIA Sydney (Byrne, 2012). This will maximise the pool of potential volunteers to ensure a breadth of perspectives and skills is achieved. In the example of ALIA Sydney, the committee included 4 academic librarians, 3 public librarians, as well as a school librarian, a librarian from the state library and an information professional who didn’t work in a library at all. The committee represented a range of genders, ages and experience from new professionals, still studying, to members with more than fifteen years of experience, many of whom had not met before joining ALIA Sydney. The group was strong and more inclusive of the community because it represented the community.

Fear of the unknown

Often potential volunteers are anxious about nominating themselves as they are both uncertain as to exactly what is required but also whether they have the necessary skills to undertake the task (ALIA, 2012). Walton, Goulding and Stephens (2009, p. 211) noted this phenomenon in their study of leadership skills in library and information graduates. They noted: “having ambition and confidence was considered vital [to being an effective leader] and yet these qualities were not particularly evident among the graduates surveyed.” Whilst this barrier is in no way limited to a single cohort, it is particularly a concern with new professionals. “In order to build their own sense of professional value, new professionals need to see their peers being treated with professional respect – presenting at conferences, writing papers, speaking about issues that they can relate to” (Bradley, Dalby, & Spencer, 2009, p. 236). In Australia there are a number of specialist branches of ALIA to support this

cohort including the New Generation Advisory Committee (ALIA, 2012a) and the New Graduates Group (ALIA, 2012b). Whilst these specialist offerings may offer early opportunities to new professionals, there is so much to be gained from diverse cross sections of the community working together. Communities of practice embrace these opportunities through their tags of newcomers and old timers discussed previously. However embracing it is one thing, communicating it to the community is another. An organisational structure can allow a group to provide a range of entry points for volunteers and internal progression. If a new volunteer has undersold their skills, or as volunteers develop their skills they can move in new directions within the group. ALIA Sydney did this with positive outcomes (Byrne, 2012), supporting both the development of individual members and promoting stable succession planning.

What's in it for me?

Perhaps the most powerful barrier but also motivator is the intrinsic element of volunteering, the perceived value to the individual (Blakiston, 2011). Potential volunteers, and continuing ones, need to understand what they value about volunteering and ensure that they find it. Ultimately, with “all volunteer-led professional development activities, the strength of the program depends on the commitment and enthusiasm of those involved” (Bradley, 2008, p. 740). The study of ALIA Sydney identified the committee members were first and foremost motivated by the other people around them in the profession (Byrne, 2012). A key reason for volunteering was a desire to support their fellow professionals by creating opportunities for professional development. Similarly, the most highly valued experience of volunteering was the people they met and networks and friendships they built.

Figuring out what potential volunteers will be motivated by might be difficult, it will certainly be more so than offering tokens of appreciation. However unlocking that motivation will unlock the key to ensuring the community feels rewarded and supported. In the example of ALIA Sydney, the initial round of expressions of interest to join the committee undersold the communal value. When asked if the experience of being on the committee matched the roles advertised one committee member commented: “Yes, in terms of what we were expected to do, but in terms of the valuable experience, skills and knowledge that I obtained by volunteering, as well as the amazing people I met who I know [sic] call my friends, they were things that I didn't expect, going into this experience, which is definitely [sic] what I valued the most and what made being on the committee such a wonderful experience.” ALIA Sydney learnt from this and this element was emphasised more clearly in the following year's advertisements. Learning from the volunteers in any community is an important aspect of providing them with relevant support.

The Challenge for New Librarians

In the ALIA Sydney study there were no clear trends that differentiated new professionals and more established members of the ALIA Sydney community. Responses from both groups reflected similar motivations and also similar barriers. It can be theorised that this is reflective of the diversity within both the new professionals' community and the wider profession. The 2008 Nexus Study demonstrated that only 29% of new graduates across Australia were pursuing LIS studies as a first career choice with 54% either changing careers or returning to the workforce after a break (Hallam, 2008, p. 29). This would suggest that new professionals within the LIS industry are not a homogenous group but rather a miscellany of different ages, experiences and home-lives. It is therefore very difficult to stereotype new professionals as distinct from other members of the profession. Anecdotal evidence from conversations at ALIA Sydney events indicated that new professionals' experience with these barriers is not dissimilar to the rest of the profession. However, the lack of existing professional support networks can make them especially vulnerable. There is a very important place for specialised new professional communities to assist with building networks and confidence. (Bradley et al., 2009) There are also significant benefits to joining communities that are inclusive of the diverse profession to continue this journey and new professionals should be supported and encouraged to do so.

Building Gateways: Supporting Active Membership Through Participation

"Loss of momentum from leadership, membership departures, loss of attentions from members who have numerous other obligations, and localism or isolation of members geographically or even departmentally can all hinder the longevity of a [community of practice]" (Henrich & Attebury, 2010, p. 162). Volunteer-run activities require support to be successful over time. However much of this support is structural, which makes it easier for associations and organisations to provide broad reaching support to engage as many of their members as possible in volunteering capacities.

To get the most out of volunteers, organisations need to think of them as they think of employees. Afford them the communication, consistency and respect any employee deserves. Design a standard committee structure with roles and position descriptions that can be adapted to the needs of each community and provide support to advertise them widely. By creating position descriptions, committee members are supported to select the best candidate for the job in a transparent way and potential volunteers have the opportunity to make clear choices about being involved. The structure should support leadership within volunteer communities, but also incorporate succession plans with volunteer turnover to ensure new voices are heard.

Together, associations and members need to create "new organisational structures which no longer inhibit invention and exploration through hierarchy and blockages. ...Structures that are tolerant and resilient, able to foster innovation and accept occasional failure" (Byrne, 2009, p. 29). By creating sustainable structures that support volunteers, such

as those employed by ALIA Sydney, there is an opportunity to create both valuable experiences for the members directly involved as volunteers. In addition, it will create professional development opportunities that the association can then add to their offerings for the wider membership. By treating volunteers as employees, associations have the opportunity to really make their membership work for them.

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