

Let's get you out there: mentoring as a tool for professional development

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Abstract:

The paper presenting our lightning talk explores the efficiency of the Finnish Library Association (FLA) mentoring program in providing professional development opportunities for library professionals. This paper discusses the benefits for the participants, how the goals of the program were met and the best practices for future programs discovered.

In order to improve communication and professional growth, the FLA decided to offer its first mentoring program. The theme international collaboration set a functional frame for the program.

The aims for the mentoring program were:

- 1. To define the demand for this type of a program.*
- 2. To explore the reasonability of the theme-based working approach.*
- 3. To lay the foundation for future programs.*

The program was presented in a FLA member newsletter, the application process was carried out online and the mentor pairs were decided based on the applications.

The participants of the program identified key factors required for successful mentoring. It was considered essential to have well-functioning mentor-actor pairs. In general, the interaction between

the mentor and the actor should be based on trust and openness. A good mentoring program also demands a competent facilitator and rules based on mutual understanding. It was also considered important to have a theme for the program. The participants found it useful to have meetings in various formats: online and face-to-face, two by two and occasionally in a bigger group. The feedback from the participants will be used when planning the next mentoring program.

The FLA mentoring program familiarized the participants with the theme of the program, and brought new ideas on how to share information about international opportunities even within the larger professional community. The mentor pairs' work was based on mutual learning. To make the program results a wider audience, the participants will write a guide focusing on international collaboration opportunities for Finnish librarians.

Keywords: mentoring, mentor programs, librarians, library associations

Introduction

The Finnish Library Association (FLA) arranged its first mentoring program for Finnish librarians in October 2017- May 2018. The FLA's mentoring program was the first ever national-level mentoring program for librarians in Finland. Mentoring is a widely used method where traditionally a more experienced person transfers skills or knowledge to a less experienced person through learning dialogue and role modelling (Law 2013, 54). Mentoring is often thought mostly to take place in business settings, but in fact the method is also used in public sector settings (ibid., 15). The motivation for the mentoring program was first of all to find out if there is demand for this type of a program and secondly to lay the foundation for possible future programs.

This paper presents our lightning talk at IFLA WLIC 2018. We will introduce FLA's mentoring program, discuss how the goals of the program were met and introduce some suggested best practices for future programs. First, we will explore the background for the program and present how the program was run in practice. Next, we will move on to discuss how the participants of the program defined successful mentoring and what kind of feedback they gave about the program. Finally, we will briefly discuss the outcomes of the FLA's first mentoring program and some possibilities for the program's future. Our lightning talk as well as this paper focuses on the program participant's experiences and the concrete outcomes of the program and we will not explore the program from a very theoretical perspective.

Background for the Finnish Library Association's mentoring program

The strategy for the Finnish Library Association lists education as one of the areas of focus for 2016-2020 (Finnish library association 2016). The goal was to strengthen the FLA's profile as an organizer of continuing training for librarians both for local and nationwide needs. The FLA considered the mentoring program as a good way to improve professional growth and sharing information between professionals and wanted to find out whether there is interest for this kind of a program among the FLA members in general.

The FLA chose a theme-based working approach for the mentoring program. The theme of the first program was international collaboration. The FLA chose this theme because they wanted to support library professionals in learning about different opportunities for international work and offer the participants new contacts and ideas for international collaboration. One of the

aims for the pilot program was also to explore the reasonability of a theme-based working approach for mentoring in general (Maarno 2018).

Before launching its first mentoring program, the FLA explored other mentoring programs that run by other associations in Finland, for example in the museum sector (ibid).

The Finnish Library Association mentoring program in practice

The mentoring program was presented in a FLA member newsletter in September 2017 and there was an online application process. Altogether, there were 12 participants forming six mentor pairs. All the pairs had a mentor, a more experienced library professional, and an actor who had less work experience or experience in the program's theme, international collaboration. The program left it for the applicants to decide the role they were interested in and there were no strict rules about the length of work history required for each role. There were participants from around Finland and none of the mentor pairs lived in the same city or area: some lived or worked relatively close to another, whereas one mentor pair had about 600 kilometers distance from one another.

The FLA arranged three live meetings for the whole group in Helsinki. An external facilitator led the meetings. The first meeting in October 2017 was an introductory meeting where the mentor pairs met for the first time. The second meeting was halfway through the program in February 2018, and it consisted of sharing ideas between the mentor pairs and a feedback session about how the program had started. In the final meeting in May 2018, the group gave further feedback and discussed ideas for the prospective next round of the FLA's mentoring program. Each mentor pair also gave written feedback about the program and the whole group was involved in creating a guide leaflet for Finnish librarians about possibilities for international collaboration.

The mentor pairs decided independently on their mutual communication methods and most were mainly in touch via Skype, Messenger or email. All the pairs also met face-to-face at least once during the program in addition to the meetings for the whole group, some even several times. Most of the mentor pairs combined library visits to their meetings and always met in different locations. The FLA also created a Facebook group for everyone participating in the program where it was possible to share news and discuss about different topics linked to the program.

Best practices for mentoring defined by the program participants

During the course of the program, the participants were asked to identify key factors required for successful mentoring. The feedback from the participants will be utilized when the FLA will carry out their next mentoring program.

Firstly, it was considered essential to have well-functioning mentor-actor pairs and to enable switching pairs if necessary. In general, the interaction between the mentor and the actor should be based on trust and openness. In addition to fluent interaction, a good mentoring program also demands a competent facilitator and rules based on mutual understanding. The participants of the FLA mentoring program were in general satisfied in all these aspects and there was no

need to switch any of the mentor pairs. As most participants were not very familiar with the concept of mentoring, it would have been useful to have a more thorough introduction to mentoring at the beginning of the first session.

Even of the setting for the program was traditional in a sense that there was a more experienced mentor guiding a less experienced actor, the participants emphasized mentoring as a mutual learning process and the actors equally felt that they learned from the process.

The program participants considered it useful to have a theme for the program, which in the FLA program was international collaboration. However, the theme should not be too strict. In the case of this program, about half of the mentor pairs focused fairly strictly on the theme and the other half also discussed more traditional mentoring topics such as leadership, job search and well-being at work. In their feedback of the program, some of the mentor pairs emphasized the importance of staying focused on the chosen themes for the whole program as well as the individual sessions, whereas some thought that it was beneficial that the theme was not too strict and preferred a less systematic approach. It is important to find a balance between shared goals and adjustability in a mentoring program with participants with partly common and partly different goals.

Some of the program participants hoped for a clearer mutual structure for the future program. The mentor pair is naturally at the focus of the program, but some pairs might need more instructions to get off to a good start with the program. At the same time, the participants acknowledged that a relatively small organization like the FLA does not have resources to facilitate the program very actively in between the meetings and the program structure has to be kept light. The mentor pairs could perhaps take some responsibility about keeping touch with the others for example by taking turns in writing a newsletter for the other participants.

Overall, the program participants thought that it was good to keep in touch with the whole group both online and face-to-face. It was interesting to know what the other mentor pairs had been working with and the meetings were an efficient way to share information especially about the different internationalization opportunities. The joint meetings also helped to build up team spirit for the whole group even in a relatively short time. In the FLA mentoring program pilot there were three face-to-face meetings for the whole group and this was considered a suitable or even a minimum number of joint meetings for the purpose of this kind of a program. The communication between the whole group also made it possible to carry out projects with other mentor pairs. We will present the outcomes of the program in the following section.

Outcomes of the program

In addition to providing its participants' opportunities for professional growth, networking and collaboration, the FLA's first mentoring program accomplished a few clear outcomes in the perspective of its main time, international collaboration. The participants collaborated in writing a guide for other professionals about international opportunities for librarians. Compiling the guide was first of all a good way to sum up information gathered during the program about these topics. Secondly, the guide will help other librarians to learn more about the topic. The guide will be published in the FLA website. The FLA will also arrange a seminar about the topic in the fall 2018.

During the course of the program in 2017-2018, the participants wrote together two presentations for international conferences in librarianship. One of the mentor pairs will present a paper in the Next Library conference in September 2018. A larger group of five program participants, all from different mentor pairs, wrote this paper for a lightning talk at the 2018 IFLA WLIC conference. Most of the program participants taking part in these presentations had not written papers for international conferences before so the whole process was new, and it was useful to get experience in writing a paper and applying for funding.

Altogether, the feedback collected from the mentor pairs helps to build up a report about what the FLA needs to take into account on the next round of the mentoring program. In addition to the topics already covered in the previous section, it will for example be useful to consider the best ways to advertise the program for potential participants and to introduce a mentoring agreement for the participants. For the first program round, the best way to find mentors was to contact potential mentors directly and this is likely to be the most fruitful method also in the future. The program could also include sessions led by professional guest speakers about the topics linked to its theme.

The program participants had several ideas about other good themes for a mentoring program if the FLA decides to keep the theme-based approach and change the theme for the next round. All in all a set theme for the program helped the participants to define personal goals for the program. Potential other alternatives for a current theme for a mentoring program are for example library management, knowledge development, public relations, event management, policymaker collaboration, service design and children's and youth librarianship.

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