# Sustainable and effective professional development for diverse libraries: Current status and best practice

**Janet Martin**
Librarian, Higher Colleges of Advanced Education, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.
E-mail address: janet.martin@hct.ac.ae

**Nicole Johnston**
Lecturer, University College London in Qatar, Doha, Qatar.
E-mail address: n.johnston@ucl.ac.uk

**Lore Guilmartin**
Librarian, Victoria Commonwealth University, Doha, Qatar.
E-mail address: lguilmartin@vcu.edu

**Jacqulyn Williams**
Librarian, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Doha, Qatar.
E-mail address: jw542@georgetown.edu

**Abstract:**

*In our geographically and politically diverse world, professional development has been increasingly needed to avoid professional isolation, and to keep abreast of the fast moving world of information management in the 21st century. This paper will consider whether the current models of face-to-face workshops and conferences common in library professional development offerings however, are likely to be the most effective and sustainable models into the future. Conference participation costs to attend can be high, and time away from the workplace difficult. This must be balanced against the value of networking and informal information exchange, and the need in some cases to be removed from daily pressures to be able to undertake meaningful learning. Evaluation will be made of some alternative forms of online delivery of professional development in libraries, including the models of 23Things, MOOCs, and webinars, together with an analysis of the theories of andragogy and adult learning.*

## Introduction

According to the ALA, "continuous learning is critical to renewing expertise and skills needed to assist patrons in this information age" (American Library Association, 2014). Clearly the role of libraries and information professionals is changing rapidly with expanding quantities and formats of information, new information needs of society, and the challenges of making effective use of new technologies. As librarians do not have continuing certification requirements to remain working as professionals after initial qualification (Bradshaw, 2014, p. 148), professional development (PD) activities are even more important for librarians than in many other professions, although our research reveals a dearth of publications on this topic.

Bellardo (2012) defines PD as "an intentional process of building knowledge and skills that allows individuals to be effective in their jobs and advance in their careers" (p. 82). PD learning opportunities can be made available in a number of different formats and offered in a variety of different delivery modes, including formal (conferences/workshops), informal but structured (discussions, visits, communities of practice), and independent learning situations (research, participation in online learning sites) (Jones & Dexter, 2014). While PD for library staff has usually been available in diverse geographical venues and has concentrated on face-to-face delivery via conferences, workshops and meetings, opportunity has arisen with new technologies to offer a variety of online options.

There are several factors highlighted in the literature which define effective PD, such as the importance of targeted design, the need for active learning which utilizes constructivist theories of instruction, the ownership of the PD by participants, the need for PD to bring about changes in practice to improve outcomes for clients of the organization, and importantly, the need for effective evaluation of the PD (Bellardo Hahn, 2012; Branom, 2012; Bubb & Earley, 2007; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Perez, 2012; Salpeter, 2003; Stoll, Harris, & Handscomb, 2012; Timperley, 2011). Argument is also made that sustainability is more likely if informal collaboration and independent work takes place after the formal PD activities occur, bringing the learning from the training room back to the workplace (Jones & Dexter, 2014).

## Changing models of professional development

In most professions, the dominant format for offering PD has historically been through face-to-face events such as conferences, meetings and workshops. Literature on the topic highlights the benefits of active participation in workshops, opportunities for librarians to network both formally and informally, to collaborate with colleagues, and to take the opportunity to access the thinking of a diverse gathering (Gruber, 2008; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Perez, 2012). These are indeed very important reasons for continuance of face-to-face events for librarian PD. Results of a 2010 ALISE survey in fact noted that "in general, in-person modalities for delivery of professional development activities are preferred over web-based or other digital delivery. This continued preference for delivery modes that incur expenses … bears further examination, particularly given that the two leading inhibitors preventing participation in such activities were identified as time and money" (Bellardo Hahn, 2012, p. 93). Face-to-face events have also been identified as preferential for some

types of learners who are not comfortable with self-directed learning online, or who are not conversant with the technologies needed for online engagement (Branom, 2012; Cooke, 2012; Perez, 2012). For some participants, online alternatives can throw up challenges in terms of access to high quality internet, and for presenters, there is diversity of learning styles, and geographical and cultural variations in the audience (Rich, 2011).

On the other hand, there is widespread argument that online PD opportunities (especially those offered asynchronously), allow busy librarians to participate when they are able, can make use of technology which allows active participation (as opposed to typical lecture or PowerPoint presentations), and usually requires less time and financial commitment than attendance at face-to-face events (Branom, 2012; Cooke, 2012; Gruber, 2008; Rich, 2011). As Moran et al (2014) also point out, students of online courses are often purposeful in their engagement with specific content they have chosen and can craft their ongoing education to specifically meet their needs, being therefore more likely to benefit from these educational opportunities.

Certainly most face-to-face conference presentations are a one-way communication of information with little opportunity for interaction, which in some cases is unmemorable and affords little effective learning.  This observance is understandable when one considers it in the light of adult learning theory (andragogy); as Rich (2011) points out, "adult learning theory is important to consider when discussing professional development because the main age for employment, and, thus, professional development is adulthood" (p. 10).  Andragogy was pioneered as a theory and model of adult learning from the 1970's by Knowles (1996), and emphasises the value of the process of learning. It uses approaches to learning that are problem-based and collaborative rather than didactic, and emphasises more equality between the teacher and learner.  Andragogy includes the concepts that adults are intrinsically motivated to learn (but that the motivation is dependent on their perception of the need to learn the information), that adults learn most when they can contextualize the information they receive within their existing knowledge (constructivist), and that learning is most successful when it is active, experimental and collaborative, giving time for reflection and testing in new situations.

This widely accepted theory of adult learning therefore would usually place the PD delivery format of conference presentations outside the sphere of effective and sustained learning. Many face-to-face deliveries of PD, however, include practical workshops and give consideration to the establishment of communities of learners and application of learning back into the workplace of participants.  Regardless of the format of delivery, all effective PD should involve targeted goals in the activity design, active engagement by participants, and measurable outcomes which improve the workplace or personal knowledge and skills.  It must be said that library conference attendances remain high worldwide, perhaps for many reasons, though whether this can be maintained in future times of austerity is less certain.

The existence of a growing range of new technology resources make it possible to consider diverse online delivery options for PD. Online opportunities should not (and probably will not) replace traditional PD experiences such as conferences, but they do offer options for librarians to connect with others by providing accessible, technologically advanced, and cost effective delivery of information (Cooke, 2012; Gruber, 2008).

**Online models of professional development delivery**

The *23Things* programs are based on the work of Helene Blowers from PLCMC library in the United States, who developed the original program in 2006. It has since been duplicated and adapted by hundreds of libraries all over the world, and is based on self-paced online tutorials which are practically based, and which are most effectively applied when undertaken as a 'community of learners' (Ragoff, 1994). The model usually presents information in different formats (e.g. read, write, listen, do, collaborate etc.), and can be undertaken individually or as a community of learners (a specific group of people undertaking this learning at the same time). The program of '23 Things (or topics)' can be undertaken on a set schedule, resulting in contribution to a blog which shares and explores their learning experiences. The modularization of the content allows participants to select and arrange content according to needs, and in the spirit of 'flipped classrooms', enables participants to investigate and experiment with content before coming together to share experiences in the community of learning.

*MOOCs* (Massive Open Online Courses) are another online option that has only taken off since 2011, with many adaptations evolving that improve participatory learning, and iterations tailored to smaller and targeted groups of people (Mahraj, 2012; Richter & Krishnamurthi, 2014; Wu, 2013). MOOCs are utilizing new technology available to offer short and longer courses online which are usually structured around high quality course materials, including the use of short instructional videos and opportunity for participants to test their learning on the way through. MOOCs usually have a community of learners, are conducted over a particular time period with some form of assessment and deadlines, and often include a certificate of completion at minimal cost. There are now hundreds of universities world-wide offering MOOCs, and a growing number of platforms on which to host courses.

An important argument for the development of MOOCs is the potential to democratize education and learning to far-flung geographical places, and to people in varying social, cultural and economic circumstances (Chant, 2013; Koller, 2012). Of relevance to library PD is this ability to reach global learners who may not otherwise have the opportunity to participate, and, as deWaard et al. (2011) note, to enable learners to develop a sense of control over their own learning with the ability to establish the learning topics and structure which suits themselves. As MOOCs continue to develop and adapt to local and regional needs, there is opportunity to use newer technologies to increase interactivity and participation, and to utilize rich data streams generated by MOOCs to yield new insights into online learner behaviour and online learning (Barnes, 2013; Creed-Dikeogu & Clark, 2013; Pritchard, 2013).

A *Webinar* is short for a web-based seminar, a presentation, lecture or workshop that is available via the Internet, usually has facility for synchronous and/or asynchronous learning, and has the option for increasing levels of interactivity with new technologies (Koch, 2008; Rich, 2011). Webinars can reach global participants with timely information, can allow for practical experience with unfamiliar technologies, and with sponsorship, can be a very cost-effective method of sharing and learning (Bellardo Hahn, 2012; Branom, 2012; Buxton, Burns, & De Muth, 2012; Koch, 2008). As with MOOCs, participation numbers are not limited by the number of chairs or facilities, and information exchange can be considered environmentally 'green', as participants connect virtually.

Increasingly Webinars are being offered to the library profession as either free or paid alternatives to face-to-face PD, with peak bodies such as the ALA, ACRL, IFLA, and regional library associations all offering events to a global market. While popular, there appears to be very little evaluation of this delivery format reported in the literature, and some criticism of the effectiveness, or variation in quality, of programs offered (Rich, 2011, p. 14). One welcome exception is the work done by San Jose State University in the United States, a founding partner in the very successful Library 2.0 Webinar Series, where an ongoing research project is evaluating the effectiveness of learning and outcomes from this Webinar participation. The goal of this recent research has been "to identify the impact and outcomes a worldwide virtual conference has on both conference participants and the LIS organizations around the world", and preliminary findings are very positive (Hirsch, 2015).

**Evaluation of professional development**

The issue of evaluation of PD events is indeed an interesting one, sometimes overlooked, rarely built into the planning of the PD, and often reduced to what Timperley (2011) refers to as a "happiness scale". We have probably all completed short surveys at the completion of a PD event in which we have been asked whether the content was useful, whether the event was well organized, and whether the catering was good. While somewhat useful, Rich (2011) argues that "professional development … should be developed with the expectation that evaluation is part of the process. In order to determine real evaluation, a long-term approach must be taken" (p. 96). This sound evaluation strategy supports all educational models of PD, whether delivered face-to-face or online, if the goal of the PD remains to change practice and improve outcomes for clients of the organization. As Simmonds (2003) points out, "it is about recording the outcomes of your learning and development – so you need to ask the questions: "What did I learn?" and "How do I plan to apply this learning?" rather than simply "What learning event did I experience?" " (p. 170).

Grohmann and Kauffeld (2013) outline an effective evaluation strategy as including satisfaction with and utility of the training, extent of knowledge gained, ability to apply new knowledge in practice, and identifiable outcomes for the individual and their organization. They argue that "for determining the actual training benefits it is important to evaluate not only short-term outcomes (e.g. reactions at the end of the training), but also participants' long term outcomes back at work (e.g. transfer to practice)" (p. 136). This longer term evaluation strategy reflects the benefits of applying adult learning theory in PD design, as adults need to contextualize the information they receive within their existing knowledge, and where time is required for reflecting on new information and testing it in new situations. Within this theoretical context, it is in the interest of designers and organizers of library PD to both implement effective evaluation strategies, and to report the findings in the literature.

**Conclusions**

It is clear that PD for librarians is vital in our changing and challenging world, and that the traditional face-to-face delivery formats face competition from online formats which usually incur less time and financial commitment. It is not recommended in this paper that online offerings should necessarily replace PD experiences such as conferences, as many other factors come into play as mentioned above, but that they can provide additional ways to develop skills and expertise in diverse geographic and economic situations.

It is recommended however, that regardless of delivery format, all offerings of PD for librarians be designed with adult learning theory in mind, which includes active, experimental and collaborative learning, the need for a constructivist approach, and the opportunity for integration of the learning into the workplace with identifiable and positive outcomes. To monitor the value of any PD (which is increasingly important as accountability for every funding dollar increases) effective evaluation strategies for the PD need to be applied, and will benefit the profession by being critically and widely reported in the literature. It may well become possible to then make more educated decisions about the most effective PD delivery formats to be undertaken within each library community.

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