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Article

SPLAT: Innovative Collaboration in Idaho's Libraries

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Abstract

Libraries face shrinking budgets, increased use, and user demand for trendy resources. This makes it difficult for librarians to find the time to keep current with innovative library trends, such as technological tools and social media developments. The Special Projects Library Action Team (SPLAT) offers a new model for enhancing library services. SPLAT is a group supported by the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICFL), the state agency responsible for assisting libraries. The members of SPLAT are innovation representatives who search and experiment with social media trends and online tools, and share the best ways to integrate them into services at all types of libraries. SPLAT members have developed SPLAT 101, an online class geared towards teaching library staff new Web technologies. Members also present about trends at conferences, blog relevant content, and engage in peer-to-peer education--all meant to demystify and exploit emergent technologies. These efforts have yielded enhanced library services, encouraged changes to policies, and increased positive user experiences. In this article we summarize how SPLAT works, explain how SPLAT has helped Idaho's libraries experiment with evolving services, analyze the success of SPLAT as a model for other states, and discuss future steps.

The ongoing development of Web-based technologies has influenced the way libraries integrate them into their service models. Web 2.0 technologies provide users unencumbered access to social networks, free to low-cost social software, cloud computing, file sharing, and similar open systems. The proliferation of these new online technologies has changed how librarians and library users interact with information, both personally and professionally.

Questions remain as to the best ways librarians can enable these evolving Web 2.0 tools to enrich their patron's experiences in and beyond the library. While Web 2.0 tools are convenient, libraries are hampered by the variety, near-duplication of services, and continued "perpetual beta" model where Web developers or services update or rearrange visual cues or change pricing models in order to remain competitive and current. How can library staff manage and integrate these tools into library services? How do library staff adapt to new developments in technologies? How do librarians forecast new trends and changes in online environments? How can staff affect change in the way new technologies and tools are viewed? The answers may be complex, but librarians are never short of inventive ideas for meeting the challenges of this evolving techie world.

Models

Some libraries have met these challenges with innovative ideas to manage various educational models to both demystify new technologies and to facilitate understanding of the potential to library decision makers and patrons. These approaches may range from top-down pressure to self-educate, employing the dangling carrot principle of reward for learning or adoption of new thinking, to performance-based standards that further employee growth and efficacy.

One of the better examples of library staff buy-in was the 2006 "Learning 2.0" initiative employed by the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (PLCMC). The goal of Learning 2.0 was to "encourage staff to experiment and learn about the new and emerging technologies that are reshaping the context of information on the Internet today" (Blowers, 2006). Blowers, the PLCMC technical director at the time, encouraged staff to participate in learning new technologies (wikis, podcasts, blogging, Flickr, etc.) during an eight-week course comprised of experiments with "23 Things (or small exercises) that you can do on the Web to explore and expand your knowledge of the Internet and Web 2.0." Participants who completed the course by the deadline received rewards and a chance to win a laptop.

A less structured method for raising staff awareness of new technologies is to harness the capital already available in libraries: library staff. Libraries of all types employ an eclectic mix of personalities, skills and abilities. Many library employees are very aware of emerging technological advancements. These individuals--the early adopter, the gadget guru, or the online social butterfly-- can affect this change. This is a grass roots model to encourage willing library staff to serve as social media and Web 2.0 experts to teach and empower fellow workers.

Another approach is to create a centralized, state supported initiative that combines the top-down model with the grass roots model: set up a select group of individuals versed in social media and other Web 2.0 technologies, but on a statewide scale. This new model encourages library staff members who believe and actively participate in the transformative power of Web 2.0 (social networks, social software, etc.) to share their expertise at the state level. The Special Projects Library Action Team (SPLAT) was born out of this new model.

Spurred by fast changing Web technologies, far-seeing Futures Think Tank meetings, and a desire to prepare for future innovation, it became apparent to those involved that a new model for libraries to meet the challenges posed by emerging technology was due. One particular concept to emerge from several statewide meetings was of "a small group of Idaho librarians continually scouting for new ideas, new tools, experimenting with different ways of applying them and then sharing what they learn with the library community," according to Joslin (personal communication, January 22, 2010). After these statewide discussions, the Idaho Commission for Libraries published the final report, "A Vision for Idaho Libraries in 2020". Dubbed the Vision 2020 Document, this report called for several initiatives to shepherd Idaho libraries towards a preferred future. One in particular called for the following:

> Innovate! Create a Special Projects Library Action Team (SPLAT) to act in the “crow’s nest” capacity, searching for innovation, proposing and leading experiments and pilot projects, and discovering new opportunities. This will begin with a statewide team, but could later be extended to regions or localities (Idaho Commission for Libraries, 2006, p. 7).

SPLAT took form by bringing together individuals from all over the state whose knowledge and enthusiasm for new technologies was well known. At its core, SPLAT members and their counterparts in the Idaho Commission for Libraries work and collaborate in a fluid and diverse manner. SPLAT members meet up to four times a year to write long-range plans and share ideas and perspectives from their own work experiences. The way that SPLAT developed is difficult to describe, something Idaho State Librarian Ann Joslin recognizes:

> I purposefully did not give SPLAT any direction on how to organize or do the work described above. The members’ initiative, creativity, and enthusiasm enabled them to create SPLAT’s own future, a process similar to building an airplane while it’s in flight and consistent with the environment in which many of us work today (personal communication, January 22, 2010).

SPLAT members contribute to a SPLAT blog and provide technological assistance to library staff in their own libraries as needed. They indicate their willingness to showcase Web 2.0 know-how in many settings outside their own institutions, both formally and informally, creating a grass roots dissemination of this new knowledge. When SPLAT

members use new online tools relevant to libraries, or experiment successfully with them, they share their knowledge with each other, their colleagues, and their library patrons. This model for the sharing of experiences is repeated throughout the state. We have found that there is no proven methodology or best practice for raising awareness of technologies that impact how libraries serve their community.

Because SPLAT is a responsive, point-of-need reference team, members disseminate new knowledge where, when, and how it is most effective to do so. For example, SPLAT members present at library conferences, addressing many of the issues associated with new technology tools or social media services. The members also set up a command center (usually a couch) for responding to technological inquiries in a casual atmosphere where they encourage questions, solicit ideas, and imagine possibilities with conference attendees.

Figure 1. SPLAT members - Photo: http://www.flickr.com/photos/stephanieb-w/271678277/

As SPLAT membership changes, new ideas are introduced and new initiatives evolve. SPLAT members benefit by the eclectic mix of experiences, library environments, and backgrounds. Teaching in peer-to-peer situations within a closed system, such as a conference, or a special one-on-one session in a library, can be an effective way of engaging staff in in-depth training. Teaching face-to-face can help to minimize technology anxiety, directly address particular learning styles, and encourage experimentation beyond the tool at hand.

The authors do not undervalue the need to partner with non-library social media experts, who can bring a different awareness and skill set to libraries in the use and potential of Web 2.0 technologies. Outside experts usually provide instruction in a structured top-down approach, with a blanket training session to address a broad spectrum of technologies. SPLAT members volunteer to serve at these types of training events, presenting a level of enthusiasm and a positive library service mentality to empower library staff from various institutions to experiment with new technologies and explore how these can be used at their institutions. As mentioned previously, SPLAT members attend regional and state conferences, where they interact with attendees to positively engage them with newer technologies. As far as the authors know, the State of Idaho is the only place where this level of engagement and implementation is happening.

SPLAT Successes

SPLAT is widely known throughout the Idaho library community because of several strong and successful innovative service initiatives. As defined in the Vision 2020 Document, innovative services are those which "evolve from continual innovation, from staff open to making many small mistakes quickly, and that may range in 2020 from traditional story time to virtual stacks and Artificial Intelligence reference assistance" (Idaho Commission for Libraries, 2006, p. 6). SPLAT members continually try out new projects and new initiatives, moving on from projects and learning from these trials quickly. Because of this experimentation, SPLAT has become known as a group of savvy and technically proficient individuals who are well received at conferences and in one-on-one interactions in large part because of their approachability. SPLAT achieved this level of charisma not only by way of numerous activities and through community involvement, but also because of the initiative and support of Idaho's State Librarian, Ann Joslin, and the Idaho Commission for Libraries.

SPLAT's impact and effectiveness, although widely accepted, has been difficult to measure. Joslin reports that the "two most visible successes of SPLAT are the informal technology mentoring members provide at the ILA [Idaho Library Association] conferences and the SPLAT 101 courses on Web 2.0 tools," (personal communication, January 22, 2010). These two activities are by far the most noticeable ways SPLAT has offered benefits to the Idaho library community. In this section we will describe the benefits that this group has achieved statewide.

SPLAT 101

Inspired by PLCMC's 23 Things, which aimed to "encourage exploration of Web 2.0 and new technologies" (Blowers, 2006), SPLAT members crafted an online course dubbed "SPLAT 101" to educate library staff on the use of new technologies across the entire state, instead of focusing on just one library. Whereas PLCMC was able to reach the library staff within that district, SPLAT, because of their unique cross-library collaboration with support from the Idaho Commission for Libraries, was able to reach staff from all types of libraries in all geographic locations throughout Idaho.

SPLAT members discussed the method of delivery and opted to make the course freely accessible on the web. Members compiled a list of topics and tools, vetting them as to their potential to enhance awareness of the most important and useful Web 2.0 technologies. The topics finalized for the first SPLAT 101 online course were: blogs and blogging, RSS and news readers, instant messaging and Meebo, online applications, wikis, and tagging. Lesson plans were developed by the SPLAT members. Each plan included interactive resources such as YouTube instruction videos and activities. The lesson plans also included examples of libraries that used the new technologies successfully to provide better services. The online lessons took six weeks to complete, with each week dedicated to a single topic.

Joslin sent a letter to all Idaho libraries to encourage participation in the online course and to explain its advantages. Joslin stated, "Everyone in the Idaho library community—from directors to volunteers, in school, academic, public and special libraries—needs to be up-to-date with the latest trends and technology tools that Web 2.0 is bringing to the world," (Joslin, 2008).

The course material was presented on the SPLAT blog. Participants who completed each weekly module posted comments about their experiences with the Web 2.0 technology from that week. Many of these comments expressed relief, surprise, confidence and empowerment. Participants expressed practical ways in which they intended to integrate the tools with their present library services. Some SPLAT 101 participants also recognized the value of these tools. For those who needed extra guidance, SPLAT members provided other methods of instruction and assistance. Although the course was web-based, and could be taken asynchronously, individual SPLAT members were on hand via open chat forums to address questions, comments, problems or concerns for the weekly module he or she had developed. For example, during the week on tagging, one SPLAT member held office hours via chat using some of the tools from earlier modules. Participants could email any instructor for help. Open communication via Web-based chat and email was a profound example of the kind of collaboration SPLAT is known for. This peer-to-peer method of instruction was crucial in many participants' ability to get past experimentation anxiety, lack of experience, unfamiliarity, or other barriers. This personal and informal interaction greatly contributed to the success of SPLAT 101.

SPLAT 101 participants were surveyed before and after the course. Even though only 32.8% of the participants took SPLAT 101 to learn something new, 72.1% expressed that they learned something new and enjoyed taking the course (Cordova, Funabiki, & Vecchione, 2009). Because of this overwhelming success, the group revised SPLAT 101 and offered it a second time in spring of 2009. Those who had missed the first run wanted to learn the same things that their coworkers had learned, and expected the same personal interactions from the first run. One school librarian reported “SPLAT 101 is just the push I needed to make the time to figure out how to use these great resources and help bring my school library into the 21st century! “(Pfleiger, 2008).

Because of the skills she gained from participating in SPLAT 101, Pfleiger was able to collaborate with her colleagues at the Melba School District who immediately saw the value of applying these tools in the school. Subsequently, the school's Internet policy was changed dramatically to begin "allowing social networks, online applications, blogging and streaming video" ("How SPLAT changed one teacher librarian's life," 2010). SPLAT was directly responsible for this change (Persichini, 2010).

Joslin's support was instrumental in the success of this project. A total of 364 library staff members officially participated statewide. Some individuals chose to participate in an unofficial capacity by taking one or two of the modules, for example learning about blogs and wikis, rather than finishing the course and receiving the certificate of completion.

The SPLAT 101 course resulted in hundreds of comments and an overall positive survey response. Madison Library District's Library Director Judy Dewey commented that her library is going to apply what they were learning into their daily workflow: "We're all doing SPLAT 101 at our library. We're thinking about an internal blog and an internal wiki where we can put our procedures manual and keep it up to date. Thanks for all the info!" (Dewey, 2008). Even more impressive were the hundreds of anonymous comments about how SPLAT 101 participants had felt intimidated by the new technology in the past, but now found it so easy to learn: "Amazingly I created my own blog. I'm not a big fan of computers in general but slowly but surely I am getting the hang of some things" (Anonymous, 2008). Those who completed the program received a certificate signed by State Librarian Ann Joslin and were entered into a prize drawing.

The purpose of each course was not only to teach the participants a new technology, but also to show how each tool can be used within a library setting, since "using technology simply for the sake of using technology is not right for anyone. There needs to be reason, focus, and purpose; finding that technology balance is an ongoing process" (Schrecker, 2010).

Informal Technology Mentoring

SPLAT members regularly attend statewide and regional conferences, often occupying a couch or lounge area. The members come prepared with a theme or message to convey during the conference. At the 2007 Idaho Library Association conference, SPLAT provided the gaming console Nintendo Wii. Any attendee could play with the games. This fun and casual approach showed the conference attendees from around the state how gaming can be used in libraries.

Figure 2. Loriene Roy, Past ALA President races cows with SPLAT's Dylan Baker of Ada Community Library, Idaho. Nampa, Idaho. Photo taken by Memo Cordova.

This informal approach has worked well at regional and state conferences as more individuals recognize SPLAT members and the ubiquitous couch. The SPLAT couch has become a symbol of the relaxed learning environment that SPLAT has embraced. Conference attendees join SPLAT members on the couch to chat, learn how to experiment with resources, or to brainstorm new ideas. Other conference attendees ask SPLAT members to help them with blogs, wikis or computer application settings.

Blog

Keeping track of new trends or web-based tools is facilitated by the SPLAT blog (http://splat.lili.org). SPLAT members post about and explore trending topics in technology and libraries. Recent blog posts include library design in other countries, implementation of new library services, libraries without books**,** and personal observations related to libraries or library resources. Some topics initiated on the blog are explored further during SPLAT meetings. At times, topics have developed into full-fledged projects. SPLAT's online presence assists library staff because they can rely on the SPLAT blog to keep them abreast of the latest innovations. Library staff trust SPLAT and because of this trust, will consider implementation of these ideas in their own libraries.

Meetings

SPLAT members convene in quarterly, day-long meetings to share new resources and ideas. The sharing of practices, implementation strategies, and projects at these meetings encourages the widespread use and adaptation of technologies.

Evaluation: Embracing Change

It is difficult to measure how successful SPLAT has been in fulfilling its role to act in the crow's nest capacity to spur new ideas for technology use in Idaho libraries because no formal assessment plan was established when SPLAT was formed. Similarly, it is hard to quantify how many Idaho library staff members have benefited from the array of services and opportunities SPLAT provides—a recursive side effect due to the SPLAT team's casual and informal venue, and because conversations and transactions are not logged or recorded.

There are several informal ways SPLAT has gauged its success, however. What is clear is that there has been a noticeable increase in use of Web 2.0 tools and other technology in Idaho's libraries. Likewise, many who have learned from SPLAT continue to explore on their own and share with others what they have learned, thus becoming ambassadors of emergent technologies to further the awareness and usefulness of such tools.

SPLAT has not yet conducted a survey or an assessment to study or measure the overall effectiveness of its efforts, and has only surveyed participants in the SPLAT 101 online courses. The Idaho Commission for Libraries staff has surveyed past and present members of SPLAT regarding their perception of the SPLAT initiative.
SPLAT can assess the quality of discussions, the amount of interaction (synchronous and asynchronous), and subject matters covered. One SPLAT member commented that while SPLAT does a great job informing and training Idaho librarians, this is not the main goal of the group. The same member commented that the emphasis has been on action. Indeed, the emphasis for SPLAT has been on action. At the completion of their SPLAT 101 course twenty different individuals suggested topics for SPLAT's next course.

This dichotomy in perspective suggests that an area for improvement is focusing on the mission and vision for SPLAT. Another SPLAT member noted, "I am not sure that I understand the direction this team is going" (Idaho Commission for Libraries, 2009), which indicates greater confusion regarding the role of SPLAT. This indicator suggests SPLAT needs to balance its mission between discussing future ideas and implementing strategies.

Identified areas of improvement include the need to diversify SPLAT membership—most are predominantly from public and academic library staff, and lack the school or specialty library perspective. Many do not hold management roles and are in entry-level positions in their libraries. Most SPLAT members serve in a public role in their libraries

and therefore the focus has been primarily towards services. Because of the group's focus, SPLAT members have not broached key areas such as the changing environment of ILS systems, access to web-based tools, and resources in closed computer systems like in school libraries.

One major asset gained by the large representation of public services staff on SPLAT is in the knowledge and experience they have from working directly with patrons. They hear what the recurring demands are and can predict trends simply based on their interactions. According to a survey conducted by the Idaho Commission for Libraries, the majority of SPLAT members believe SPLAT is a resounding success. However, the survey found that members also feel that SPLAT has become too focused on technology and is not fulfilling its capacity to bring new trends to the attention of the Idaho Commission for Libraries and to the librarians in the state of Idaho.

As SPLAT continues to grow and implement new ideas, it is necessary to measure the effectiveness and efficacy of efforts to educate Idaho library staff and their communities on technological advancements. SPLAT needs to integrate assessment throughout their activities. These measures include designing surveys, implementing research techniques, and evaluating the results to determine if the level of success can be measured quantitatively and/or qualitatively.

Conclusion

SPLAT offers a new model for enhancing library services state-wide. The members of SPLAT are innovation representatives who identify, learn about, and experiment with social media trends and online tools, and then share their best practices for integrating them into services at all types of libraries.

With three years of experience, SPLAT is now ready to assess the impact of the work done to date. Evaluation up until this point has been informal and anecdotal. Sharing new ideas will continue to be at the forefront of SPLAT's focus as the group re-evaluates its mission and vision and determines strategies and directions for future projects.

The authors foresee developing a SPLAT toolkit to enable other states to create similar teams of "innovation representatives" comprised of technically savvy library staff and forward-thinking library leaders who encourage and implement newer technologies to better serve their communities. The toolkit will consist of the best practices that SPLAT determines through the evaluation process, and perhaps include the evaluation process itself. If the quantitative measurements match or exceed the anecdotal and informal feedback, SPLAT will most assuredly be considered as a model for success in any state.

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