Using Unconferences for Unconventional Professional Development

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Abstract

I have had the privilege of devising, organising, publicising, promoting and running unconferences for Library Technicians on behalf of the ALIA NSW Library Technicians Group every year since 2009 at the Australian Catholic University's North Sydney Campus until 2012. This year's unconference was held at UNSW and I was joined by ALIA Sydney and ALIA New Graduates Group.

This paper will chart the journey from first encountering the term “unconference” back in 2005 through to the planning and presentation of the very first Library Technician unconference in NSW in 2009.

It will then chart progress through subsequent unconferences, with details of lessons learnt and the changes made to the format to promote engagement.

The planning and delivery of the 2012 unconference, 'Unmeash', will highlight the role of a former online Library Technician student, which enhanced the unconference with a greater online presence and the use of social media. Details of the 2013 unconference will also be discussed.

The paper will look at the way the day is run and how using unconferences, whilst unconventional, can have a positive effect on professional development for Library Technicians by providing an accessible, fun and concentrated group learning collaborative environment.

I want to thank the organisers of the ALIA National Library & Information Technicians’ Symposium for the opportunity to present this paper here in Canberra.

My paper looks at the opportunities presented by using unconferences for unconventional professional development of Library Technicians. I have had the privilege of organising, promoting and running five unconferences on behalf of the ALIA NSW Library Technicians Group, focussing on Library Technicians and Librarians. My paper will detail the journey that I have taken from first encountering the idea of an unconference back in 2005, to the latest iteration of the unconference format that was “Unmeash2”, which was run on behalf of ALIA NSW Library Technicians Group in conjunction with ALIA Sydney and the ALIA NSW New Grads Group in July this year.

So, to begin at the beginning, back in 2005 I was on the organising committee for the next 2005 National Library and Information Technicians Conference in Sydney. One of the ideas that I had come up with for that conference ended up as a ‘Treasure Hunt’ for clues that were located in and around the Conference venue at Darling Harbour. This treasure hunt starred two Book Detectives, Follows and Leeds, who, in my elaborate back story for them, were engaged by libraries to track down long overdue books and return them to their libraries. The original idea that I had had was to slip this into the call for
abstracts as a bit of light relief for those who would be working through the abstracts, with the concept having been sold to the BBC and now being in production. Time restrictions prevented this from happening, so I then developed the idea into the treasure hunt instead. However, one of the other people on the committee said that this would be one of the key narratives of the conference, which lead me down the pathway of narrative story-telling in organisations. I then started to look at people around the world who were doing this sort of thing.

One of the companies who were doing this was Anecdote, who are based in Melbourne, and I subscribed to their newsletter and blog. They had heard recently that “some of the most productive and empowering meetings that occur at a conference are often those that occur over a coffee, or over lunch, in between sessions”. They went on to describe the possibility of doing away with the session and the speakers and just having the ‘spaces in-between’ and having an unconference. I found the idea of this very intriguing, however it was way too close to the next conference to organise anything, so it just stayed on the backburner.

In 2006, my wife and I went off for 4 months in the UK and the idea remained just that. In 2007, I started looking once again at the idea, trying to get my head around how an unconference could work in a library setting. In 2008, having found out a bit more and having had a look at a few blog sites and blog reports of successful library-based unconferences, I started to talk up the idea; and at the ALIA NSW Library Technicians’ Christmas Dinner and Committee Meeting, I said that we should have a go and do an unconference. The Committee agreed with me – but said that as I was the only one who really knew what they were talking about, then I had better organise and run it. So I did.

One of the things I learnt was that you shouldn’t organise an unconference without first going to one. However, all the “good” library-based unconferences I was finding were far away, either in Perth, or the US or the UK, so I broke that rule. I still haven’t been to an unconference organised by anyone else! I wanted to keep the costs as low as possible. We were fortunate in having Janette Telford organise the Library at the Australian Catholic University’s North Sydney campus as our venue. This meant it didn’t cost us anything to hire a venue. I realised that the Rag and Famish pub was only a 10 minute walk away, so that got lunch sorted, and then I had the brilliant idea of asking people to bring morning and afternoon tea to share, thereby sorting out the food. I had learnt that food was important in organising a successful unconference!

I then decided to give it a name and came up with “one8nine”, which I thought was just a play on the date, 1st August 2009, but apparently I still managed to confuse some people! So, we had a name, a date, a venue and the food was sorted. But what would happen at the event? I set up a blog, advertised on the ALIA LibTech email and hoped word of mouth and the library gods would smile upon us so that we’d get enough people. Everyone who registered was asked what they would like to see discussed, or what they’d like to talk about, and I recorded their details in a spreadsheet. I remember telling a friend of mine that someone had actually registered and that now I’ll have to do this thing! I was still not sure how this would all come together.

In unconference “rules”, one thing you should not do is have a guest speaker, but I had a friend of mine who had recently left BlueScope Steel where I was working at the time. She had gone to a work for Banarra in North Sydney, a Sustainability company, so I asked her, and she agreed to come and do a talk. So, my first unconference began with Amy Luscombe talking about Sustainability and Libraries. This turned out to be a great idea and sparked a lot of discussion, comments and questions. From there we broke into several groups and at that very first library-based unconference in NSW we talked about: Google Docs; Libraries and Web 2.0; Virtual Libraries; and Flickr, Social Networks and Education. Then in the afternoon sessions we had workshops on Koha; Libraries and Social Media and Web 2.0; Google Analytics; a view on Web 3.0; and Highlights of the ALA Conference. We rounded the day out with a video of the five finalists of the Book Cart Drill Teams competition at the ALA Conference.

The day was a great success with 25 people having turned up and enjoyed the unconference experience. Amazingly (for me) they had enjoyed it enough that they were very keen to have another one the following year!
One of the things that arose from the feedback after that first unconference was that it had felt a bit rushed and they wanted a bit more time for networking. This was my fault in trying to make sure there weren’t any gaps and that the day would “pump” along. So we (or I) agreed that 2010’s unconference would be held on May 1st – Mayday. However, in the meantime, my wife and I went to the UK again for 6 weeks and not long after I returned to work I was to discover that my role had been made redundant. Not long after that, I managed to secure a casual teaching role at TAFE and began teaching online. This meant that the run up to the Mayday unconference was not quite as focused as the year before, but the unconference that followed was less structured, looser and allowed more time for networking. It was, perhaps, more like an unconference should be. We had about 30 people that year and we had established a tradition!

In 2011, the highlight of the “thirty seven eleven” unconference was a panel of Allan Daniel from TAFE Western Sydney, Julie Daw from Zenith and Martin Ellis from North Sydney Libraries, all talking about where the jobs were for Library Technicians. As I was now a teacher, I was of course encouraging my students, both face to face and online, to come to the unconference, with little success! However I had had a few students attend and at the 2011 unconference one of my online students Connie Ross attended. Connie was quite blown away by the unconference experience and was enthusiastic to get involved and help with the 2012 version. 2011 also saw our first “out of state” attendee with Sonja Barfoed coming down from Canberra to attend.

With Connie on board for 2012, the planning got under way a lot earlier than in previous years. Connie had far more experience with social media than I had. Previous unconferences had been promoted via email, via the elists, and via blogs, but with Connie on board we expanded into Facebook and Twitter and got a better looking blog. We also got a “brand” for the unconference – “Unmeash” which was a portmanteau of unleash and mesh. This was trying to pick up on the thought that Library Technicians network or mesh together, and that unconferences unleash ideas amongst us.

Connie also introduced the idea of “Pecha Kucha”, a Japanese presentation format featuring 20 slides for 20 seconds each. We put the call out and ended up with four different speakers prepared to do a presentation “powered by Pecha Kucha”. We did two in the morning and two in the afternoon, with the breakout sessions slotted in around them. These covered such topics as embedded Librarians; fairy tales; the role of being a Reader Advisor, a library student and an ALIA NSW manager with a love of romance literature and libraries; and I had a crack at the future of libraries. We also had Phong Dang, a Library Technician from Canberra, do a Lightning Talk on her role at the Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia.

Continuing on from our theme of keeping the unconference free, we enlisted the help of Cover It Live. Access to Cover It Live is free for non-profit organisations. It enabled us to curate the tweets from Twitter for the day, a sort of group note taking exercise that is stored on the web for posterity. The only trouble was the lack of people with access to Twitter. But we at least proved it worked!

Having Connie meant that the topic selection process was able to be sorted out beforehand, by utilising PollDaddy to conduct a poll for the topics we would be talking about. This ensured a fairly smooth operation on the day, but for the third session we took on a suggestion by Vassiliki Veros to open up the discussion to the Year of Reading and our part in that. This highlighted the fluid nature of running an unconference. That same year we had an attendee from Victoria and two from Canberra.

With four unconferences at the Australian Catholic University, there was still a hunger for another one, and so plans were put in place for one this year. In January there came a call from ALIA Sydney and ALIA New Grads asking if they could be involved in the running of an unconference with the ALIA NSW Library Technicians Group. As I hadn’t yet begun to plan the next unconference, I agreed to go to Sydney and meet up with them to see what they wanted to do, and whether it would be possible to join three ALIA groups together to present a joint unconference. As this was to be the fifth unconference I had planned, I had said previously to Connie that it would be nice to get 50 people there for the fifth, so I was thinking with ALIA Sydney and ALIA New Grads on board, that there was now a possibility of it actually happening.
I visited Central Queensland University’s Library in Sydney and met with Amy Croft from ALIA Sydney and CQU, Amy Barker from ALIA NSW New Grads and UNSW, and Liz Weisse from ALIA Sydney and Willoughby Council Library, to discuss the possibility of running a joint unconference. I briefly outlined how previous unconferences had gone and the fact that all four previous unconferences had been different from one another. Amy Barker had been to one previously, so she had some prior knowledge, but Amy Croft and Liz had only a vague idea. I was struck by the fact that they thought that there should be some quite detailed planning involved – which isn’t quite how unconferences work. From my experience, unconferences tend to be self-organising. The content of the day is determined by the people who come and what it is that they want to talk about. Consequently they just “kind of evolve” and the most important part of the preplanning is the publicity, and that is where social media can play a major role. For people who are used to meticulous planning and organisation, an unconference can appear chaotic, but for some reason I enjoy that part of it and thrive on the chaos! Amy Croft later admitted that she hadn’t been entirely convinced that everything would come together without the usual event planning, but was amazed to see everything come together so smoothly!

We decided – or I managed to convince them – that we would continue to use the Unmeash brand name and call this joint unconference “Unmeash2”. I again did a flyer, which I’m not sure anyone actually prints out and pins to noticeboards, but I like doing them and they help me to advertise the unconference to my students. We then decided on a date and the venue. It was held at the amazing space that is the Library at UNSW, Kensington Campus. With a date, a venue, a name, a brochure and three ALIA groups on board, all was effectively set and all we needed to do was advertise and spread the word and get people to come.

I contacted Connie and she set about getting the WordPress blog up and running, setting up the Unmeash2 Twitter and Facebook accounts, and linking all of them together. Connie also made sure that we could once again use Cover It Live to collect all the Twitter feeds on the day. However, PollDaddy had changed their software, with only 10 topics being able to be voted on, so we had to resort to a slightly more cumbersome method of determining topics. This allowed space for me to do another “powered by Pecha Kucha” presentation on Libraries I have visited, while the numbers were tabulated and the topics for the day were determined.

While we were collating the topics we would cover, an idea struck. Instead of the organising committee trying to collate the most popular ideas, next time we would ask each participant to count the occurrences of particular subjects that had been written on the board, to save time and include them in the process.

On the day, we had almost 40 participants attending at the Library at UNSW and we put the 37 topics up and people simply wrote down the numbers of the 6 topics they’d like to talk about, and then we tabulated those and chose the most popular topics, and then from there, chose the first 4 topics to talk about.

When we stopped to go to lunch, the discussions continued and so lunchtime became an unstructured topic session on its own. We virtually took over the White House dining space and carried on a number of library-related conversations.

So, after devising, organising, publicising, promoting and running five different unconferences, what have I learnt? Why do I think using unconferences work for promoting unconventional professional development?

Firstly, as we work in libraries we are often a small part of a bigger organisation. As such, most people, even within the organisation we belong to, don’t understand fully what it is that we do. Even within my own family, my daughter grew up with me working in a Library, yet when I left BlueScope in 2009 after 18 years as a Library Technician, she still didn’t understand what it was that her dad actually did each day. Library conferences and library unconferences allow us to be with and around people who understand what it is we do – even if our libraries are all vastly different and the roles we undertake within them are also different. We don’t need to explain ourselves to each other.
When I stood up at the start of the last unconference, I gave a “powered by Pecha Kucha” talk on my magical library tours, talking about some of the many libraries I have visited. I started off by saying that recently I had come to Canberra to catch up with one of my online students. Marilyn Davidson, who is here as part of the Symposium, had scored a job at the High Court of Australia. I had taught Marilyn (and the rest of the class) for two years, but had never met her or even seen her, so I thought that coming to Canberra to hear Neil Oliver speak would give me an opportunity to catch up for a chat and a look at her Library.

Afterwards, I said on Facebook that I was having a coffee in the café at the High Court, and my niece messaged me to say she was up at Parliament House and I should come up for lunch. I did, and received a tour of the backrooms of Parliament House, which meant I got to poke my head into the Library there (both floors) before we had a nice lunch on Queen’s Terrace. I finished with my niece, and then got a message on Facebook from Colleen Gammage inviting me to come and see Treasury Library. In the end, over 2 days I visited 8 libraries. When I went home, people asked if I had a good time in Canberra and I'd say I had a fantastic time and visited 8 libraries. They'd look at me somewhat strangely. But library people, you understand that!

One of my reasons for doing an unconference in the first place is that it provides a space where Librarians, Library Technicians, Library Assistants and library students can enter and exchange ideas, questions, answers, theories and thoughts on a number of library related topics. The topics are in some way randomly generated, being the topics that most of the attendees want to talk about at that time. But the important thing is that right now in this unconference, attendees have space to talk about those topics. Library professionals rarely get opportunities to engage, understand where they fit in, exchange ideas and network, but unconferences provide that opportunity.

There are some simple rules that unconferences operate under:

- There are no spectators – everyone is a participant
- Whichever people come on the day are the right people
- Whatever happens is what was meant to happen
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen
- It’s a gift economy – the richest people are those who give generously
- And if you find yourself in a session where you can’t contribute or you’re not learning anything, use the rule of two feet and move to somewhere where you can participate

I think this removes a lot of pressure from participants; and so far we haven’t had any problems. People are encouraged to get involved, to lead a session, to contribute a comment, a question, a thought, a website, or an experience to the discussions. I also think that as a precursor to presenting a paper at a conference or symposium, or even a workshop, an unconference gives people confidence in contributing in front of a small group, and sharing their ideas with colleagues.

At Unmeash2, the top topic was creativity in the profession, which was by far the most popular topic from the 37 topics the attendees had to choose from. Unconferences capture the zeitgeist of the moment. For conferences and symposiums, topics are called for and nominated a long time out from the date of the conference. In the meantime, perhaps, the attendees’ concerns and interests can move on. At Unmeash2, the top five topics were: creativity in the profession; copyright; the future of the profession; the new supervisor; and where are the job opportunities? Julia Garnett, the new ALIA NSW manager also gave a presentation, which was the result of her study of the convergence of core skills and knowledge of library and museum professionals. This has led to us thinking of expanding our offer of participation in next year’s unconference to museum professionals, as we share so many competencies and skills.

One of the people I sought feedback from after Unmeash2 responded by saying that unconferences create networking pathways to knowing people, types of positions currently available, and opportunities that exist for the future. As if to back that up, at Unmeash the year before, Lauren Castan was a Library Technician student at Ultimo facing the prospect of finding a job at the end of her course. At Unmeash she met Lisa, who spoke to her about volunteering at Hurstville Library and Museum, which Lauren did,
gaining valuable experience and helping her to fill gaps in her resumé. From that experience she has now secured a new position at Campsie Library.

Other things that the feedback told me was that ideas and contributions flow when library professionals engage with each other in a relaxed and autonomous environment – and having ample food on hand certainly helps! The benefits of an unconference as opposed to a conference or a symposium, is that, for those who attend, they really are participants in the day and their contributions are integral to the success of the day. Unconferences provide an opportunity to talk about the things and the issues that matter in libraries and to library professionals.

Unconferences are cheap – well, mine are! Because we get the venue for free, and people bring morning and afternoon tea to share, and everyone buys their own lunch, the costs of running an unconference are practically nil. We charge a gold coin donation for ALIA Members and $5 for non-ALIA members, which covers the organisation of the event and any odds and ends that might arise. Library Technicians who want to be professional about their careers understand the need for professional development, and by keeping the cost of attending and participating in an unconference low, it gives greater opportunities for people to undertake their own professional development. The future of the profession and of libraries is exciting, but requires people to come to terms with new technologies and skills. Unconferences expose participants to things like social media engagement, library promotion, e-library resources, online courses, blogs, and new websites that can be followed up later for further investigation. I also try to keep unconferences fun and because of their unstructured nature, they are quite casual affairs.

Perhaps the best reason for using unconferences for unconventional professional development can be left to Amy Croft, who wrote after Unmeash2, “I feel reenergised after attending – a similar feeling to attending big conferences, but for a fraction of the price. A few other attendees mentioned that the day had reignited their passion for the sector”. Liz Weisse also added that “it reignites your original reasons for getting into the industry, leaving you motivated and positive”.

I run unconferences because I love libraries, and I love the potential that libraries have, and ultimately I do it because I love the (slightly) chaotic, democratic opportunity to engage with like-minded library professionals in a casual, relaxed, collaborative environment.

Unreference List

For further reading:

Unmeash²:  
http://unmeash2.wordpress.com/

Next Library:  
http://www.nextlibrary.net/

London LibraryCamp  
http://libcampldn.wikispaces.com/

Cycling For Libraries:  
http://www.cyclingforlibraries.org/

LibraryCamp UK  
http://www.librarycamp.co.uk/ and wiki: http://libcampuk13.wikispaces.com/home

Future Library 2012 Unconference in Greece (on Vimeo):  
http://vimeo.com/59163917