"The Institute was Great, but Now What?"
Partnership Projects

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Introduction/Context

"The institute was great, but now what?" The participants in the first Thinking Outside the Borders institute established connections with each other and forged new relationships, but there was no formal mechanism in place to keep these connections going and practice the skills learned. Just as momentum built, the institute ended. As planning for the second institute got underway, this question stood out as key to improving the participants' experience and adding long-term value to future institutes. We immediately saw the power of extending the Thinking Outside the Borders experience beyond the institutes by way of partnership projects.

During the second institute, pairs of librarians would brainstorm and then design a project to link them professionally after the institute ended and establish connections between their institutions. The projects would allow participants to:

· practice the communication skills learned at the institute

· get to know someone from another country more closely than just during the institute's sessions or social opportunities

· learn more about a specific library setting in another country

· appreciate each others' knowledge and the unique challenges faced by their partner

· get inspired to try something new in their own library, and

· involve their colleagues and thus enrich the project.

For the Mortenson Center, the partnership projects provided us with a way to keep in contact with participants after the institute and assess the lasting value of the content. We felt strongly that deepening the connections beyond the institute would enhance the experience and would better prepare future library leaders to work successfully in a global library environment.

Prior to the Institute

Once all of the participants had been selected and invitations to attend accepted, we sat down to pair up the participants for their partnership projects. Rather than randomly stick people together, we tried to find natural connections (e.g., technical services librarians with other technical services librarians, academic librarians with other academic librarians, librarians from small institutions with other librarians from small institutions, etc.).With common areas of interest, it seemed there would be a natural context from which to develop a mutually beneficial and interesting project. The American Library Association's (ALA) Sister Library Initiative provided ideas about directions the projects might take. With limited time within the busy institute schedule to design the projects, it was essential to give participants starting points that would get them thinking creatively and quickly. (See Appendix A: Possible Activities for the Library Partnerships.)

We also created the Library Partnership Agreement form to give participants a structure around which to organize their ideas (see Appendix B). On the form, participants needed to:

· describe the partnership activity;

· delineate the steps to implement the partnership activity, including a timeline;

· divide the responsibilities (determine, in writing, who would do what); and

· determine who else from each institution needed to be involved.

The form ensured participants took each of these factors into account and kept the scope of the project realistic. The final key part of the form was a signature line for each participant. The signature would, in theory, give them reason to take the project seriously and foster a sense of commitment to move it forward that might otherwise be missing. Including email addresses after the signature line put everything participants needed on one document—they did not have to search through masses of institute materials and handouts to find contact information for their partner.

During the Institute

We gave participants several opportunities to meet with each other and determine the direction for their projects. On the first full morning, we introduced them to the Partnership Projects and the rationale behind them. We also distributed the partner assignments, the sheet of possible activities for the projects (Appendix A), and the Library Partnership Agreement forms (Appendix B). We wanted to introduce the topic as early in the day as possible for several reasons:

1. The first official "planning session" would not occur until later that evening.

2. Participants could take advantage of any down time during the day's activities to look at the materials and begin to think of ideas.

3. Participants also could seek out their partners during free time or meals and begin to get to know each other.

We purposely inserted formal project planning sessions into the institute schedule to allow their ideas to take shape. These informal sessions took place in the evening, and the project coordinator always attended in case participants had questions or wanted to get feedback on their ideas. One session took place the evening of the first full day; the second the evening of the second full day. Participants knew they would be expected to stand and present their ideas to the full group during a special session on the final day. Participants showed a lot of interest in the project ideas, making for a lively presentation session.

After the Institute

Keeping project momentum going after the institute proved challenging for everyone involved. The participants returned home and to work after a significant absence (especially the international participants, who had been away from home the better part of three weeks). That absence meant multiple tasks and priorities competed for their attention. We needed to keep the partnership projects at the forefront of their minds to give them the best chance for success.

Immediately after the institute, we compiled a list of project summaries and created a PDF document that we emailed to all participants within two weeks of the institute. We hoped the document, which used the Mortenson Center logo and consistent formatting to create an official look, would attract their attention through the everyday clutter and thus keep the projects going. Timeliness (within two weeks) was crucial to remind them of their commitment in the midst of competing priorities.

We also offered to arrange a meeting time with the project coordinator for anyone attending the ALA Midwinter Conference, which occurred about two months after the institute. Such a meeting offered, at least, any librarians in attendance the opportunity to check in and discuss any problems or challenges they encountered. Unfortunately, very few of the United States librarians who participated in Borders even attended the conference. Ideally, there would not have been such a stretch of time in between contacts between the Mortenson Center and participants. However, the institute was held in the month of November just preceding the United States Thanksgiving holiday, Christmas, New Year's, and for many institutions, an extended holiday break that went well into January of the following year.

Approximately three months after the institute, we checked in with the participants again via email to get a progress report on the partnership projects.

We asked the following questions:

1. How are things going with the project so far? Please tell us what progress or accomplishments your partner and you have made on the project.

2. If your partner and you have been encountering challenges either in starting up or in implementing the project, what are those challenges?

3. What strategies will your partner and you use to address the challenges or continue the

progress?

4. How are your partner and you maintaining communication? How frequent is that communication?

5. How was the idea of doing a project with an international partner received by the administration of your library?

6. Do you have any other comments about the Partnership Project?

Of the 32 participants, 20 responded to the questions (8 United States librarians and 12 international librarians). Most were having some difficulty in maintaining the project or communication, and several cited problems with their library's administration—either outright objections or complete apathy. Lack of time and funding seemed to be the largest obstacles of all. However, several projects had taken hold, and even one that had yet to get underway had hope because of a developing friendship between the participants.

Formal communication between the Mortenson Center and with participants ended at that point for several reasons; most importantly because of my maternity leave. However, additional follow-ups may not have been necessary or welcomed. We felt sensitive to the possibility of being perceived as "pushy" or putting additional pressure on already busy professionals by continually following up. At that point, we decided, either the participants would be committed and continue the projects, or wouldn't. It was up to them.

Summary/Conclusion

Even with the best of intentions, many things can get in the way of successful long-term international partnership projects. In order to maximize the chance of success, participants (and project coordinators) must keep the following in mind:

1. **Keep project scope realistic.** Overly ambitious goals have greater chance of failure. Consider starting with something extremely small and build on its success to move toward larger, more demanding projects.

2. **Avoid time-sensitive projects.** Emails may be delayed, lost, or deleted. Holidays, vacations, and life events happen that take people out of the library for extended periods of time. Participants must be able to put the project down/away for a while and still be able to pick back up. (Try not to begin projects right before a built-in break, such as the Christmas holidays. In some countries, some libraries and campuses close for over a month!)

3. **Make regular contact with the partner to keep momentum going.** Regular contact does not have to mean frequent (monthly seems to work).

4. **Get support of the library's administration.** Participants must be able to show administrators how the institution will benefit from the project and how it will further the institution's mission and/or goals.

5. **Avoid projects that require using personal or institutional funds.** One way to avoid this trap is to build on a project within the institution that has already been funded, or even better, requires no money at all!

6. **Find a topic/area/goal of high interest to both participants.** Passion about the project will keep things going during the difficult times.

7. **Find a topic/area/goal of interest to participants' colleagues.** Getting someone else excited and committed to the project will increase the chances of success and sustainability, and will give the partner another contact person to work with when the main partner is unavailable.

8. **Make initial agreements as detailed as possible.** Participants will foresee many of the obstacles and will be able to hit the ground running instead of trying to formulate a workable plan over long distances.

9. **Determine if the project coordinator should stay involved.** Involvement could mean copying the coordinator on email exchanges, asking for advice, or even arranging additional in-person or electronic meetings, if logistically possible. Both partners must agree to take this step.

10. **Recognize email's limits.** While convenient and not bound by time zones, email may never get through, be deleted, or be overlooked in a crowded Inbox. Participants should get creative in using other ways to stay connected, depending on what's appropriate for the project (Project Web site? Blog? Shared work space over the WWW? Wiki? Internet phone?, etc.).

The tremendous benefits and rewards of international library partnership projects make the effort worth it. We hope anyone planning their own Thinking Outside the Borders institutes will consider adding a partnership project or some other way to maintain and build on the relationships developed during future institutes.

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Library Partnership Project Summaries

- Create a virtual pen pal program to connect Dominicans studying English and Americans studying Spanish. While exchanging emails both pen pals will have the opportunity to improve their language skills, learn about other another culture, and make new friends.
- Exchange staff newsletters and organize a pen pal program in order to help staff members learn about different cultures. This exchange could lead to a short-term staff exchange or visits to partner libraries.
- Start a pen pal program and make display cases about each other's libraries. Their goal is to create a formalized sister library program between the two libraries so they can exchange information about technology and librarian experiences.
- Share information between Alberta and Costa Rica in regard to authors, books, reading lists, music titles and artists, and newsletters. They will share via email and hope that the sharing will promote cultural learning in both libraries.
- Exchange free-access electronic information between the two universities. They will exchange information about their libraries' profiles and define information needs at both institutions.
- Build a digital collection depicting the historical reality between the two home cities. The collection of photos will depict scenic videos, historical figures, and other local events during the early years of the twentieth century.
- Develop a concept paper to educate/teach educators about information literacy and computer literacy

skills, assist in the development of the school resource center, and create a link between U.S. high school students and South African high school students.

- Exchange useful materials and information, including information on Spanish language development and information on American library science education. These materials will be exchanged digitally whenever possible.
- Exchange suggestion lists for books to purchase, including popular authors who are writing in Spanish and popular North American authors who have been translated into Spanish for leisure reading.
- Exchange experience and expertise in two areas: In collections, they will focus on materials for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) community and for the East Indian community. In training, they will focus on reference and computer skills.
- Explore the possibility of arranging a library visit to the American library for a master's student who is enrolled in the LIS program at the Mexican library and a reciprocal visit to Mexico by a librarian from the American library.
- Share institutional concepts for assessment criteria, development of assessment instructions, and development of tools for data collection. This exchange will help them assess librarian teaching at their own institutions.
- Prepare library presentations in order to share complete information about each other's library services and collections. The presentations must be designed with the same components for comparison purposes, and may culminate in a librarian exchange program between the two universities.
- Exchange materials and share information. They will explore ideas of how the two libraries could work together to support rural library development in Costa Rica.
- Set up an exchange of books and materials between the two libraries. By exchanging materials both institutions will become more culturally aware while meeting information needs.

Appendix A

Possible Activities for the Library Partnerships

- Organize a pen pals program for library staff and users to learn from and about each other.

- Initiate contact via email to discuss issues and concerns.

- Arrange to exchange displays of books and cultural materials.

- Arrange for interlibrary loan to facilitate document delivery between libraries.

- Donate useful books or journals.

- Exchange local newspapers, cultural materials, bibliographies, artifacts and displays of interest.

- Offer to assist in purchasing materials that are difficult to find in the other country.

- Provide assistance at local professional meetings attended by staff of the partner library.

- Exchange staff newsletters.

- Create a bulletin board display with photos of your partner library, its staff, and users. Send a scrapbook, slide presentation or videotape of your library to your partner library.

- Publicize your partner library status via your library newsletter and at speaking engagements with community groups that have an international focus. Provide interviews and photo opportunities with local media.

- Share joint activities as part of a summer reading program.

- Start a "one book, one city" project where both libraries promote reading of a particular book and share programming ideas and activities.

- Set up an evaluation mechanism to help both libraries celebrate their successes and learn from their mistakes.

- Arrange for short-term exchanges of professional staff.

- Organize a delegation of staff and community members to visit your partner library.

- Other ideas? Use your imagination!

Note: Many of these partnership ideas were borrowed and/or modified from the Sister Libraries Program of the American Library Association © Copyright 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 American Library Association.

Library Partnership Agreement

Description of partnership activity:

Steps in implementing partnership activity, including timeline:
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Division of responsibilities (who will do what):

Who else from your institutions needs to be involved?

_____

Signature   Date   Email address

_____

Signature   Date   Email address