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What Collaboration Means to Me: Passing the Mic

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What Collaboration Means to Me Passing the Mic

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In librarianship, we take a lot of pride in our profession. We spend a lot of time dividing into subfields, honing our skillsets as we develop our careers. We travel locally, nationally, and internationally to connect with our peers at conferences, workshops, and communities of practice. When we are unable to travel, we sit at our desks with our headphones on, participating in Twitter conversations and streaming webinars or conferences from afar. At work, we have meetings to discuss the development of projects and services. We read a lot of literature about the work our colleagues are doing.

This looks a lot like collaboration on the outset. It should. Librarianship, by its very nature, focuses on aspirational values: providing access to information, defending intellectual freedom, the pursuit of the public good, and the general empowerment of our users¹. All of which necessitate having a perspective that looks beyond ourselves and considers a wider worldview that encompasses our users, our colleagues, and our stakeholders.

However, to be collaborative, we have to hear multiple voices. It turns out that we, as a profession, are not particularly good at listening. Nowhere is this more obvious than who we choose as speakers, keynotes, and organizers of our conferences.

On some level, it makes sense that this would be the case. Conferences are time-consuming, ex-

pensive projects. The pressure is immense to finish in the black (or at the very least, to break even). The allure of a “name” — a well-known individual within the field — suggests the way forward: these individuals attract attendees, they do interesting work, and people want to hear what they have to say. Here is the thing: folks who are earlier in their careers, coming from less-resourced institutions or with large swaths of responsibility cannot see themselves reflected by these “big ticket” names.

In perpetuating this cycle, we create a sphere of superstardom. Those big names become bigger and brighter. The distance grows between the people on the stage and the people in the audience, and over time, it is harder to bridge this gap. Those on the stage start to repeat themselves. They stand at the podium; they come across as having all the answers. Those in the audience think up questions to ask so that they might grow into better professionals by learning from the greatness of others. In an effort to learn from each other, we inadvertently create a field divided: the haves and the have-nots. The haves have something to say, and the have-nots have something to learn.

We have to ask ourselves; what are we really learning? What does our persistent vaunting of the individual at the expense of the collective reveal about our professional identities and values? If we are inviting the same voices to the



Versluis & Rigling: Passing the Mic

microphone, are we learning anything? If not, what does this mean for us in terms of moving forward as a profession?

These questions provide particular salience in an era of austerity. Workers must do more with less, and professional development dollars are few and far between. We owe it to the profession, as well as its constituent parts, to change the conversation by the cultivation of discussions that are critical, realistic, difficult, and rooted in everyday experience and through the inclusion of folks from all roles, career stages, and organizations. This may not result in the slickest presentations on the shiniest topics, but that is okay. These events will become more relatable, practical, and diverse.

It is important to note here that ignorance is not an acceptable excuse for the creation of homogenous conferences or other events. Our profession is full of passionate people working to provide communities with the services and information resources they need. These talented, driven folks are active on listservs, conference circuits, and Twitter. If they are not online, they are working tirelessly in their local community. Someone they have worked with or helped is waiting eagerly to sing their praises. Their work may not be front and centre, but it is absolutely discoverable. We all have something to contribute to the conversation. Why not start by inviting people to participate?

While some subfields of librarianship consistently succumb to the allure of big names and bright lights, others are actively making collaborative efforts to invite people into their community. Those involved in the Code4Lib community, for example, take a community-driven approach to programming for their conferences. Keynotes are sourced using localized knowledge; anyone is able to nominate a keynote speaker for the conference and anyone can vote on nominated speakers². This ensures that the speakers invited

are not limited to those previously known or admired by the organizing committee.

Any conversation about collaboration also has to take into account diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are getting better at these things. This has begun to surface as a core value—or at least, a value to aspire to—after serving as the content of countless reports, data, and presentations. We have acknowledged a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the makeup of our profession and the effect it has on our potential users³, and are beginning to rectify this by making a conscious effort to bring diverse voices into the conversation⁴. However, too often we are reassembling the same group of “diverse” voices, using the same people to represent diverse perspectives. This tendency presupposes that all those who occupy a certain identity have a monolithic perspective or experience. Not only does this undermine the larger efforts of diversity, it also exhausts those who consistently end up representing the diverse.

Besides, diversity and collaboration are more than just checklists. They are about thoughtfulness and intentionality.

Many individuals have taken to this ethos, embodying it fully in their practice. At the 2016 National Diversity in Libraries Conference, the person invited to provide the keynote address was Chris Bourg (Director of Libraries at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Instead of simply accepting the offer, she challenged the committee. She restructured her keynote, inviting April Hathcock (Scholarly Communications Librarian at New York University) to share the stage. They sat in two chairs and engaged in a conversational dialogue, dispensing with the “sage on the stage” style keynote and challenging the idea that there is just one authoritative voice who can speak to these issues.

The subversion of the “one voice, one narrative” idea is necessary, because librarianship does not



just look a single way. The reality is that we come from different contexts, with widely varying experiences, perspectives, imaginations, and skillsets. Since we wear many hats as librarians (between our practice, service, scholarship, advocacy, and public identity), we have endless opportunities to engage with our peers and the larger library community. With each of these opportunities comes the chance to take a breath, question our instincts, and strive to embody the spirit of collaboration.

So, what can this collaboration look like? Well, it can look a few different ways.

As an organizer, find ways to source opinions other than your own. If you have an established community to reach out to, seek their input on topics and speakers they find interesting. Write calls for proposals that encourage participation from new voices and distribute these calls widely. Create opportunities for attendees to shape the program and their participation, as Open-Con does with their unconference-style sessions and story circles. Make space for emerging ideas and researchers. Include a code of conduct that explicitly addresses power dynamics and tone policing. Ask more of people than to simply “be nice.”⁵

As an invited speaker, ask someone to share the stage with you. Be aware of the volume of your voice in the conversation. How many times will you give this talk? Do you need the provided opportunity or should you give it to someone else? Consider whether you are the best (or even an appropriate) choice for a talk, given the topic. Ask yourself: is there anyone that I have met recently who has inspired me? Listen to those in your audience and get to know them. Let yourself and your expertise be challenged.

As a presenter or panelist, commit to not speaking on all white, all male,^{6,7} or all-managerial* panels. In international venues, ask about representation from non-English speaking countries. Inquire about the representation of people from rural libraries, community colleges, and from outside North America. Say yes after investigating the context of an invitation, not before.

As a practicing librarian, be aware of those around you. Invite people in less privileged positions (such as those working part-time or on contract, library assistants, or students) to join you in your public-facing, experimental, or innovative work. Find opportunities to write or speak about this work and put the names of others before your own. Leverage your voice to give space to the voice of others.

These suggestions and examples are not prescriptive or exhaustive. There are plenty of other ways to be collaborative in your practice and your politics, many of which we have not listed here. Our intent in putting forth the ones that we did is to encourage people to conceive of the wider systems of power and privilege that operate within librarianship and by extension, to understand that the decisions they make and the actions they take can either reinforce or subvert those systems of inequality.

This means that the responsibility to integrate other voices into the conversation is yours. And mine. And all of ours.

The reality is that (as much as we would like to pretend otherwise) librarianship still prioritizes white, male, managerial, and established voices. Changing this culture will be immensely difficult and it will not happen overnight. This does not mean that it is not worthwhile. The onus is

* We use the word “managerial” here to refer to all folks who occupy positions of organizational authority as managers, administrators, CEOs, directors, and the like.



on people who enjoy some sort of power or privilege—whether that comes in the form of secure employment, the reverence of their peers, an established career, the occupation of a position of power, or some other marker of status—to be thoughtful, intentional, and to pass the mic.

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