

Connecting Collections and Cultures By Creating a Community of Children’s Librarians Around Early Literacy Storytimes

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ABSTRACT

Communities of practice are important tools for professional development, encouraging peer-to-peer learning and knowledge creation. This study, which is part of a three-year Institute for Museum and Library Services National Leadership Research Grant, examined children’s librarians’ perceptions of a community of practice they created during an extended online, interactive training program. The librarians shared both positive and negative perceptions of the community that was created during the training. Through the interviews it became apparent that while creating a community of practice the librarians made connections between their collections and shared their library cultures.

Keywords

Communities of practice, libraries, online training, early literacy

INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice (CoP) can be crucial to professional development (Hara, 2009; Yukawa, 2010). Hara (2009) defines communities of practice as “collaborative informal networks that support professional practitioners in their efforts to develop shared understandings and engage in work relevant to knowledge building” (p. 118). CoPs can be important because most researchers will agree on the importance of the social aspect of learning (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989; George,

Iacono, and Kling, 1995 & Vygotsky, 1978;). The interaction between individuals is considered a significant component of learning in a social context. The interaction occurs on many levels with the learner-learner (peer-peer learning) being most relevant to the study described here (Donnelly 2010). However, due to the diverse size and locations of libraries as well as reduced funding, many children’s librarians may not have regular opportunities for professional development that includes peer-peer interactions around their practice.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been established as a valid means for delivering professional development training and establishing communities of practice. ICTs offer the conveniences of reducing geographic barriers and providing scheduling flexibility. They also offer the ability to be connected on a more frequent basis. However researchers have pointed out that virtual CoPs lack some important attributes of face-to-face CoPs. Yukawa (2010) commented that participants lack a “shared awareness of context” (p. 55). Hara (2009) identifies three types of knowledge shared in CoPs: practical knowledge, book knowledge, and cultural knowledge. However, Hara found no evidence that online CoPs helped to develop a shared meaning for the participants nor did it offer support for developing shared cultural knowledge. Given these limitations, it is important to understand participants’ experiences in virtual CoP in order to consider whether and how a virtual CoP can meet the needs of its participants.

PURPOSE

This study examined the participants’ perceptions of a virtual CoP that a group of children’s librarians created during an interactive web-based training program, which was part of a larger three year grant. The training program was intentionally designed with a purpose of supporting the development of a CoP. Follow-up surveys revealed that while some librarians felt a sense of community had

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developed during the webinars not all librarians agreed. (Mills 2014). Because of the participants' mixed feelings around the sense of community, the researchers utilized interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the librarians' perceptions of the community that was created in the interactive web-based training. The focus of this poster is the responses from these interviews with the librarians following the completion of the training program.

BACKGROUND - VIEWS2 (VALUABLE INITIATIVES IN EARLY LITERACY THAT WORK SUCCESSFULLY)

The training program the children's librarians participated in served as the intervention for Project VIEWS2, a larger three-year quasi-experimental study working to measure the early literacy outcomes for children, birth to kindergarten, who attend public library programs. As part of the larger study, 40 children's librarians, from small, medium, and large libraries across the state of Washington, agreed to have their storytimes observed by researchers and participate in the interactive web-based training program.

The quasi-experimental design meant that each of the 40 children's librarians from the VIEWS2 libraries were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group.

The 20 experimental librarians were brought together to take part in an intervention, which was the interactive web-based training. An ICT was used due to the librarians' wide geographic distribution. The training was intentionally designed to be interactive with the goal of the librarians developing a CoP and learning from each other. During the training program the children's librarians were trained on how to use the VIEWS2 planning tools to increase the early literacy focus of their storytimes. The training consisted of the librarians attending three webinars with time built in for independent exploration, using the tools for planning, developing, and delivering new activities incorporating the additional early literacy skills. A support website was also available for the librarians to access that held the resources and information they received during the training. Finally the librarians received weekly informational sheets throughout the training that provided additional storytime tips and techniques.

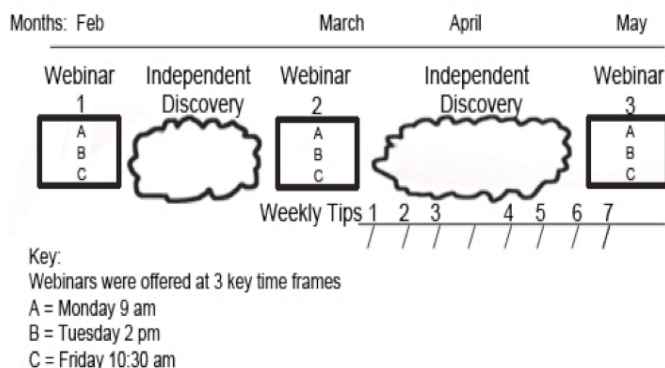


Figure 1. Training Schedule for Librarians

Because the study endeavored to support the development of a CoP of the children's librarians during the online training, the first two webinars were designed to be interactive, offering training and giving the librarians opportunities to collaborate. They provided time for open-ended discussion with their peer librarians and the opportunity to share new activities they were trying along with what worked well and what did not work well. The final webinar afforded the librarians an opportunity to continue these open-ended discussions, giving them time to share how they were using the planning tools, training information, and the experiences they had during the discovery periods. This dialogic time was incorporated in the model to give the librarians time to learn from each other as "experts in the field" and to allow the librarians to develop a CoP. Upon completion of the training program the participating librarians were asked to complete a survey about their training experiences. A few months later the librarians were brought together in a face-to-face environment to provide feedback regarding future implementation of a similar training program for the entire state of Washington. After an extended period of time the librarians were invited to participate in a structured interview to provide additional insight into their training experience. The goal was to ascertain their thoughts regarding the development of a community during the web-based training and around the planning tools.

METHODS

The interviews were performed to gain an understanding of the librarians' perceptions of the opportunities to build communities and of the community they actually created in an interactive web-based training. The structured interviews contained questions on: the impact of the training, the librarians' feelings or sense of a learning community, learning from other librarians, and potential future collaborations with other librarians. Fourteen of the twenty experimental librarians consented to participate in a recorded interview. A grant researcher conducted the interviews via Skype or other ICT platforms, depending on which worked best for the librarian. The interviews were conducted in this manner so that 1) the interviews could be easily recorded and 2) we could provide familiar space for the librarian being interviewed via ICTs. The interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed for reoccurring themes that ran through the interview sessions. These themes were also considered in the context of the researchers' observations of the dialogue during the webinars.

RESULTS

In general the feedback regarding the training program was positive. Of the fourteen librarians, 85.7% indicated that they felt that the training led to more mindful and intentional planning, as well as increased early literacy strategies in their storytimes. 57.1% also said they got several new ideas from the webinars and the skills and tools provided helped to improve their storytimes. When asked

about the sense of community in the webinars there were a variety of responses with a common theme: the librarians appreciated the opportunity for open-ended interactions with a diverse group of other children’s librarians. Fifty percent of the librarians appreciated the opportunity to share practical examples with each other. The discussions during webinars ranged from sharing storytime tips to resources and suggestions, as well as tips for sharing with parents. 28.6% of librarians reported that the webinars helped to build connections. They felt better knowing there were others trying similar things in similar circumstances. Another 28.6% said the webinars helped to open lines of communications to librarians they otherwise never would have met. They felt the webinars introduced new collaborators. One librarian commented that having the ability to have a conversation with people that are exploring creative and innovative ideas is a huge plus. Another librarian felt like the state of Washington was more connected after the webinars.

While a large portion of the feedback around the training and the community development was positive, the librarians also shared constructive criticism on the community aspect of the webinars. Fifty percent of the librarians shared that there was not enough time set aside in the webinars to share ideas; the schedule for the webinars was not conducive enough to building community. They felt that an even more open-ended schedule would be better for community building. Some additional feedback was that the librarians wanted more direct interaction with each other. They spent a significant amount of time in the interviews discussing methods for continuing the collaboration that had begun in the training. Some of the librarians had the opportunity to meet face-to-face in an advisory meeting so they provided reflections on webinar versus face-to-face exchanges. One librarian stated that she did not feel strongly connected to the community during the webinars whereas after meeting face-to-face she had a stronger sense of community with the group. Another librarian felt that meeting face-to-face first would have brought the webinar community to life.

During the interviews the librarians were asked about the possibilities and methods for continuing the collaboration they had created during the training. A majority of the librarians indicated that they did want to continue the collaborations that had emerged during the training. When asked to brainstorm ways to continue the discussion some of the methods suggested were: a discussion board, list serv, face-to-face meetings first with the webinars as a continuous collaborative vehicle, videoconferencing, and a storytime conference.

DISCUSSION

The relationships and environment that the librarians created as part of the training program fits within Hara’s (2009) definition of a community of practice. The librarians worked to develop shared understandings and a common vocabulary regarding storytime techniques, early

literacy principles, parent communication techniques, and the tools they were being trained on. Also in line with Hara’s definition they engaged in “work relevant knowledge building”. When sharing storytime techniques there were frequent conversations that involved knowledge building, adapting ideas for other age ranges, library cultures, and sizes. They also engaged in resource sharing and informal sharing, often on their library cultures.

Given that this community of librarians fit the qualifications of a CoP it is interesting to consider why some librarians did not feel a sense of community during the training program. This may have been impacted by technology and scheduling issues. There were several responses requesting the need for additional open-ended discussion time. One participant commented that there was not enough time spent on developing a common vocabulary. It is possible that spending more time working towards the goal of a common vocabulary could have contributed to a stronger feeling of community. One limitation of the interview was that there

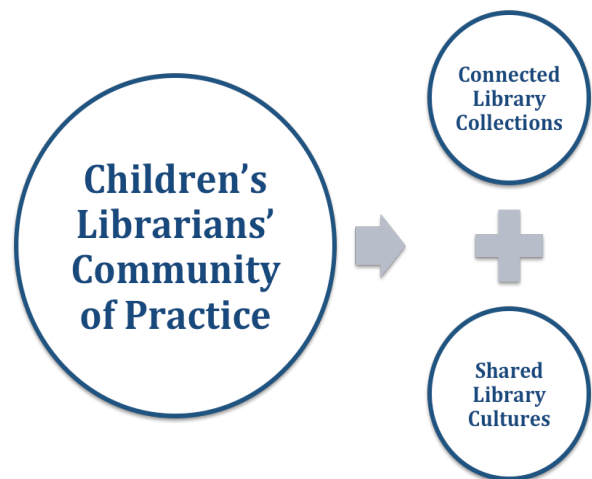


Figure 2. Effects of the librarians’ CoP

were no questions clarifying the librarians’ personal definitions of community. Having that insight might have provided more understanding of the librarians’ feelings toward the community they created.

In addition to creating a community of practice around storytimes the librarians were also able to make connections between their collections and share their library cultures. These connections played important roles in the success of the webinars. The librarians created connections between their individual library collections by identifying shared resources (books, songs, rhymes, or resources) that each had in common. The librarians continued to build on these connections and build additional knowledge by engaging in discussions on how to alter a storytime activity, that used one of these shared resources, for their own individual storytime populations.

The librarians also connected and shared their library cultures by sharing information about their libraries outside of storytime ideas. One participant shared their appreciation in being able to learn about other libraries' populations during the training program. In addition to describing their populations, they shared about their storytime attendance, the age ranges of their storytimes, their storytime spaces, staffing at their libraries, location and size of their library, and other professional development opportunities offered to them. Taking the opportunity to develop professional identities, by sharing this information, may have helped to build trust with the participants which, according to Hara (2009) would have helped to build and strengthen the sense of community in the group.

CONCLUSION

This study reported on librarians' perceptions of a community they created during an online training program. While some librarians did not feel or identify a sense of community, according to Hara's definition, the librarians were able to create a community of practice, share their library cultures, and make connections between their collections regardless of technology issues and limited time for the training. These results are important for the state of Washington as they move forward with providing the training program statewide. The results are also significant due to the widespread use of ICTs in training and the role of communities of practice in the success of that training.

Now that the training is complete and given the librarians' strong desires to continue developing their community of practice, the VIEWS2 research team is working towards empowering the librarians to take leadership roles in redefining the community to exist outside of the training. The study has provided some social networks as support in continuing this community beyond the grant research period; however, it is hoped that the librarians will grow and evolve the community outside of these networks.

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