

All aboard! Stepping on board with a Community of Practice (COP) for health library technicians

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*"Be like a train; go in the rain, go in the sun,
go in the storm, go in the dark tunnels!
Be like a train; concentrate on your road
and go with no hesitation!" -Mehmet Murat Ildan.*

My journey into communities of practice (CoP) began with like-minded library technician (LT) colleagues in the health care sector in late 2020, as my hometown of Melbourne emerged from an isolating four-month lockdown due to COVID-19. Initiating the CoP created connectedness at a much-needed time. It provided direct opportunities to learn from peers, a group with which to exchange ideas to help respond to common challenges, and the opportunity to communicate with colleagues working in the same professional role in different libraries. It was both broadening and enlightening for the LTs who participated, with flow on benefits for our teams and the wider library community.

Starting the Health Libraries LT CoP

The Health Libraries LT CoP was formed to bring together LTs for networking, support and knowledge sharing with a particular focus on building on existing knowledge and skills to perform the role of a LT in evolving library services. To assess whether there was sufficient interest in forming a community of LTs working in health libraries, I contacted individual libraries to describe my idea and the benefits of developing a CoP geared towards the needs of health LTs. Positive responses indicated that this was a train worth boarding!

I partnered with Kathy Roe from the South Metropolitan Health Service in Western Australia to form the group. With the support of ALIA HLA (Australian Library and Information Association - Health Libraries Australia), we emailed the health library sector to ask our fellow LTs to join us. We also met to develop the scope and purpose that would drive the group. This saw us arrive at the first station – an initial invitation and agenda for our inaugural meeting, referencing our scope and purpose. The results were very encouraging, with twelve LTs registering for the first online meeting.

Participants attended from across Australia including Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. We also welcomed a colleague

from Istanbul in Turkey, which provided a wonderful opportunity to engage with colleagues at local and international levels. We had a good mixture of metropolitan, suburban, rural, and remote health libraries represented. And, yes, we really did get along very nicely, thank you – no COAG issues here – not at all! There was a great sense of camaraderie.

We were pleased by the depth and breadth of experience held by attendees as well as their willingness to buy a ticket to a new concept, not yet fully formed. A key concern at this first station was to be effective without over-formalising the group. The aim was to encourage participants to bring ideas and/or challenges to each discussion. We will evolve as we continue down the track, but this informal approach appears to be the model that works. It favours flexibility and inclusiveness.

An informal style does not mean a lack of direction. Discussion topics listed for each meeting provide structure for CoP discussions. These topics flag current issues affecting LTs' work environments, learning needs or knowledge gaps. From this tabling of topics, we learn how others might deal with the same issue, how common it might be and whether it is unique to the health library environment. For example: common issues occurring in Library Management Systems, is a solution achievable or does it involve more in-depth approach and/or external help?

What is a 'community of practice' group?

A CoP is a network with a shared area of interest that facilitates learning, knowledge sharing, mutual support and a forum for discussing solutions to issues commonly experienced. Along with enhancing both individual and professional development, a CoP can contribute more widely to the development of expertise and knowledge within a sector.

In our case, contribution of ideas and solutions within the CoP assists with day-to-day issues faced by LTs while helping to explore the health LT's role within health sciences environments. This is especially important for rare, niche roles such as that of the hospital library LT, where it is common for libraries to only employ one LT amongst a mix of librarians and paraprofessionals. Hence the interest in and need for our CoP, which is predominantly made up of passengers from hospital libraries.

Importance of having CoP groups

The CoP has many positive benefits for those participating. It is a great opportunity to meet new professionals. It creates a friendly environment that encourages participation. It is an alternative way to make a professional network, with many new online options for coming together as a group. It also encourages collaboration in the troubleshooting of issues, which will lead to more innovation and solutions benefitting all libraries. This is particularly important when dealing with the constant change in our sector.

Collegial support and networking are obvious benefits. The health LTs CoP has been a tremendous experience that has provided insight into different libraries, regional areas, emerging issues, challenges, and solutions. Additionally, the CoP offers members the opportunity to expand their profile and build connection with the general library profession on a broader level, allowing participants space to grow in their own right as a library professional.

It is a process of continuously evolving - CoPs improve education while expanding the knowledge base of the profession, which invites more diversity, a growing list of library skills, and expanding communication within the library sector.

Discussion topics

Agendas for CoP meetings include one main discussion topic to focus preparation and group discussions. We encourage suggestions from all members to ensure topic diversity and relevance. Topics therefore reflect what is most pertinent to the group and they tend to focus on a current challenge or issue impacting our work. New ideas, knowledge and helpful solutions then become possible through the sharing of different viewpoints, practical approaches or applications that may have been tried and tested or are about to be undertaken.

Change is a common theme. When change occurs, we offer support to one another while workshopping the challenge. The upcoming changes to the Libraries Australia Document Delivery (LADD) service is an important example. This will affect all libraries and LTs directly as they tend to be responsible for document delivery requests. The topic chosen for our inaugural meeting was: 'COVID-19 & how we fared during this period – working on site and working from home'. It was a very relevant and current issue that had deeply affected everyone in the group.

The COVID-19 discussion topic revealed slight differences in the way individual libraries pivoted with the situation, influenced by their geographic location and stages of the pandemic they were experiencing at the time. It was interesting to realise that many similar processes were put in place across the country, and to listen to how each library dealt with the changes. We had a lot in common and insights to learn from one another, with agreement that we succeeded in keeping the train moving and as safely as possible for everyone on site. Future discussions are likely to reflect on how libraries are evolving 'back to COVID-normal' as time goes on.

Working from home was another significant challenge of importance to the CoP. Continuing their respective library services from home and online was a key concern for all health library LTs. We continued to support the demand for online training, meetings, consultations, document delivery, general enquiries, email and phone requests while also playing a role in library projects and a wide range other work. LTs

appeared to be doing many, if not all, of these things wherever they were based. We observed a strong sense of busy-ness and variety across the board. It indicates that our health library services were very much in demand during the pandemic, and this continues to be the case.

Life is the train, not the station

Commencing the health library LT CoP has been an incredibly exciting time. Meeting likeminded LTs willing to actively participate has been particularly rewarding. We will continue to map out our future as we tackle change and emerging issues. In particular, the success of the inaugural meeting provides a foundation for a positive networking group that will contribute to the development of LTs in the health sector and wider library community. Members of the CoP have a genuine interest in helping one another take on new knowledge, providing friendly encouragement and discussing new ideas and solutions. This will benefit all of us, on many different levels. If we can keep travelling forward one station at a time, our Library Technicians CoP will have a very bright future.

Having boarded the train and travelled with my fellow passengers through the first couple of stations, we are contemplating new sights and destinations on our journey. You can't stop a moving train!

*"Our life is a constant journey, from birth to death.
The landscape changes, the people change, our needs change,
but the train keeps moving. Life is the train, not the station."
-Paulo Coelho.*