Building an Online Learning Community from Abroad

By Raymond Pun
California State, Fresno

In this article, I’ll cover my experiences volunteering from abroad to create an online learning community and share some of my challenges and developments in the process.

For the past year (2014-2015), I volunteered as an online facilitator to plan, teach and deliver online lectures to an organization called Dorot Inc., a non-profit organization based in New York that offers a variety of services for seniors. Dorot Inc. organizes the programs, promotions and reservations for senior citizens to sign up for the workshops. I create and present online while working abroad.

In this piece, I will reflect on the opportunities, challenges and rewards for serving as an online facilitator/teacher in providing educational content and presentations about Asian history, culture and cities to this group.

One of the advantages of working abroad is that I have the opportunity to travel and visit different countries and develop the “global experience” in Asia. I traveled to countries such as Burma, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and Cambodia.

These senior citizens are all based in the United States. Some of them are physically handicapped, making them immobile but all of them are retired people. At the time of my volunteer service, I worked as a reference librarian in New York University Shanghai located in Shanghai in the People’s Republic of China. I was able to volunteer from abroad throughout the year.

These opportunities and experiences shape my own perspectives and enhance my own learning developments about different cultures.

From my traveling experiences, I visited museums, and local sites. I documented and stored the images in a Tumblr page but others can use Omeka, Pinterest or other online repositories. I often share the images with attendees during the meetings to encourage discussion.

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Message from the Editors

Karen Bordonaro and Gail Sacco are the new co-editors of International Leads. They will serve in this capacity for two years, from July 1, 2015 until June 30, 2017.

Karen is a Liaison Librarian at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. Karen is an American librarian who has been working in Canada since 2006. In addition to being a full-time librarian, Karen is also a part-time ESL instructor and has written extensively about library and language learning issues.

Gail is the Director of the Voorheesville Public Library in Voorheesville, New York. She is passionate about libraries and fascinated by the ways libraries around the world provide community support. VPL has hosted librarians from Croatia, Romania, and Russia, as well as foreign visitors to Albany, the capital of New York State.

Welcome to our first newsletter! We are excited to bring you news from many different areas of international librarianship.

In this issue, Raymond Pun explains how he uses visual tools to engage in library work abroad. Hans Zell summarizes provocative new research that considers whether or not there truly is a book famine in Africa. And our new Chair and Chair-Elect offer welcoming messages to members of the International Relations Round Table and beyond. In addition to his welcome message, John Hickok, Chair, also created a video introducing all of you to the new Executive Board members. The embedded link can be found on page 3.

Please consider sharing your news, stories, reports, and videos with us!

~Karen Bordonaro and Gail Sacco

Call for Submission

Do you have news about…

International library activities?
People in international librarianship?
Upcoming international conferences?

Then why not submit to International Leads? Send your news and stories to the co-editors:

Karen Bordonaro, kbordonaro@brocku.ca
Gail Sacco, gailsacco75@gmail.com

DEADLINE FOR THE DECEMBER ISSUE: November 16, 2015

International Leads (ISSN 0892-4546) is published quarterly by the International Relations Round Table of the American Library Association in March, June, September, and December. The first issue was published in 1957. IL contains news about international library activities, the international work of ALA and other organizations, people and publications in the field. IL is indexed by Library Literature and Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) and is available online: http://www.ala.org/irrt/intlleads/internationalleads. The IRRT mailing address is: International Relations Office, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611. Materials for IL should be sent to Co-editor, Karen Bordonaro, James A. Gibson Library, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario L2S 3A1 Canada email: kbordonaro@brocku.ca
Message from the IRRT Chair

“We are the ‘red carpet’ to our international colleagues...”

Greetings fellow IRRT members!

Welcome to the start of the new 2015-2016 ALA year! I am delighted to take my turn as IRRT’s Chair. I follow in the footsteps of many wonderful internationally-minded past Chairs, including Robin Kear, last year.

We have a terrific new Executive Board composition—see their photos below. And we have 2 enthusiastic new co-editors of this International Leads newsletter—see their introductions on page 2. To welcome you more visually, click the link for a video greeting from me.

As you know, IRRT serves many functions. (1) We are the “red carpet” to our international colleagues at ALA conferences, hosting the Orientation session, International Visitors Center, Reception event, and more. (2) We provide internationally-oriented presentation opportunities at ALA conferences, such as the paper and poster sessions. (3) We sponsor internationally-oriented programs from our committees, like the Pre-Conference program, Chair’s Program, Sustainable Libraries program, and more.

Some might think IRRT is only focused on events at ALA conferences. Not at all! The work of IRRT extends beyond conferences.

For example, on the IRRT website you can find our Sister Library Committee’s wiki on establishing sister libraries, our “Free Links” page of library professional development links from around the world, our blog and Facebook pages for ongoing networking, and our International Leads newsletter (which you are reading!)

As the largest Roundtable of ALA, we have a dynamic, worldwide membership. We’re glad to have you with us, and look forward to a great year with you!

John Hickok

Your IRRT Executive Board:

VIDEO GREETING FROM JOHN: https://www.youtube.com/user/ALAIRRT

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Message from the IRRT Chair-Elect

I am very excited to be serving on the IRRT Executive Board as the 2015-2016 Chair-Elect. I have worked with IRRT for the past six years, in the various roles of committee chair, Secretary/Treasurer, and co-editor of our round table’s newsletter, International Leads. My research agenda focuses on sustainable library development, particularly the work of INGOs and NGOs creating libraries in developing countries. I am also committed to creating contacts and collaborations among those in international librarianship, to publicize global opportunities to perform research, to exchange library personnel, and to attend professional conferences and/or professional development.

In my opinion, the International Relations Round Table is one of the most engaging and energetic groups within the American Library Association. Our membership makes us the largest round table within ALA, with representation from around the world. We have amazing programs each year at Annual, plus create several opportunities for creating connections including the International Visitor’s Center, the International Orientation, and the International Librarian Reception. And it is all done with volunteers from within our membership. A big thank-you to everyone involved; I look forward to the next three years and all that we will accomplish.

Warm regards to all,

Beth Cramer
Building an Online Learning Community  (continued from page 1)

This volunteer program is unrelated to my position in New York University Shanghai but in some ways, I see how it complements my role as a librarian as well: I search for appropriate reading materials and create resource guides, presentations and topic discussions for the attendees. I use a variety of online resources to do this: Prezi, Tumblr, and YouTube to create an interactive experience. This experience has also enhanced my own skills as an online facilitator for other purposes. If I wanted to organize and lead a massive open online course also known as “MOOC” in the future, I would feel confident in doing so.

For each semester, I taught a couple of classes – they were mostly one hour and met on a weekly or biweekly basis. The topics included Ancient China, Contemporary China, Contemporary Japan and the History of Burma/Myanmar. My discussions often focused on the images that I took – I showed a lot about the cultures of these countries through various visual mediums.

This becomes a great learning opportunity for attendees to discuss these topics and issues without feeling embarrassed or ignorant. There were usually five to six regular attendees who signed up to take my classes. As long as the attendees have a tablet device, they can sign up for these classes hosted by Dorot Inc. Some of the attendees have also called in before to listen to the lectures which may not be as effective as an online experience but it is also a possibility. There is also a $15 suggestion fee for attendance.

Some of the popular discussions relate to food, museums and stereotypes. We spend time to discuss what and how food is prepared in these countries; food way cultures and habits and it becomes an anthropological experience for them to see the food and imagine what and how it tastes. We also talked about language and diversity in these countries. For instance, there are several Muslim minority groups in China that they did not know about. We spent time discussing the postcolonial politics in Burma/Myanmar, which can be complicated but educational as it echoes the similar issues in contemporary times.

One of the challenges that I see from this experience is a technological one. All attendees own a tablet device where they can hear the lectures and see other participants virtually. However, sometimes there may be Wi-Fi issues or learning curves to use the online meeting software: Vidyo.

Another challenge is that I am presenting from China, which is 12 hours ahead of U.S. in EST. This limits my schedule to give online programs in the evenings. I generally give the talks at 9 PM in Shanghai, which is 9 AM in New York. However, I see this as a volunteer opportunity and relish these moments to build new connections and to educate others from afar.

The greatest reward for me is that I am able to build a new learning (international) community through my traveling experiences. The group learned immediately about the cultures, politics and societies in these countries. I am also promoting local and art histories as well: by capturing images of sites and museum exhibitions, I share what I have seen and I get to hear what they think about these images.

In some ways, it can be a kind of “visual literacy” class where they learn how to decipher and analyze images critically. The attendees may never have a chance to visit these countries and for me to “bring” these countries to them on a virtual setting has been an effective way to engage with them about the many cultures on the other side of the world.

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I find it rewarding that I can enlighten and educate them about these new experiences that I see. I also get to “build” a resource list for them to read and they actually do read some of the materials on the lists: mostly newspaper articles, online news or short essays about a particular topic in that country. It is also an opportunity to promote lifelong learning to those who are very interested in continuing their learning beyond retirement.

It was not easy in the beginning to establish rapport and to get accustomed to this new virtual environment but it gradually became a great learning experience. I hope to visit these people in-person some day since they are all based in New York. They have seen me many times and they know where I’ve been to and what I like and do not like in terms of food so it also feels personal in many ways.

Building a learning program through an outreach program can be rather daunting at first. As more and more baby boomers are retiring, many are seeking learning opportunities from their public libraries; there are numerous ways to collaborate with a public library or a non-profit organization to reach and connect with retirees; one does not need to create a sophisticated online programs but can easily organize and facilitate lectures or discussion groups that are appropriate to one’s topic of interests. Now that I am no longer in China, I can still volunteer to facilitate and deliver new online programs in the U.S. and the experience has expanded my skills as an educator and in my new position which requires community service.

Acknowledgement: I would like to extend my thanks to the attendees of the APALA 35th Anniversary Symposium and the ACRL Image Resources Interest Group for providing thoughtful comments and feedback for his presentations on this topic.

Building Sustainable Libraries in Asia: Success Stories
by Carolyn Ziering, ISLD

The International Sustainable Library Development (ISLD) interest group was formed about 15 years ago by return Peace Corps volunteers. At each annual conference, ISLD presents an interactive program and, in San Francisco this year, the focus was on success stories in Asia. John Hickok, with 15 years experience researching libraries in Southeast Asia, began with an overview of challenges and successes in libraries throughout Asia. Kelly Grogg, RPCV Cambodia, gave a brief history of Cambodia and its relation to literacy and education. In addition to library success stories, she described a Cambodian-led initiative, Caring for Cambodia. Janet Lee, RPCV Ethiopia, spoke about the Peace Corps Partnership Program grants and how they have aided sustainable library projects. After the formal presentations, the audience divided into groups to discuss targeted questions about sustainability and to network with each other.

For more information please visit the ISLD website:
http://www.ala.org/irrt/irrtcommittees/isld/isld

Aurora Public Library (CO) Initiates Inaugural Computer Class in the Amharic Language

According to Brilliant Map (http://brilliantmaps.com/country-of-origin-new-immigrants-us)/, Ethiopians are the second largest immigrant population in Colorado and the majority of this community resides in the City of Aurora. As such, the Aurora Public Library (APL) is reaching out to this community by actively participating in many Ethiopian Community events. For instance, during the Taste of Ethiopia Colorado Festival that was held on August 2, 2015, the library promoted many books and resources APL has in its collection related to Ethiopia.

Recently the library has started the first ever computer class in Amharic, taught by native Amharic speaker and librarian Nebeyou Nunamo Zewde. This class is being promoted through social media and in major Ethiopian community gathering places, such as churches and festivals. Nebeyou moved to United States in September 2011. As a newly arrived immigrant he visited the Aurora Public Library daily to use all the available resources. Soon he became an employee. He stated that APL is where his “success story began as an immigrant”. Now, he is inspiring the community by sharing his APL experience as a patron to his native community. For more information about the Aurora Public Library contact: http://www.aurorapubliclibrary.org/.
The Harris Wofford Global Citizen Award “honors an outstanding global leader who grew up in a country where Peace Corps Volunteers served, whose life was influenced by the Peace Corps, and whose career contributed significantly to their nation and the world in ways that reflect shared values in human dignity and economic, social, and political development. It is the highest honor bestowed upon a global leader by the National Peace Corps Association.”

Berhane served at the National Museum in Addis Ababa for years as a librarian before championing for rights for the disabled. In 2008 she earned her Bachelor of Science in Information and Communication Technology from Admas University, in Addis Ababa. She currently is president and founder of Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA).

At the young age of four she was stricken with polio, left to fend for herself, and ultimately placed at the Princess Tsehaye Hospital in Addis Ababa where she was cared for by Peace Corps volunteer and nurse, Mary Myers-Bruckenstein. These two formed a bond that lasted a lifetime. The Harris Wofford Global Citizen Award was first granted in 2011 on the 50th anniversary celebration of the Peace Corps. It is named in honor of the Harris Wofford, former U.S. Senator and special assistant to U.S. President John F. Kennedy.

The ISLD serves as a clearinghouse of sustainable community-based library projects in developing areas of the world. This group mobilizes the power of ALA librarians to raise awareness of and make significant contributions to international library development. Librarians in developing countries can tap into resources for training and projects in their libraries.

The Interest Group originated when several like-minded returned Peace Corps volunteers who were also librarians and ALA members joined together for the purpose of networking and project development.

By Janet Lee,
Regis University
Editor's note: This article summarizes a new two-part investigation of African book donation programs.

Part I: Book Donation Programmes in English-speaking Africa, by Hans Zell

Book aid is complex, problematic, and sometimes controversial, but the literature and research on book donation programs for Africa is still surprisingly scant.

This wide-ranging, extensively documented investigation attempts to shed more light on current book donation practices, and provides an overview and profiles of the work of the principal book aid organizations active in the English-speaking parts of sub-Saharan Africa; describing how they differ in their approach and strategies, donation philosophy, selection policies, their methods of shipping and local distribution, the quantities of books they are shipping annually, as well as their processes of monitoring and evaluation. A total of 12 of the leading book donation organizations – in the UK, the Netherlands, the USA, and in South Africa – are individually profiled. (Organizations in Belgium and in France, operating in the francophone countries of Africa, are analysed in part II of the study.)

A number of small-scale book donation and library support projects are reviewed separately, as are digital donations in the form of e-reading devices preloaded with e-books.

The article aims to provide a balanced account, presenting a variety of viewpoints about both the benefits and the potential negative consequences of book aid. In particular, the study sought to find out how many African-published books are included in current donation schemes.

"In particular, the study sought to find out how many African-published books are included in current donation schemes."

Extracts from the Conclusion:

Numerous studies over the past three decades or more have found that African library services are severely and chronically under-resourced, and have failed to attract adequate government support. Government officials and policy makers in Africa would appear to view book donations from abroad as the most effective and most economical method of providing books to their libraries, at no cost to them. For public libraries they do not seem to see a need to provide them with book acquisitions budgets, because their national library services are happy to receive substantial, ongoing donations from book aid organizations in the countries of the North. This in turn has created a culture of dependency on overseas book donation programs, as well as other external assistance.

Donation guidelines are occasionally very precise, but often are also far too broad or ambiguous. Many book aid organizations argue, albeit not always convincingly, that they are taking into consideration the expressed needs and interests of those who will be using the books donated.

The investigation found that only a small number of organizations offer access to publicly available impact studies, evaluations of their book donation programmes, or case studies that evaluate specific projects in terms of a set of identified needs. Significantly, there is also an acute lack of hard data and feedback from the recipients: the African librarians and other recipients who have benefited from, and have been involved in processing and distributing book donations; or impartial accounts how recipient librarians react to and employ book donation programs.

Book aid organizations continue to emphasise the desperate need for books to be donated to African libraries, schools, rural communities, and other recipients, but what is incongruously missing from their websites are statements of any kind to indicate that there is not only an acute need for books, but that it is equally important for African governments to provide much more positive support for their libraries, and make them less dependent on book donations from abroad.

Despite a range of advocacy activities in support of African libraries – to ensure that books and libraries are recognized, elevated to a higher profile, and adequately funded – nothing much has changed over the last decade or more. On the contrary, the level of donor dependency and external assistance seems to be on the increase.

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The study recognizes that many book donation organizations are constantly working towards a clearer identification of need, more careful selection of material donated, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation processes of their programmes to ensure that books donated are relevant and well used. However, it is essential that evaluations or impact studies are carried out more rigorously and more systematically, and that they ought to be transparent and publicly accessible.

There have been several initiatives in recent years to encourage greater effectiveness in donated book programmes, so that there is a better match between the information needs of African libraries and schools and the books provided. This is a welcome development. However, it would not appear that many of the recommendations for good practice, and ‘correct donating’, have been embraced by the majority of the leading book charities. Or their organizational structure, their funding, or other practical constraints don’t allow them to do so.

Most book donation schemes are well-intentioned, but even the most well-intentioned programmes may sometimes have unintended, potentially negative consequences. The study sought to investigate whether the activities of overseas book donation organizations have an adverse effect on the local ‘book chain’ in Africa. As the figures of annual book donations from overseas dramatically demonstrate, African publishers have legitimate cause for concern that their main potential markets are flooded with millions of free books every year, which could jeopardize the sales prospects of their own locally produced books, not to mention the damaging effect on the retail book trade.

The investigation found that, at this time, the inclusion of African-published books in current donation schemes makes up a miniscule proportion of the millions of books that are shipped to Africa by donation organizations each year.

Judging by statements on various book donation organizations’ websites, it would also appear that many book charities in the countries of the North are poorly informed about the state of the book industries in Africa, and the rich diversity of books currently available from numerous African publishers. The myth of an almost total absence of indigenous publishing – “there are few or no publishers in the countries we work” – has been perpetuated by many book donation organizations for years.

Well-conceived, recipient-request led book donation schemes that fill a genuine need can be highly beneficial to their intended recipients, but each programme should include a component designed to support indigenous publishing and the local ‘book chain’. It is therefore vitally important that African-published books, including locally-published books in African languages, are included as part of any large-scale book donation programmes, although it is recognized that the practicalities of incorporating African-published books in such programmes, and meeting the costs of including them, can be a complex matter.

It will require a more holistic approach in the donation philosophy of book aid organizations, and it would probably also necessitate a measure of reconfiguration of their fundraising efforts.

Finally, it is also essential that there is a dialogue and a frank exchange of views between the leading book donation organizations, African publishers, and African recipient libraries, which might eventually lead to discussions about methods and approaches how systematic incorporation of African-published books could be successfully implemented over a period of time.

Toward achieving this aim, book donors may wish to seek the active collaboration of African Books Collective Ltd – an organization founded, owned and governed by African publishers, and currently representing the lists of some 150 independent African publishers – through which it would be possible to offer a very wide range of African-published books in both print and digital formats.

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Part II: Le don de livre, mais à quel prix, et en échange de quoi? Un regard sur le don de livre en Afrique francophone, by Raphaël Thierry

Part II of the study (in French) examines the relationship between book donations and the publishing markets in francophone Africa, and is part of an attempt to analyse the evolution of North/South relations through its book markets, which has always been intrinsically linked to an institutional history of cooperative relations between African countries and international agencies since the dawn of independence. Book donations imported through a variety of agencies and organizations occupies a historic place in francophone Africa, and has contributed to an omnipresence of the products by Northern publishers. Meanwhile African publishers’ output is usually limited to perhaps 10% of the books stocked and available for sale in local bookshops. And it is the same picture for school textbooks, heavily dominated and monopolized by, and over 80% the products of foreign publishers, mostly French.

The African publishing houses that were initially set up in the francophone regions of Africa were primarily designed to facilitate the importation of foreign books from publishers in France, through both commercial and philanthropic organizations. However, this flow of books was only able to grow through the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation dedicated to promoting a culture of reading. Moreover, book donations reached a new stage with the rise of book surplus monitoring, particularly through the ‘désherbageenbibliothèque’ (library collection weeding policies) in France in the 1980s. It is a little bit ironic that better resource management in France has, albeit indirectly, led in turn to book donation excess, and consequently to a different faced deregulation of the ‘book chain’ in francophone Africa.

In France NGOs are nowadays becoming increasingly central in the book donation sphere (especially in digital formats), motivated by a logic that until then principally belonged to the field of foreign cooperation. However, the study questions whether that are not in fact a new form of substitution, and point out that the success of such substitution will depend of the level of dialogue and collaboration the NGOs will be able to establish with the book professions in Africa.

These are the full publication details and links:

Book Donation Programmes for Africa: Time for a Reappraisal? Two Perspectives


The Editor of ARD will be inviting responses and debate, for publication in a subsequent issue.

Pre-print versions are freely accessible at Academia.edu.

Part I: Book Donation Programmes in English-speaking Africa by Hans M. Zell

https://www.academia.edu/13165497/Book_Donation_Programmes_for_Africa_Time_for_a_Reappraisal_Part_I


https://www.academia.edu/13166294/Le_don_de_livre_mais_%C3%A0_quel_prix_et_en_%C3%A9change_de_quoi_Book_donation_programmes_for_Africa_part_2

(In French, with an abstract in English)