Knology

Evaluation of Libraries Transforming Communities

Facilitation Skills for Small & Rural Libraries

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Executive Summary

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded initiative **Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries** seeks to provide community engagement resources and opportunities specific to the needs of library workers serving small and/or rural communities. From 2019-2020, The American Library Association, in partnership with the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL), and the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) developed a suite of tools and training for library workers. This step-by-step approach consisted of a six-part online eCourse and a corresponding Facilitation Guide. As part of the project, in-depth training with a cohort of library workers included a series of eight Coaching Sessions, and a four-part Virtual Workshop.

As evaluators for the project, Knology found that library workers benefited immensely from the LTC training experience, albeit with some unanticipated challenges due to COVID-19. Trainees made demonstrable progress against three IMLS project performance goals, having increased their **understanding** of and **interest** in facilitation, and their **confidence** in applying what they learned.

Trainees gained understanding due to thoughtful and well-organized materials, and there is already some evidence that this increased understanding is having an effect on library practice. Interest in facilitation increased due to the engaging and interactive nature of the various training components, and the variety of learning media used. In particular, trainees demonstrated a keen interest in learning how to facilitate digital programs, given the limited opportunities for in-person programming due to COVID-19. While not part of the original grant scope, project leadership worked swiftly to add digital-focused skill development as a bonus area covered by the training. Finally, trainees gained the confidence needed to apply what they learned, bolstered by feelings of preparedness and opportunities to practice with peers. They felt confident in the authority of the materials and were encouraged to know that there is not a single correct way to facilitate a conversation. Confidence also resulted from the interpersonal dynamic between cohort members, who shared a sense of solidarity with others working in similar library communities.

Building on a successful project and positive feedback, evaluators have provided recommendations for continued impact as LTC advances into the future.

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Introduction & Methods

Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries is an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) that seeks to provide community engagement resources and opportunities specific to the needs of library workers serving small and rural communities. Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), this work continues ALA's commitment to helping libraries facilitate discussions among community members. This current project, a partnership with the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL), and the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), builds on earlier iterations of LTC (*www.ala.org/ltc*). Working with a cohort of trainees, LTC: Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries (2019-2020) aimed to provide accessible professional development opportunities focused specifically on facilitation skills, and to correlate resources to existing community engagement models.

As part of this initiative, ALA developed an asynchronous online **eCourse,** originally consisting of five modules (a sixth was added during COVID-19 to focus on facilitating virtual programs), and a corresponding **Facilitation Guide**. To support libraries' progress through the eCourse, a series of eight **Coaching Sessions** were conducted virtually, led by NCDD facilitators. As part of its original design, grant funds were set aside to support an in-person workshop, to be held at the June 2020 ALA conference. Forty-nine library workers in small and rural communities applied for travel stipends to attend. However, as the in-person conference did not occur due to COVID-19, awardees were invited to attend a **Virtual Workshop** instead, which featured four sessions of two hours each in Fall 2020.

Moving forward, the support of a private donor has enabled a continuation of this IMLS-funded work, allowing those who have been trained to continue their community engagement work and support additional small and rural library workers who can likewise benefit from a similar opportunity.

Evaluation

As evaluator for LTC: Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries, Knology (formerly New Knowledge Organization Ltd.) developed a multi-pronged approach to data collection and analysis. Using a range of data sources and a varied approach to evaluation design, we triangulated the findings. The findings presented in this report speak to three **IMLS project performance goals**:

- Participants' **understanding** of facilitation has increased as a result of the trainings;
- Participants' **interest** in facilitation has increased as a result of the trainings; and
- Participants' **confidence** that they can apply what they learned in the trainings has increased.

In May 2020, Knology published Key Findings and Recommendations (Modules 1-3) (Norlander, 2020). The findings aimed to inform decision-making and planning, as project

leaders grappled with challenges facing small and rural libraries due to COVID-19 and the cancellation of the in-person ALA 2020 Annual Conference.

In addition to the evaluation activities listed below, we reviewed applications from 14 cohort libraries who also applied for funding from a concurrent LTC: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries project to continue the work they started or apply their skills in new ways. While those applications are evidence of grantees' commitment to community engagement, this review was separate from the IMLS-funded activities and IMLS grant funds did not support this process in any way.

Activities & Methods

Focus Groups with Previous Trainees (October 2019)

As part of a prior LTC initiative called Models for Change (2016-2018), Knology evaluated a dialogue and deliberation training program for library professionals serving small, mid-sized, and/or rural communities, including a professional development workshop at the June 2018 ALA conference. We followed up on this effort with two virtual focus groups in October 2019 to hear about what trainees had done since the workshop. Results of that focus group informed decision making for this current iteration of LTC and identified the need for basic facilitation skills. Focus group findings are not explored in detail in this report, since the evaluation was conducted with a prior group of library workers who were trained as part of a separate grant.

Online Embedded Evaluation: eCourse & Facilitation Guide (February 2020 - Current)

Knology developed a protocol with questions to be embedded directly into the project tools as part of the user interface. The questions were open-ended to maximize response variation and kept to a minimum to ease burden on the respondents. Questions were designed to capture both short-term usefulness as well as long-term benefit.

Upon downloading the Facilitation Guide, library workers were asked what stood out as most helpful, whether the Guide is useful for those working in small and/or rural settings (and how they envision it being used), and whether the Guide is missing anything that would be needed to effectively facilitate a discussion. We received six responses that have been integrated into the findings in this report.

Following each eCourse module, library workers were asked about what was most useful to them and what they would change. After the fifth module – which had originally been scheduled as the final one – the questions changed to focus on participants' feedback explicitly about the eCourse *content* and *format*. A final, unplanned, sixth module was added to provide instruction specific to digital programming. Questions following this module asked about usefulness, preparedness to host a virtual conversation, and potential obstacles to doing so. The number of people who answered each question ranged across the various modules, from 15 to 128.

Given that the Facilitation Guide and eCourse are available to library workers beyond the IMLS cohort, we refer to those who submitted feedback broadly as "eCourse learners" rather than "trainees," since some did not participate in the other cohort training activities (i.e. the Coaching Sessions and Virtual Workshop).

Qualitative Review: Coaching Sessions & Virtual Workshop

A researcher reviewed audio and video recordings, transcripts, and Zoom chats for all Coaching Sessions. The same was true for the Virtual Workshop, along with breakout group notes, collaborative working documents, embedded feedback (such as polls), and notes from a debrief meeting with the workshop planners and facilitators. A researcher reviewed all forms of documentation for themes related to the three IMLS project goals, and used this informatio to generate recommendations for the continued success of the broader LTC initiative.

Anywhere from 16 to 31 trainees synchronously attended the four-part Virtual Workshop. The number fluctuated due to scheduling constraints and other challenges of working in a small or rural library setting, further exacerbated by COVID-19. Recordings were made available to those who could not attend the live training. Following the Virtual Workshop, participants were asked to respond to two questions:

1. Did the Virtual Workshop meet your expectations? Why or why not?
2. Was there anything you would like to have seen done differently for the workshop? Please describe.

We received seven responses which were reviewed and used to inform findings in this report.

Qualitative Interviews

With input from project leaders, evaluators selected four library sites and invited them to participate in 45-minute semi-structured interviews. Interview questions aimed to understand trainees' experience with the eCourse, Facilitation Guide, Coaching Sessions, and Virtual Workshop. The interview protocol acknowledged that, despite the closure of many library buildings due to COVID-19, libraries continue doing important work to facilitate connection in their communities. We hoped to capture changes that have occurred in libraries and communities as a result of participating in the LTC training – both before and during the COVID era, and in anticipation of future impact. Interview questions were also designed to help inform decision-making as the project moves into an expansion phase and online tools are made available to additional libraries serving small and/or rural communities. Two of the four conversations used video conference software and were recorded with the permission of the interviewee. The other two occurred via phone and the interviewer took detailed notes during the conversation. Evaluators reviewed notes and transcripts for information pertaining to the three IMLS goals.

Some quotes in this report have been edited slightly for grammatical clarity.

Findings

Increased Understanding

All analyses performed across datasets indicated an increase in trainees' understanding of facilitation, in some cases beyond what they had thought possible. As one eCourse learner exclaimed, *"It exceeded my expectations! I thought I knew plenty about how to facilitate…and now I know so much more!"* These positive sentiments on the value of the training came despite the difficult timing of the grant due to COVID-19. The four library workers who were interviewed reflected on their experience and acknowledged gains in understanding despite the shifts needed to accommodate COVID-related changes to the original plan. One commented, *"The only upheaval was everyone did the best they could but it wasn't what anyone expected it to be,"* referring primarily to the impossibility of in-person training experience. Input across data sources also pointed to the professionalism, experience, and encouraging attitudes of the NCDD instructors as responsible for gains in understanding.

The **organization of training materials** and **presentation of content** were cited as major reasons that trainees successfully learned facilitation skills. One eCourse learner said, *"Materials were concise and well organized,"* while others praised the step-by-step approach to training used in the eCourse and accompanying Coaching Sessions. One person remarked, *"The course set up was set up in 'chunks' which made the information easy to digest and follow along."* Correspondingly, as one user of the Facilitation Guide commented, *"The Guide did an excellent job of breaking up the task of facilitating a meeting into smaller manageable sections. That helps because when asked to facilitate or guide any kind of meeting / group it can be an overwhelming task."* Another confirmed this idea, saying, *"I think this Guide is well rounded, informative and really helps with step by step what is necessary to lead conversations with groups."* Due to this approach, the training was rated as extremely useful for increasing participants' understanding of facilitation. An aggregate of responses across the eCourse modules indicated that more than 98% of respondents overwhelmingly found the content useful (*n* = 294, versus only 5 who did not).

One interviewee who had engaged with a prior iteration of the LTC training appreciated how straightforward the current approach was by contrast, expressing previous doubts about knowing which model to choose. *"In this grant we didn't talk about models. It's more about techniques, that's how I look at it now."* Another interviewee acknowledged that the training would have been good to do in person, but that sometimes single-day conference sessions can be overwhelming and hard to process or even remember upon returning home. For them, the virtual format actually proved helpful for developing greater understanding. For example, one person commented, *"I think I learned more this way, having it spread out."*

There was substantial evidence that **greater understanding is resulting in altered library practices**. Library workers learned new approaches to developing community partnerships. One noted that *"thinking outside the box for collaborators helped me identify other groups."* Another agreed, claiming, *"it really got me thinking of partnerships that I wouldn't have thought of / considered otherwise."*

Another area of applying new areas of understanding to practice related to the manner of facilitation. One trainee said that the LTC experience focused them on being able to lead a discussion that is more open-ended and respectful of participants. This was the case even for routine library events, such as a book discussion or a Friends of the Library meeting. One person reflected, *"I'm able to listen more to people instead of telling them things."* Trainees understood the role of the facilitator as one who is able to reframe questions during difficult situations, remain impartial, and diffuse situations to enable productive discourse. Particularly helpful was an understanding of how to deal with challenging situations (along with the assurance from NCDD trainers' experience that those situations very rarely occur). Speaking about the Facilitation Guide, one trainee said they benefited from *"learning how to use certain language that helps the facilitator diffuse arguing and debating in a group conversation."* Some of these interpersonal skills have already come in handy according to one interviewee, who spoke about their experience facilitating programs with teens. They said, *"Right off the bat I've been able to use redirection skills or suggestions for avoiding offensive [language]."*

Areas for Improvement

While it was clear that trainees overwhelmingly understood what they were learning about facilitation, the evaluation uncovered several points of confusion or struggle that may merit further attention.

Some eCourse learners had difficulty navigating the online portal. Various comments, especially corresponding to the earliest modules, indicated confusion or a lack of intuitiveness. One interviewee expressed this concern, saying, *"I didn't really understand how to advance through the online portal...I just figured it out eventually. I felt it was too stupid to have to ask."*

When asked whether they used the Facilitation Guide (*n* = 38), 20 trainees said they did, 16 did not, 2 were inconclusive. Those who did had positive comments about its usefulness as a reference tool and resource. One interviewee exclaimed, *"I downloaded it many times and had sticky things all over it!"* Yet the relatively high number of eCourse learners who did not use the Facilitation Guide suggests that it is not being fully leveraged as a learning resource. People cited multiple reasons for not using the Facilitation Guide, including having forgotten about it, thinking it was to be used after the eCourse was finished, being unable to download it, or not realizing it exists. In one case a trainee had downloaded and planned to refer to it in the future. Multiple people expressed a lack of certainty about the content of the Facilitation Guide or how it was to be used, wondering whether the information it contained was the same as the material presented in the online course. Several expressed desire for a closer and more explicit link between the two resources. One observed, *"I did not realize that there was a guide. I have been saving all of the documents provided in the course in a folder so that I could access them later. I bet they are also in the Guide."* Another said, *"I thought it was meant to be used more as a reference after. Maybe it would be helpful if the modules referenced certain sections to review before or after."*

A final area where a lack of understanding may have slightly hindered learning related to the practice conversations that occurred in breakout groups during the Virtual Workshop. For the most part, trainees spoke as themselves, rather than adopting a different character or

perspective for the purposes of the conversation. Yet some chose to role-play as a way of representing a member of their library community. This was occasionally confusing, toggling between a conversation among library-based peers versus simulated library patrons attending a dialogue event. According to documentation reviewed for this evaluation, both approaches seem like viable options with distinct advantages for trainees.

Increased Interest

We documented high levels of interest and engagement in all of the training components and feel confident that interest in the training itself will lead to a corresponding interest in the practice of facilitation. One learner summarized the eCourse as *"really well designed, informative, and engaging."* They continued, saying, "*I wasn't planning to work through the entire course, but it was so interesting I couldn't stop."*

Largely responsible for this enthusiasm was the use of **different media and learning formats**. This approach generated interest by being engaging; for example, one person said, *"The mix of the components kept the course interesting."* It was seen as appealing to people who learn in different ways; another person remarked, *"I think it's valuable to have different components to hit different types of learners."* The videos used in the eCourse garnered particular interest from many learners, who described them as *"engaging and insightful."* People were interested to learn from their colleagues' perspectives, such as the one who commented, *"I thoroughly appreciated that it was built from actual library staff experiences in diverse environments as opposed to just examples."*

Learners' interest in learning about facilitation stemmed from the **interactive nature** of the eCourse and Virtual Workshop, where they had an opportunity to take what they learned and immediately practice or apply it. Having blank planning tools and examples provided an invitation for new learners to adapt what they were seeing to their own situations. One thought that *"The planning tools are the best part of all the modules,"* while another said, *"the sample agenda really helped get my thoughts organized."* Learners anticipated actually using these training components in their future library practice. *"The printable agendas, conversation planning tools, and sample communications plans are a valuable resource that I will refer to often when facilitating events,"* commented one trainee.

We found that being able to interact with others was a major factor in determining interest. One person observed, *"The best part was the online interaction, the interactive workshop...You got support and ideas from peers."* This came with an acknowledgement that the earlier Coaching Sessions were more of an information-presentation style and less interactive, but that the Virtual Workshop design was much more interactive in nature, and trainees appreciated having the chance to practice in a controlled setting.

Given the challenges of ongoing COVID-related library closures, there was particular interest in learning how to facilitate **digital programs** with community members. Many echoed the thoughts of one library worker who said, *"[The sixth] module was probably the most important for our library. With the rise and fall of cases in our community, doing things digitally is our best option."* The cohort expressed appreciation for the flexibility and willingness of project leadership to develop and incorporate such timely and relevant material into the training. They appreciated the use of tools like a jamboard and breakout rooms to make the Virtual

Workshop more interactive, with some noting that these features were new to them. Chats during the Coaching Session about how to facilitate an online conversation using Zoom showed participants found the instruction relevant and useful.

Ultimately, one of the best ways to capture an increase in interest related to facilitation can be found in what librarians **plan to do in the future** with what they learned. Those who applied for additional funding through ALA described an impressive range of plans to apply their new skills, and a variety of community concerns that they plan to target through engagement efforts, including food insecurity, mental health awareness, homelessness, digital literacy / digital divide, drug abuse, social justice, environmental stewardship, equity, and race relations.

Areas for Improvement

Pre-COVID, there was a great deal of excitement and interest in the idea of traveling to the June 2020 ALA conference. Many library workers serving small and/or rural communities do not have the opportunity or means to attend an ALA conference. Several expressed disappointment at the loss of this opportunity (although they were able to attend ALA's virtual conference for free), noting that traveling to the in-person conference had been a major motivator for them. For instance, one person lamented, *"that's sort of why I signed up."*

The shifting of the workshop to a virtual format did provide trainees with a firsthand experience of participating in a virtual program similar to those they might host, given the limited opportunities for in-person programming at many library buildings due to the ongoing pandemic. Yet along with the recognition that this experience had value, and the potential for expanding community reach with virtual tools, came concerns about bandwidth and other obstacles. Trainees expressed an array of concerns, such as questioning whether they would have capacity to run effective breakout sessions, how to deal with participants calling in without video access, and the potential for decreased engagement with older patrons who have less experience with or motivation to use digital tools. For library workers in small and/or rural communities, the lack of face-to-face interaction can compromise relationships that they have fought hard to establish. They also expressed concern about people simply not wanting to add more virtual activities, given how dominant Zoom and other platforms have become in the past year. One pondered *"the challenge of people already being so burnt out over virtual stuff"* and wondered, *"what would motivate them to participate in another virtual meeting?"*

Increased Confidence

By the end of the workshop, trainees demonstrated a high degree of confidence in their skills. When asked to rank how confident they felt, everyone who participated in the poll selected either somewhat (n = 4) or very confident (n = 14). For some it meant discovering that as library professionals they already had the skills and those skills were strengthened, or thinking of their abilities in new ways. As one trainee commented, the LTC experience *"gave us the courage to actually do it. Even if the skills aren't new to us...it's a strengthener."* Understanding that facilitation was not all that different from what they already do as library professionals was a comfort for several participants. For example, one commented, *"The*

most useful part of this module was learning that the conversations include all types of programs." In the words of another, *"As someone hesitant to facilitate a community discussion (despite 3 decades of librarianship), I was reassured to see that I am already comfortable with hosting public programs that I had not considered to be 'community discussions.' My stress level was somewhat alleviated by this module."* Others spoke to a newfound ability to navigate difficult conversations. Following the workshop, one trainee said, *"I feel more confident bringing controversial but necessary discussions to my community."* Despite already being familiar with facilitation, the training made one librarian *"more confident in conversations that are a bit tougher."*

Reasons for this clear uptick in confidence are varied. Trainees felt **well prepared and trusted the tools and resources**. One person said, *"I am always a little nervous with public speaking. This course is giving me some tools so that I feel better prepared and more at ease with groups."* They were confident in the authority of the materials and the trainers, and felt confident knowing they had *"cheat sheets"* to fall back on, such as a list of questions they could ask the group while facilitating.

Another reason trainees cited for feelings of confidence is that the **training was both robust and practical**. One interviewee spoke about how in-depth the experience was, compared with other professional development they had done that was more *"entry level."* The training was described by many as focusing on practical application, providing ample opportunities to practice and apply what trainees were learning and hone their new skills. As part of the Virtual Workshop, participants could select and act out different roles (such as opening or closing the conversation, or facilitating the main discussion). This led to increased confidence as they received feedback from their peers, who were also taking turns in these various roles, to help them continue to improve.

Simply the knowledge that there is no one right way to facilitate and that **messing up is ok** made trainees more confident in their abilities. For example, one person reflected, *"I was encouraged by being told I was human and it was okay to make mistakes as a facilitator."* Another reiterated this idea, saying that, *"hearing that there are failures and it can be awkward made me feel like I can do this, too!"* Building on this idea, a third summed up the training experience by saying, *"It is also good to hear that we can 'mess up' and still be successful. That perfection isn't the goal – conversation and connection is."*

Perhaps the biggest contributor to feelings of confidence was **solidarity** – the ability to come together with a cohort of peers working in similar settings and facing similar challenges. Trainees felt that the LTC experience was very relevant to those working in small and/or rural communities, and they spoke about feelings of solidarity and feeling supported. While going through the eCourse, one commented, *" I love the ability to upload and exchange ideas with other libraries who face similar challenges...lots of great trainings are somewhat unrelatable to small rural settings."* Another exclaimed, *"It is very useful! It is very helpful to know that there are others facilitating conversations on many of the same issues that our community faces."*

For others, the interactive nature of the training, in particular of the Virtual Workshop, left them feeling not only more confident but also motivated to pursue the work on community engagement. *"It was inspiring to meet and work with librarians from all over the country, all of us grappling with issues important to our communities."*

Areas for Improvement

While trainees overall felt prepared to use their facilitation skills as part of an in-person discussion event, there was some hesitation about how well this confidence transferred to running digital programs. Fewer trainees expressed confidence about virtual facilitation, given that many were relatively new to hosting groups on platforms such as Zoom. Speaking about the portion of the training specific to virtual programming, one interviewee said, *"I felt this was a decent overview, but to actually prepare someone in practice it would need more detail."* Specific areas of concern that might prevent trainees from running their own virtual programs included logistics associated with various platforms, how to use breakout rooms or other features, a lack of technological know-how, or even a lack of interest in digital programming, along with concerns about its suitability for their communities.

Additionally, although everyone was asked to try out a facilitation role as part of the Virtual Workshop, not all seemed confident enough to actively engage. Most volunteered but not all, and this was noticed by peers. One commented on this issue and proposed a potential solution:

> *"I wish more people would have participated in the facilitation practice (and I know some folks may have been shy but the purpose is to have the experience and set attendees up for success). Perhaps just assigning attendees to a facilitation role for the practice sessions would be the best way to get participation. You could ask for volunteers but let everyone know that if they don't volunteer they will be assigned a role at some point."*

NCDD trainers and ALA project leadership also noted an occasional disconnect between the different roles. For example, when the person role playing the "opener" passed off the conversation to the main facilitator, or when that person handed it off to the "closer." Given that each person prepared for their role in isolation, the conversations were somewhat disjointed. In the debrief meeting following the Virtual Workshop, the suggestion was made to have people who would be facilitating together connect in advance to discuss their roles and transitions. This approach will likely have the effect of increasing feelings of confidence, as we have noted that preparedness is one of its main causes.

Discussion & Recommendations

The reality of COVID has made libraries more essential than ever but also brought about unprecedented challenges for those working and living in small and rural communities. The library workers who made up the cohort of trainees wear many hats simultaneously, complicating their priorities amid shifting schedules and ever-changing plans. Many library buildings remain closed to the public, making virtual conversations an alternative option, and not always a viable one.

Yet despite such an unpredictable climate surrounding the course, the level of engagement remained high, trainees were dedicated, and the evaluation demonstrated considerable success. The project accomplished its aim to provide small and/or rural libraries with accessible professional development opportunities focused specifically on facilitation skills. We heard again and again how trainees felt the resources spoke directly to them, and that this explicit tailoring of tools and resources contributed to increases in understanding, interest, and confidence. The use of a step-by-step approach that was interactive and relevant proved key to the success of the initiative.

The sense of solidarity expressed by trainees will likely contribute to long-term commitment to community engagement work. Applications for continued grant funding, while outside the scope of this grant and its evaluation, are a testament to both the desire and ability to advance what has been started. As one library worker expressed, LTC: Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries was the perfect opportunity given how librarianship is fundamentally in flux. This person said, *"[Our library] in recent years has been changing its approach of housing collections to one of housing relationships."* Perhaps the timing of this project has been auspicious, as libraries take on an ever-increasing role in community life and help people navigate new realities. Library programs have always embraced flexibility and adaptation, and who better to handle the demands of a training course happening during a global pandemic than professionals who are already adept at juggling many tasks and roles.

Recommendations

With an understanding that the current project is one aspect of a larger LTC effort and that ALA is continuing to look for ways to bring community engagement-focused training opportunities to library workers, we recommend the following:

- Continue to emphasize that there is no one right way to be a facilitator, and that making mistakes is a natural and expected part of skill development. Share examples of times things didn't go as planned.
- Emphasize what library workers already do well (and are likely more comfortable doing) to minimize the tendency to feel overwhelmed. Trainees got a confidence boost from realizing they already had facilitation skills that they could further develop and build upon, and that events like book club discussions count as community engagement, even when not explicitly focused on controversial topics.

- Illustrated step-by-step instructions to the Moodle classroom (where the eCourse is hosted) already exist, but some learners' frustration indicates they may not be using this valuable reference. Consider ways to draw attention to this resource and help new learners better navigate the platform.
- Make the relationship between the eCourse modules and the Facilitation Guide more explicit, so that learners better understand the content of each and how the two complement each other to reinforce learning. Currently, the worksheets and other eCourse downloads are not part of the Guide. If additional funding is available, we suggest adding these as an appendix or workbook portion.
- Continue to prioritize opportunities for trainees to interact with one another as much as possible. Sharing challenges and successes, which promote a feeling of solidarity and support, was an invaluable part of the project and can only serve the broader LTC effort going forward.
- One possible way for future trainees to interact and to help them feel more prepared to role play would be to have small teams interact in advance of the session they lead (e.g., Opener, Main Facilitator, Closer). This could happen early on in the Virtual Workshop or even a Coaching Session. It could also be assigned as homework so teams can choose a time to touch base that works best for them. Deliberately building in accountability would likely mean fewer people refuse to participate in this practical aspect of the training.
- If facilitator teams are asked to touch base and prepare outside of the Virtual Workshop, encourage them to familiarize themselves with different online platforms and features. For example, being the host versus a participant will change the functionality and feature menu, using a computer versus a tablet or phone alters the layout and positioning, and dialing in by phone without video gives people a chance to see what that experience is like (as both facilitator and participant). Trying out these scenarios will increase confidence to engage in digital programming.
- Expanding the list of questions to use in different scenarios may help trainees relax, knowing that they have a resource on hand to fall back on if they get stuck. Questions should be as broadly applicable as possible to work across various conversation topics. This may alleviate pressure related to controversial topics or dealing with difficult personalities.
- Library workers entering a conversation as themselves or pretending to be a community member both have benefits, but greater clarity is needed regarding which is expected. We suggest using both tactics. Given the sense of solidarity that results from speaking to one's peers, a conversation grounded in library practice is advantageous. Yet given the relative homogeneity of the trainee cohort, it may also be fruitful to ask discussants to role play, offering a selection of personas and character attributes from which they may choose.
- For future evaluation efforts related to LTC initiatives, especially those that focus on library workers in small and rural communities, continue prioritizing data collection that is minimally burdensome on respondents. The "embedded" evaluation approaches used as part of the Virtual Workshop provided useful information for project leadership and evaluators, while simultaneously serving as a learning opportunity for trainees, providing tools they can now employ as facilitators of their own virtual programs.

References

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