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Five librarians walk into a bar... Keeping librarianship vital

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5 Librarians walk into a bar, and take care of business

Like any scholarly community, it’s often discussions and connections that happen outside of the office that have the most impact and keep the profession vital.

We’d like to share with you the value of informal communication through our experience at Western and hopefully get you thinking about how it might fit into your own environment.
• (It might be hard to believe but...) This session is actually based on a true story
• 5 Librarians from across Western Libraries did walk into a bar, the friendly neighborhood Grad Club, and found themselves discussing some pretty important issues
• And it was kind of an AHA moment where we realized how much those informal conversations matter for keeping us informed about the profession and engaged with our colleagues
• The environment at Western is a large, dispersed, multi-library university setting
• Seven library locations scattered across campus, as well as a technical services unit
• Some locations are small and have a single librarian while others have 10 or more librarian/archivist colleagues
• Communication can sometimes be a real challenge
• As in most workplaces, the **primary** way we interact is through **meetings, and a formal comte structure**, which has a protocol/focus, usually pre-determined agenda (both literally and figuratively)

• So Informal Communication becomes important for **filling in gaps** and **providing key information** that perhaps isn’t passed down through more formal channels. And it allows for a more **nuanced discussion**

• It can build bridges **between units**, and provide **different perspectives** on the same issue
• One way we keep the conversation going outside of formal meetings at Western... OR get the conversation started
• Fridays at the Grad Club: It’s a central meeting place for faculty and graduate students across campus, and it’s a **neutral setting**
• a few of us drink, a few of us don’t; it’s not required:) - although sometimes it helps
• Librarians across Western have been meeting there some time now, about once a month, and sometimes more frequently
• **Who** is part of this conversation and **how** do we get people together? Librarians from all locations across the system come, as well as Lib Assistants, faculty colleagues, graduate students

• Communication happens in a few different ways:
  - Facebook
  - Email
  - Walk-Abouts

• Not everyone comes, but everyone is invited
• Disagreement is too often mistaken for disrespect, but what effective informal communication can do is encourage folks to express diverse opinions in a safe and collegial environment
• Libraries tend to be very polite, conflict averse environments
• BUT they are also places, particularly academic libraries, where critical thinking and scholarly Debate, even Dissent is encouraged
• It’s easy to get so busy in our day to day work that we forget there are larger discussions about librarianship happening outside of our local environment that we need to be part of.
• Having informal get-togethers where we’re not in a meeting with an agenda helps us avoid focusing so much on our specific library setting, and thinking beyond the institution level too.
• So what do we actually talk about?
• Well, it’s really useful to get input from librarians in other units or libraries on any sort of issues you’re dealing with - they might have a completely different perspective to offer
• We also learn from each other how other units/libraries are implementing new products or services
• We get to test out new ideas in a supportive environment
• I’ll give a couple of examples of recent topics we’ve discussed
• Working from home is a fairly new opportunity for librarians given our unionization
• There are different norms in each library, depending on whether librarians work at the reference desk, whether they supervise any staff, number of librarians in a unit
• Talking through how working from home affects colleagues and in particular users has been really helpful
Another recent example we’ve discussed lots: different models of librarianship
This has been a big topic in part due to lower staffing levels, when it’s crucial to figure out how to best serve users with fewer resources
Different units have experimented with different models across the system
• Some units have librarians embedded in a faculty - others use a department-based liaison model, and more recently one library has been trying out a functional model to create portfolios that focus on collections and instruction.

• Having informal discussions about these models helps us consider new opportunities for our own units, and at a higher level consider the direction our library system is heading.
• So you might be wondering whether this is really just a chance for us to complain to each other... but we think this is a healthy way to vent
• It’s important to be heard and to have an opportunity to articulate your feelings about library issues
• This “complaining” is actually a first step toward discussing and then resolving a problem
• And this is where creativity can start - your colleagues will see aspects of your issue that you can’t, and they will offer some solutions
• Another important part of this informal communication is that we hear about what’s going on in other units, like renovations or new services that a library is trying out
• We all have a research component to our job, so this is also where we can make connections for research projects
• We also learn about new employees, people leaving, and changes in professional responsibility
• Then there’s the morning after the conversations, the debates, and the discussions
• In the heat of the moment we make connections and generate new ideas for our practice and research, but we have to put effort into sustaining these connections and moving forward with new ideas by acting on our impulses from the night before
• Or, at least trying them out in the light of day to see if they are relevant
• Lise has given us specific examples but there are many general benefits to using informal communication
• For new hires it is a good social introduction and a chance to learn about the organizational culture
• Mentoring relationships can also start here, and our bar meetings facilitate Serendipity, where engaging with others turns into opportunities for working with others
• What happens is, we become connected
When people know each other, it’s easier to trust them and share with them.

We start to develop a common ground and with this common ground we recognize the humanity in our colleagues.

When we know each other we are more comfortable taking risks, to discuss real issues, controversial or otherwise.

When you have personal connections it more easily translates into professional support.

“I think it makes the person more human, than just professional carbon unit.” (Zhao, Rosson 2009)
• And in a way, as part of our profession we are obligated to have these tough discussions ...
• We are part of the university community
• As seen by the CAUT statement on academic libraries, we are full partners with faculty members in the scholarly and intellectual functions of universities and colleges.
• Being included in this community, means we should engage as critical thinkers about the university, the library, our practice, our service and our research
• How do we keep librarianship vital?
• At this point it might seem obvious, but we wanted to demonstrate the power of taking informal ideas and conversations home from the bar
• Think about the issues in your environment:
  • What’s not being talked about?
  • What needs to be talked about?
  • How would informal communication work for you?
  • Would it complement your current forms of communication?
And, of course, these relationships don’t have to be formed in a bar...

- It’s key to find a relaxed environment, where your voice is heard;
- A place to be comfortable with your colleagues - and when you get to that PLACE, it becomes a grassroots, employee-focused discussion
- **So where’s your bar?**