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NWCentral:

Your Gateway to Continuing Education Through Collaboration

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Your library school education was superb. Your job experience is broad and deep. So, you're ready for the challenges and opportunities of a workday at a library, right? Well ... maybe, not so much. An ancient Chinese curse condemns the recipient to live in interesting times. Libraries today are both blessed and cursed to operate in times that are, to put it mildly, quite interesting and ever-changing. Technology is transforming. Communities are evolving. Patron expectations are skyrocketing.

New librarians and experienced library workers alike must struggle to keep abreast of trends and developments. One day you're doing your job satisfactorily, and the next you're asked to get a handle on the next generation catalog debate, learn how to serve a new population, brief the board on copyright issues, align services with the millennial generation, or something else that requires immediate up-to-date training. For all library workers, whether newly-minted or seasoned veteran, ongoing continuing education is absolutely essential to remain relevant in library services.

NWCentral (Northwest Continuing Education Network of Training Resources for All Libraries), an online clearinghouse of educational opportunities in the Pacific Northwest, can help! This collaborative tool is based on the premise that it takes a community to master the ever-changing skills needed to serve our diverse constituencies. Continuing education for library professionals, support staff and managers comes in a variety of forms: conferences, workshops, workplace-hosted trainings, webinars, library blogs, meetings of interest-based library organizations, college classes, and countless Web resources. Sometimes, however, the most effective learning comes from a simple interaction, live or virtual, with a colleague who has expertise to share

on the challenge of the moment. The goal of NWCentral is to bring all of this together in a 'one-stop shop' for continuing education that is local, economical and enjoyable.

If you have not had a chance to visit NWCentral (www.nwcentral.org), please do! This is some of what you'll find:

- An events calendar with all sorts of library trainings, meetings, and conferences in the Pacific Northwest and online.
- Handouts, tutorials, presentations and Web links on a range of library topics
- Conference presentations
- Scholarships and grants information
- A speaker's bureau listing experts willing to share their knowledge

And much more—with much of the content contributed by members of the local library community.

Plan to spend some time on your visit to the site!

The story of NWCentral begins with PORTALS, the Portland Area Library System consortium. Leslie Wykoff, director of WSU Vancouver Library and former chair of PORTALS, describes how NWCentral began back in 2004. "PORTALS decided, after much work reassessing its mission, that local and regional continuing education for librarians and library staff was its top priority into the future. An LSTA grant from the State Library in Oregon allowed PORTALS to hold focus groups and needs assessment meetings across the state of Oregon, form



a user-run Advisory Board, and build the beta version of NWCentral. PORTALS still provides some funding for the NWCentral project.” Sheila Afnan-Manns was project manager of NWCentral during its development stage, and Rachel Bridgewater was its Web architect. Drupal, the open-source content management system, was selected to provide the structure for the site. Using Drupal’s lightweight architecture and some custom coding, NWCentral was designed to provide a solid structure for organizing content as well as many opportunities for participants to connect.

In June 2006, a pilot of NWCentral was introduced to the library community. A voluntary Advisory Group came together to help publicize the site and guide its growth. Slowly—and with a few bumps—the site began to establish itself in the Northwest library community. Enthusiastic volunteers spread the word through conferences and listservs. Members of the library community began to populate the events calendar and topic categories with content. The Oregon Library Association recognized the potential of NWCentral early on and created an OLA board liaison to NWCentral, a position currently held by Maureen Cole of Eugene Public Library. In 2007, the Washington Library Association followed suit and designated its coordinator of continuing education, the position currently held by Mary Bucher Ross, as the formal liaison to NWCentral. In 2008, hosting of the Web site moved to Portland Community College. Donna Reed, Library Director at PCC, recognized NWCentral as a good fit for the mission of the college. Currently PCC provides continuing education support for professionals in health, technology and other fields and has a program that trains library paraprofessionals. By hosting

NWCentral, PCC is expanding its commitment to library continuing education.

Now that NWCentral has been in service for over two years, the need for certain improvements to the Web site has become apparent. To reach its full potential NWCentral needs a critical mass of users, including both seekers and contributors of continuing education events and resources. This bare-bones operation has never conducted usability testing, and it has become clear that improvements to the site’s organization and interface are necessary for it to achieve this critical mass of users. A follow-up LSTA grant from the Oregon State Library for 2008 will fund usability testing and an overhaul of the site. This work will be done by Paul Irving and colleagues at In-site Web Publishing, the talented team that created Multnomah County Library’s wonderful new Web site and recently launched a Web site for the Kalamazoo Public Library. The release of the revised NWCentral site is currently scheduled for October 2008.

NWCentral has always operated with minimal staff support, which is another of those joint blessings and curses. Granted, if NWCentral had its own professional staffing, then content could be added to the site with no effort from members of the library community, and the site could boast a slicker, more varied appearance. On the other hand, the advantage of the community-driven, self-service model that NWCentral uses is that it fosters connections. When a local librarian shares a handout she has created on, say, a staff training on responding to an angry patron, she is expanding her commitment to the larger library community. If she provides her contact information, another library manager considering similar training can both learn from her handout and contact her for advice. Maybe



The future of librarianship and how to keep up

Read something interesting once a day, at least. Read “one level up” or outside your area of expertise. Read related literature, e.g. Educause reports. Try to get a sense of what is ahead of you, not what’s already happened.

—DEB CARVER
Dean of Libraries,
University of Oregon

together they can brainstorm new solutions, or they can pool their resources and bring in an expert speaker, or just commiserate about their jobs. We don't just need information—we need connections.

Because NWCentral operates with minimal staff support, the voluntary Advisory Group that guides the project is key to its success. Members of the Advisory Group come from all over Oregon and Washington, and represent public, academic, school and special libraries. Here are a few statements from Advisory Group members about why they take time from their busy schedules to support NWCentral:


Paula Swan from Spokane Falls Community College Library in Washington is the Advisory Group's newest member: "I got involved with NWCentral as I was looking for a regional online CE clearinghouse for teaching and research. I like the multiple access points to resources—the calendar and the subject access—especially. It is a great resource for librarians who want to strengthen their professional networks."

Maureen Cole is a former president of OLA and OLA's current liaison to NWCentral: "OLA was looking for a way to connect its members to Continuing Education resources and NWCentral offered a solution! In a volunteer organization, time is the most important resource. OLA found itself without a lot of time to devote to the deserving and important area of Continuing Education, to keep its members in touch with the latest and greatest regional offerings. NWCentral presents an elegant and electronic answer to our need; in doing so, we have established a great partnership!"

Marian Thomas is director of human resources at Deschutes Public Library: "Are you a leader? Do you like to mentor? If yes, your gateway is NWCentral. This impor-

tant and developing shared community Web site is a great opportunity for you to share with others. One key way is to share conference presentation materials. Another way is to share information about dynamic speakers. These two actions are significant and will help develop the growing resources at NWCentral. Participate today and make a difference! We guarantee your sharing will enhance and encourage others in their pursuit of lifelong learning."

Perri Parise, the Director of Emporia State University's MLS program, has this advice for new librarians looking for a professional position: "There's no substitute for networking and lifelong learning. It is often frustrating to see an ad for a position that seems just perfect, except for some preferred skill that you, the job seeker, lack. And that's where NWCentral can play a key role."

So, whether you are looking for your first job, seeking a different job, or just trying to keep up with the job you have, you are invited to join the network of lifelong learners at NWCentral. You are especially invited to be part of the expanded and improved site that will be released this fall! Questions or comments about NWCentral can be sent to admin@nwcentral.org or to any Advisory Group member, whose contact information can be found on the site. Add your support to locally-grown library continuing education and participate in a network that is preparing to thrive in these interesting times. 



Advice for new librarians

Try to remember that this is one of the very best times to be a librarian, so be clear where your passions lie and pick that field of librarianship that allows you the opportunity to exercise them. When you start new job, pay attention to what works and what does not and be willing to be a problem solver. Always see yourself as a player. Look for opportunities to collaborate whether within your department, library, your campus, city or state. Pay attention to people you admire and note how they do what they do.

—KARYLE BUTCHER
University Librarian,
Oregon State University

