

Chapter 108

What's In It for Me? Professional Development in Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds offer synchronous (simultaneous) real life participation through virtual reality, combining the two to provide convenient and low-cost options for librarians' professional development. This chapter explores the use of virtual worlds for meetings, training, conferences, discussions, mentoring, networking, and peer-to-peer information sharing, with a focus on the 3D virtual world of Second Life. Definitions of "professional development" and "virtual worlds" precede discussion of the issues surrounding the use of this type of environment for a variety of training events and activities to support and encourage ongoing expansion of knowledge, innovation, and creativity among librarians. This chapter also includes information about planning and implementing professional development sessions in this arena, along with information on effective methods for publicizing these activities for parties interested in using virtual worlds for professional development. For those interested in attending professional development opportunities in virtual worlds, the chapter provides information on how to discover and choose useful activities and events in virtual worlds.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians live in a pop-up world of information tools, socially networked environments and technology-based resources that appear, grow, expand, and sometimes die a quick death. This hyper-speeded up world requires constant expo-

sure to and learning new technologies, both those developed specifically for libraries and those created for users with many different levels of experience and expertise. Professional development plays a significant role here as a means of helping librarians learn new technologies and experiment with them to see if and how these technologies

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can support and further the mission and goals of their institutions or organizations. Librarians may also get ideas or learn new techniques and research approaches through professional development activities. This can be particularly useful to academic librarians, who often need to conduct research and publish the results in order to advance professionally (Pan & Hovde, 2010).

Attending and participating in professional development events offers many supportive options for learning, creativity and networking for librarians in all types of libraries and information centers, including:

- Any librarian who does not have funding or time to attend conferences, workshops or other programs in-person
- Librarians in isolated areas who do not have a large staff as backup
- Library school students interested in a variety of librarian positions
- Job-seeking librarians
- Librarians with specialized library or information center jobs and no local peers
- Librarians who have shared interests in particular subjects and issues, and seek a community, for networking, creative problem-solving and feedback on current issues and projects

How do librarians manage to try out, learn, apply and teach synchronously (simultaneously) or asynchronously (any time, any place) in this madly gyrating information environment? Librarians who jump on new technologies and resources are scouting out the possibilities, trying new tools and environments, such as virtual worlds, in the ways they were meant to be used, and inventing both new uses and new tools. Many are generously sharing what they learn through professional development offerings, and encouraging and engaging other librarians to jump in as well.

BACKGROUND

What is Professional Development?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “professional development” (PD) as “the development of competence or expertise in one’s profession; the process of acquiring the skills needed to improve performance in a job” (OED, 2011). As far back as 1985, however, Stone pointed out that many terms have been used to identify different types of professional development, including lifelong learning, self-directed learning, continuing education and staff development (Stone, 1985, p. 60). Today, institutions and organizations continue to use a variety of phrases to describe supportive educational and training experiences of all kinds for their employees. In this chapter, ‘professional development’ includes ‘staff development and ‘continuing education’.

Regardless of its definition, if you subscribe to a library-related listserv, you probably see frequent announcements for professional development conferences, programs, workshops, and courses for librarians offered online as webinars or in virtual worlds, as well as traditional face-to-face (F2F) meetings. Who has the time and money to spare for these events? How do you pick and choose among them? And why do librarians need PD, anyhow?

Many institutions and organizations see PD as a time-consuming and expensive enterprise. However, it need not be either. As Bell (2009) points out, even libraries on a budget can arrange for practical, low-cost professional development opportunities, including one-time or repeat F2F exchange visits to and from other college and university libraries nearby that may be similar or somewhat different from one’s home institution. With administrative support, individual librarians can initiate these visits as PD opportunities, regardless of the library’s budget, and discuss topics of mutual interest and/

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