Benefits of an Early-Career Peer Mentoring Group

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Academic librarianship comes with a multitude of responsibilities that can overwhelm an early-career librarian. It can be difficult to figure out professional service opportunities and participate in scholarly activity, all while learning your day-to-day librarian responsibilities (not to mention finding your way professionally as a whole). As a newly minted academic librarian just out of graduate school, Grayson wished there were a group for fellow early career academic librarians on campus that could meet regularly and support each other in building our careers in academic librarianship.

Three months into his new role at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Libraries, Grayson conceived of ECAL (Early Career Academic Librarians group) and was supported by library administration in creating this group. ECAL is an informal, peer-led, voluntary group intended to bring together anyone at UAB Libraries who is in the first five years (or so) of their career, regardless of rank or position. Members of ECAL meet quarterly with the purpose of discussing scholarly and professional service endeavors and sharing insights as we navigate our first years in academic librarianship.
LearnRT at ALA Annual

Level Up Your Facilitation Skills for Better Meetings
Friday, June 28, 9:00am - 12:00pm
San Diego Convention Center, Room 31 A B C

LearnRT Executive Board Meeting (Open to All)
Saturday, June 29, 9:00am - 10:00am
In-person: San Diego Convention Center, Room 27 B
Online: Zoom (link on ALA Connect)

LearnRT Training Showcase
Sunday, June 30, 3:30pm - 5:00pm
San Diego Convention Center, Sails Pavilion

LearnRT President’s Program: Basic 3D Modeling with Tinkercad
Monday, July 1, 1:00pm - 2:00pm
San Diego Convention Center, Room 29 D

LearnRT Member Social
Monday, July 1, 4:00pm - 5:00pm
San Diego Convention Center, Room 01 B
President’s Message: Amy Eiben

At any conference, I always appreciate a session that spells out the process for some new or less-familiar practice. The sessions that really excite me, though, are the ones that help me make connections among skills and situations that go beyond the presented context. As you participate in Annual Conference and other continuing education this year, I challenge you to think about both teaching and learning in terms of transferable skills.

Adult learning tends to be self-identified and needs-based. If a learner does not perceive that a training or presentation is relevant to their need, they will likely leave frustrated. Sometimes the content is not what they expected. Sometimes the examples seem unachievable.

As a learner myself, I am inclined to believe that all of these opportunities hold some value, even if what is gained is not the intended objective of the presenter. This belief is part optimism, part creativity. I realize that not all learners feel or think this way. A little nudge toward creativity can help bridge that gap and make their experience more satisfying.

How do you do that?

As a manager or mentor (or someone who otherwise supports library workers seeking professional development), this may look like coaching staff to have an open mind. Talk with them in advance about their goals for the learning they are pursuing. Encourage them to take notes. Engage with them afterward and, if needed, guide them toward identifying transferable skills and knowledge.

As a presenter or creator, this may look like digging a little deeper. Think ahead to what kinds of questions may arise. I am not asking you to account for every situation in every library. I am encouraging you to stretch a little, and consider things like scalability. Even just acknowledging how a project may look different in a larger or smaller organization, or in a more rural or more urban community, will go a long way. Plant seeds of creativity for the learners to nurture afterward.

It is such an honor to support learning with you! I hope to see you in San Diego, and if not, remember to keep an eye on our LearnRT channel in ALA Connect for ways to participate - from discussions to volunteering to learning.
One of the primary goals of the ECAL group is mutual support in fending off feelings of imposter syndrome for members who are coming to this field with little prior professional library experience. One tool implemented to combat these feelings is “Brag Time.” During each quarterly ECAL meeting, “Brag Time” is a moment for members to talk about their recent accomplishments or projects. The purpose of this is twofold: to have everyone learn about the work their colleagues are doing, and to get people used to promoting themselves and their work.

Another major element of ECAL is quarterly “Learning Events,” designed to educate us about a particular topic related to our professional development. These events include workshops, discussion panels, and presentations. To date, we have held a conference poster making workshop with the Assistant Dean for Public Services and a discussion panel on the promotion process with UAB librarians at various ranks. Our next learning event will be a workshop on strategies for scholarly writing put on by the director of the University Writing Center. Several veteran members of the UAB Libraries have also attended our “Learning Events” and given us feedback about how beneficial these events are to Libraries faculty and staff at every level.

A major benefit of the group comes from our diversity of professional backgrounds and experiences. We currently have fifteen members from three different faculty ranks, as well as staff members and undergraduate student workers who are interested in pursuing a library degree after graduation. Because the members of ECAL come from a wide variety of professional backgrounds and hold a variety of roles within the UAB Libraries, the experiences and strengths brought to the larger group encompass any weaknesses of the individuals. This creates a strong network of peers in a social environment that allows new library faculty and staff to discuss the ups, downs, victories, and challenges of their work with peers outside of earshot of their supervisors. This kind of relationship building is key for troubleshooting problems specific to early career professionals.
Continuing Education, Webinars, Virtual Events – Where do I start?

Anna Tapia MacDonald
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Staying excited and motivated is a challenge we all face. Sometimes, it involves taking a refresher course and building our current skills, or it could mean diving into something new. However, what truly excites me is the prospect of gaining fresh insights and building connections with fellow library staff, who generously share their expertise and experiences within the library community.

These days, you can find continuing education and staff training opportunities everywhere - if you know where to look. I have come across training resources by simply signing up for online research platforms and subscribing to newsletter emails from providers such as EBSCO and SirsiDynix. These subscriptions provide me with daily or weekly emails containing links to training webinars and other valuable resources. Lately, I have been watching webinars on how to use current subject-specific databases to create a more immersive student experience and webinars exploring the relationship between artificial intelligence and its impact on university research.

One of the best training and development resources for both librarians and staff is WebJunction (www.webjunction.org). WebJunction offers free webinars either directly through email registration, the website, or through their Facebook page. WebJunction is a free training program of OCLC Research and it is primarily focused on public libraries, however, many of their webinars are relevant to other types of libraries. Simply create an account and you have access to a course catalog of self-paced courses and webinars. Additionally, you can register for email notifications of upcoming webinars.

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One summer, a former colleague of mine used the slower-paced months to take courses that not only captured her interest but also helped her build her skills in areas she felt less experienced and proficient.

Notably, both the Library Journal (www.lj.com) and the School Library Journal (www.slj.com) host many free training opportunities. Additionally, you can find free virtual events such as discussions with authors and virtual conferences. A recent highlight for me was the SLJ Picture Book Palooza virtual event, where diverse authors and illustrators shared their creative processes and inspirations for their latest books. While both platforms offer paid courses, a considerable number of webinars and events can be accessed at no cost through email registration.

For those affiliated with a library consortium - webinars, and other training resources are often available through consortium websites. In certain cases, tailored training sessions can be organized to meet specific faculty and staff needs. The ALA website remains an invaluable source for finding groups and other resources to fit most development areas. My interest in programming and outreach led me to the Programming Librarian newsletter, a discovery I made through the ALA website. This newsletter serves as a hub for current programming news, webinars, exhibits, and job opportunities. Likewise, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) offers numerous webinars and continuing education opportunities on a variety of topics through their ACRL professional development programs, many of which are offered free of charge. Whatever your area of interest, the ALA has a group or resource for you!

Additional avenues for continuing education and training opportunities can be explored through regional associations. For instance, the Southeast Florida Library Information Network (SEFLIN.org) is one of the nation’s largest multi-type library cooperatives that offers ongoing continuing education opportunities for library staff.

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Membership and participation in ECAL lead to collaboration opportunities between new library employees at UAB who may not have otherwise realized their shared interests. ECAL serves as an excuse to bring together individuals from all corners of the UAB Libraries system, which can be difficult because UAB Libraries consists of multiple separate library buildings with several individual departments that may not often have opportunities to work together.

A final major benefit is establishing a collective voice as early career professionals since it can be hard for us to communicate our needs efficiently and effectively. The ECAL group has facilitated great conversations about our collective needs and given us the agency to provide library administration with ideas and requests that will most directly address our concerns. While we started ECAL in an academic context, an early career peer group has value in all types of libraries. If you feel like ECAL would benefit you and your peers, we encourage you to speak with your supervisor about the possibility of implementing it at your institution.

The SEFLIN continuing education program includes Niche Academy (nicheacademy.com) which provides topical and skill-building webinars offered through its website, Facebook page, or email. Topics within the latest webinars I attended covered partnerships and collaboration, tips for online instruction, fighting fake news, and podcasts for patrons and professionals alike. It is important to note that SEFLIN-exclusive access is limited to member libraries, however, many of the webinars are recorded and can be found on their Facebook page.

In this age of virtual work and digital events, finding free training and educational resources has never been easier. Honestly, it can be tempting to sign up for all the free events – but remember to pace yourself!