ISQ

INFORMATION STANDARDS QUARTERLY

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION: PART FOUR

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE:
A NEW MODEL FOR
ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

DCMI: BEYOND THE
ELEMENT SET

E-BOOKS: THE ETERNAL
NEXT BIG THING

Z39.7 LIBRARY METRICS &
STATISTICS DATA DICTIONARY

OPENURL KNOWLEDGE BASES
RECOMMENDED PRACTICE

NISO
How the information world
CONNECTS

ERIC CELESTE

A Focus on Innovation at the DLF Forum

In 2009 after four years as a freestanding organization, the Digital Library Federation (DLF) returned to the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), where it had been founded in 1995. One consequence of this organizational shift was that the DLF Forum, one of the key conferences for institutions building digital library solutions, took on a decidedly different tone for Fall 2009.

Instead of the typical set of project updates and reports presented by panels in two or three tracks over two days, this Forum, held from 11-12 November 2009 in Long Beach, California, became a focused conversation about innovation prodded by presentations to the conference as a whole and stoked by an undercurrent of tweets flowing between attendees and participants far from Long Beach.

The Fall 2009 DLF Forum focused on innovation in library technology and gave participants a chance to share their views about the potential role of the Digital Library Federation as a program within the Council on Library and Information Resources. The conference itself was an innovative response to the limited planning time and resources of an organization in transition. Rather than break into separate tracks, participants for the most part remained together and engaged in wide-ranging conversations about the topics introduced by a provocative set of speakers. One pre-conference session on the Blacklight discovery front-end advocated a number of best practices others developing community-based solutions might consider.

Sayeed Choudhury, associate dean for library digital programs at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and CLIR presidential fellow, welcomed the 60 or so participants to the meeting with a talk that stressed the rarity of "right" answers and the need to analyze local circumstances before developing a course of action. Innovation arises from chaos, Choudhury noted, urgency being the mother of innovation. During this period it is tempting to select the most common or simplest option. In describing the analysis that preceded Johns Hopkins' choice of institutional repository platform Choudhury noted that others had made this decision before them, but it was important for JHU to be cognizant of local needs. It required tremendous trust on behalf of administrators to give the JHU team the time and funding they needed to consider and analyze the situation. Building this trust, carving out space to do innovative work, is the first challenge of innovation.

The development of the Blacklight project at the University of Virginia illuminated the lessons that Bess Sadler (now at Stanford University) brought to the Forum. Sadler referenced the "ancient war between our peoples" to describe the tensions between developers and system administrators that seem to emerge whenever a significant technology project is undertaken. Again there was a call for trust as a foundation of innovation. Sadler pointed out that innovation was about more than having great ideas and taking risks, turning these ideas into something that actually makes a difference is the hard part. To do that, developers and system administrators must develop a level of trust, they have to get to know one another and need tools to verify that everyone is doing their job well. This requires a commitment to testing on the part of developers and monitoring on the part of sysadmins.

John Ober talked about the California Digital Library's approach to innovation, a move beyond digital preservation to digital curation. He noted that many think of novelty when they hear "innovation," masking the legitimacy of a passionate pursuit of incremental improvement. Jon Dunn presented some of the lessons of the "Sakaibrary" at Indiana University, encouraging listeners to get involved in existing communities before starting new ones. Jenn Riley of Indiana University spoke about the balance of efficient tools and creative staff. Josh Greenberg shared stories of partnership and organizational change at the New York Public Library. Brad McLean of DuraSpace shared some of the challenges of bringing DSpace and Fedora under a common umbrella. Mike Winkler of the University of Pennsylvania discussed portfolios as a management tool, developing service layers orchestrated to provide composed functionality.

Finally, Brad Wheeler of Indiana University addressed the topic of collaboration as a strategy. He asked whether the behaviors of DLF participants would yield solutions that matter for their campuses or for higher education. Wheeler

Blacklight is a front-end which aims to promote the discovery of resources indexed with the SOLR/Lucene search engine. It has been designed from the ground up to be a community source project, open to a wide variety of input.

contends that there is a great interest in moving toward more collaborative solutions. He noted the importance of looking beyond institutional walls and the rise of a "meta-university" that we will all build together. He identifies a number of existing projects as part of an emerging shared infrastructure, from HathiTrust to Sakai to Kuali. While resisting the allure of "cloud computing" Wheeler still pointed to "above campus services" as an innovation that will bring us together as a community, as unnatural as that act may be.

Discussions touched on our users' tolerance for continual change in systems, where to get resources to make innovation work, the importance of recognition for key staff, techniques and tools for monitoring and performance enhancement, building community, asking (or not) for permission, streamlining processes, the need for more coders, the competitive advantages of libraries, the need for trust, and the difference between thinking you are being innovative and real innovation. The single track engagement of all participants in one large conversation led to a rich interaction among participants.

Katherine Kott, at Stanford University and a former director of the Aquifer effort at DLF, spoke about the roles CLIR could consider for DLF, including that of an incubator encouraging and supporting innovation. In fact, much of the second day was devoted to a detailed discussion of potential futures for DLF as a program of CLIR. Most of this would be of little interest to readers although it was very valuable to the transition committee defining the new program within CLIR.

Of more interest to ISQ readers would be the pre-conference that snuck onto the Forum agenda very late in the planning. Even with little forewarning, this session about Blacklight held the evening before the conference began was very illuminating. Blacklight is a front-end which aims to promote the discovery of resources indexed with the SOLR/Lucene search engine. It has been designed from the ground up to be a community source project, open to a wide variety of

input. The discussion of Blacklight highlighted a recurring theme at this Forum: the need for integrated testing plans as systems, even experimental systems, are developed. The Blacklight team used tools like Rspec and Cucumber to build unit tests that ensured components of the system already completed were not broken by later work. These same tests, and the discipline to always develop new tests alongside new code, become the heart of a viable community source development infrastructure. The tools help ensure that contributors of code always understand what conflicts their code creates, and give developers a chance to fix these problems before users encounter these conflicts. Another testing tool, Puppet, is being used by the Blacklight team to ensure a consistent user experience across versions of the system. The integration of testing into the workflow of Blacklight developers illustrated the kind of trust-building that Bess Sadler called for to end "the war" between system administrators and developers. For the Blacklight team their use of Ruby on Rails and these testing frameworks provided great confidence that as code was being added, progress was actually being made.

By the time the Fall 2010 DLF Forum comes around, the Digital Library Federation may well have changed its name and fully emerged as a new program of CLIR. DLF membership has long valued the Forum as a critical meeting ground, a place where project managers, product managers, and those leading digital library initiatives can come together to share and get a check on their perception of the challenges and opportunities ahead. Even if its form was quite different from Forums of the past few years, the Fall 2009 DLF Forum proved successful enough that we can expect many more Forums to come, whatever their name may be. | CR | 10.3789/isqv22n1.201011

ERIC CELESTE <efc@clst.org> is Senior Advisor to the Council on Library and Information Resources. His website is at: eric.clst.org.

RELEVANT LINKS

Blacklight
www.lib.virginia.edu/digital/resndev/blacklight.html

Council on Library and Information Resources
www.clir.org

Cucumber testing suite
www.cukes.info

Digital Library Federation
diglib.org

DuraSpace
www.duraspace.org

HathiTrust
www.hathitrust.org

Kuali
www.kuali.org

Puppet administrative testing
reductivelabs.com

Rspec testing suite
www.rspec.info

Ruby on Rails
rubyonrails.org

Sakai
sakaiproject.org