



## CONFERENCE REPORT

# American Library Association Conference 2008

Linda Ashcroft

*Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, UK*

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide a flavour of the content of the American Library Association Annual Conference held in Anaheim in June 2008.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is an outline description of the issues, content, networking, speakers and participants of this conference.

**Findings** – This major conference covered many topical issues and themes, latest trends and research, and leading edge technology applicable to librarians and information professionals internationally. It facilitated many networking opportunities.

**Originality/value** – This paper is a conference report of value to librarians and information professionals as the variety of themes apply to the various aspects of library and information work.

**Keywords** Conferences, Library association, Libraries, Librarians, Information research

**Paper type** Viewpoint

The American Library Association conference 2008 took place in Anaheim from June 26-July 2. Attendees and exhibitors totalled 22,047. Many delegates took advantage of the shuttle bus service, sponsored by Thomson Gale, which ran between the hotels and the Anaheim Convention Centre – although many hotels were centrally grouped around the convention centre.

This year all the ALA conference programs and exhibitors could be held in the palm of your hand. ALA Mobile was the fastest, easiest way to access important information about the conference directly from your mobile phone by downloading and installing a small application to your phone from a link. Once installed, clicking on the ALA logo allowed selection of ALA 2008 Sessions or ALA 2008 Exhibitors. You could even find local restaurants, hotels and taxis through the ALA mobile. Visitors to the conference also had the opportunity to view the revamped ALA website. The website was being redesigned under the guidance of usability expertise provided by UserWorks. Throughout this process, many stakeholders had opportunities to contribute to the design of a user-centric website which will serve the organisation, its members, and non-members as well. Two 15 minute presentations were made in the Membership Pavilion in the Exhibits Hall.

Also new was the Conference Materials Wiki. Program presenters were invited to post their materials (slides, handouts, bibliographies, etc) to the Wiki prior to the conference. Those who wished to retain their materials on another site were encouraged to provide links to that content on the Conference Materials Wiki. Attendees had the benefit of instant access to material, while those who could not attend the conference were assured of having a place to find conference material – not just for this conference but also for the future. See <http://presentations.ala.org/>



ALA President, Lorie Roy, sponsored a Workplace Wellness Fair, informing on how you can implement workplace wellness to your library. The exercise pavilion demonstrated ways to get and stay fit while seated in your chair together with nutrition tips and information on ergonomics and Pilates. There was also a healthy cooking demonstration and exhibitors showing off goods and services that promote workplace wellness. Another aspect of the multi-dimensional wellness focus was staying healthy at this and future conferences. This encompassed physical, environmental, social, spiritual, emotional, intellectual and occupational factors – providing the balance necessary to live one's life to the fullest. For more information on libraries and wellness, visit the "join the Circle of Wellness@ Your Library" website [www.ala-apa.org/wellness](http://www.ala-apa.org/wellness)

Author and actor Jamie Lee Curtis presented the Public Library Association's (PLA) keynote address at the PLA President's program and awards presentation. Jamie Lee Curtis is the author of several children's books. She understands the issues facing children today and every one of her books is designed to make those issues accessible for children and adults. Her book "Big words for little people" released shortly after ALA was designed to empower children to communicate in a grown-ups world with grown-up words.

The conference offered many programs, meetings and social events. However, the comprehensive conference program was designed to help delegates get the most from the conference. The program was broken down into ten tracks:

- (1) Administration and leadership;
- (2) Authors, literature and cultural programming;
- (3) Children and young adults;
- (4) Collection management and technical services;
- (5) Digital information and technologies;
- (6) Career paths and professional development;
- (7) Issues and updates;
- (8) Research;
- (9) Transformation and innovations; and
- (10) User services

Most of these were broken down into sub-tracks.

This was supplemented by a daily publication of *Cognotes*, the official conference newspaper, giving news on events, special features, additions and any changes. Clearly there was plenty to choose from, and again it was hard to choose which conference sessions to attend – even if following a track, constantly there were interesting sessions running at the same time. For those international delegates new to ALA, there was a session right at the beginning of the conference "Librarians' orientation". This provided information about the ALA, its annual conference and about Anaheim. This was a mix of how to get the most from the conference and exhibition, and also some tourist-type information. ALA members provided an overview of the conference, including recommended programs and social activities. There was also "First-time attendee information". ALA divisions and round tables sponsored 101 programs designed to help plan how "to do" the conference based on attendees' type of work or

type of library in which employed. Expert advice was offered on programs to attend, exhibitors to visit, parties to frequent and how to get the most out of the conference. ALA Ambassadors are ALA members who are long time conference-goers. Identified by their name tags, they can advise how to make the most of time at the conference. They staffed the Ambassadors/First Timers Booth in registration.

When it came to which sessions to attend, I was spoilt for choice with so many sessions running at the same time. Rather than follow one particular track, I dipped into various tracks, as some topics arose in many tracks, for example "Research" and "Technology".

The following gives an indication only of the very different types of sessions throughout the conference.

As part of the "State of technology access and funding in US public libraries", speakers shared findings from national studies assessing internet connectivity, internet access and the impact of funding changes on the sustainability of computer services in public libraries. National librarians and researchers on the front lines discussed the following questions and strategies for addressing high-quality public access computing:

- What are the most challenging issues public library staff face in finding and meeting the needs of their communities?
- How are these issues the same or different for rural libraries compared with the suburban or urban counterparts?
- How can regional library co-operatives help?
- How can libraries improve their bandwidth?

A different aspect of technology was the focus of a session on the complexities of digitizing historical newspapers among Native American communities. The problems that plague small communities everywhere were noted, such as physical distance from resources, finding quality IT personnel and finding funding. One example was the *Char-Koosta News* (official newspaper of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Pablo, Mont.), the role of which is for open communication between tribal members and departments, those who have moved away and lost contact with local sources of information and the community at large. On realisation that patrons were frustrated with going through non-indexed newspapers unable to find desired information, an opportunity and key to success was collaboration with the University of Montana's Mansfield Library and receiving an IMLS Native American Enhancement Grant. The University of Montana "wanted it to be the tribe's newspaper, not the University of Montana's", and a special concern for them was adhering to the Tribal Council's request to have their meeting minutes redacted from the *Char-Koosta News*, which had to be done by hand, page by page, resulting in roughly 1,000 redacted pages.

The LAMA Buildings and Equipment Section hosted a session "Ergonomics in libraries: human centres design for library facilities". Judy Village, certified professional ergonomist, spoke to a rapt audience (seated in uncomfortable chairs) about the incorporation of ergonomic principles in library facility design. She said "we take what we know about humans and apply it to design". Libraries are rife with cases where ergonomics could better the environment and reduce injuries by focusing on prevention, as well as increasing well-being, efficiency and productivity. Ergonomists

can help bridge the gap between the needs of planners and those of workers. Ideally a certified ergonomist would enter the scene when the library is talking with architects to see what everyone is able and willing to do. When considering an ergonomic facility the process includes, among other things, understanding how facility design has contributed to injuries, predicting future needs, considering the routine movement of materials, and reviewing the design with prototypes, mock-ups, and user trials. The key for any facility looking for an ergonomic solution is to remember that you are designing for a long time and need to be “fore-thinking”.

Another session from the LAMA section “People spaces in libraries: the community off-line experience” explored high-quality, intriguing spaces found in public libraries. Whilst it might be obvious that people will come if you build a jaw-dropping multi-million-dollar library, the question arises – will they come back? A factor that encourages patrons to return is that “successful libraries integrate quality connections, interesting events and compelling spaces”. Compelling spaces encourage meaningful, delightful, repeatable experiences – the combination that makes people go back to any place they love again. “The connection is almost spiritual, and requires adjusting focus from the virtual library back to the sense of place itself.” The following design elements were suggested to encourage that connection:

- *Shape*. Triangular spaces direct people to a destination. Rectangles pull people through. Circles are tricky – a circle inside a circle provides a sense of enclosure and coziness.
- *Scale*. The size of a space creates expectation. Large spaces encourage impersonal interaction. Small spaces, such as alcoves, encourage interpersonal interaction.
- *Light*. A tapestry of light can be used to make certain spots pop, and create a hierarchy of space.
- *Adaptability*. This gives patrons a sense of control and allows them to “own” the space. Providing task appropriate lighting, movable chairs, partitions, or furniture that can be used to partition space are good options.

To find out what is going to work in a certain community, just ask.

At “Your library, your space: using research to make libraries people friendly”, a panel of public and academic librarians and a space planner discussed how to use qualitative research methods to enhance institutional missions and social dimensions of learning and community. Librarians and architects have traditionally used surveys, demographic information and other quantitative criteria to build functional spaces. This session showed how qualitative methods, such as observation, focus groups and interview, can be deployed successfully to inform renovations and new building design. As planning for new or renovated libraries has changed dramatically during the past decade, design now places users at the centre of planning, and successful libraries must understand how patrons currently use their spaces.

Cataloguing is another topic still undergoing debate. There was no shortage of sage advice – and memorable one-liners – at the session “Ultimate debate on the future of the library catalog”. There were suggestions that most libraries are generations behind technology and need to catch up fast. Stephen Abram asked “what is it we want to create, and how do we get the catalog into a format where it actually succeeds?” For the

most part it was the online catalog and its limitations that drew the most fire from the group. Joseph Janes stressed the importance of connecting people with the resources they want. "What we need is a new set of rules, and we need to come up with them in a deep, thoughtful, and relatively hurried way". Another session "Creating the future of the catalog and cataloging" demonstrated the future with two options – the dodo bird or the extinction model, or the re-tooling model. The following tips were offered to help catalogers take the re-tooling option.

- Consider what you already do, what you need to do, and the training and tools you need to get there.
- Look for support for retraining on many levels.
- Find a new job title. Metadata librarian is a more accurate description of the catalogers role.

The metadata librarian will "shift from creating to managing, improving and distributing the data and their jobs will be absolutely essential".

Much was on offer at the exhibition area (known as The Stacks) – over 1,500 booths, which seemed constantly busy. Exhibit floor pavilions included:

- "Assistive technology pavilion" – this area of the floor featured emerging technology and how to use it to serve more people in your community and serve them better.
- "ALA professional area" – this area housed ALA divisions, roundtables, offices and ALA-affiliated groups.
- "Gaming pavilion" – this is new – part of a full-scale gaming initiative that includes workshops, publications designed to answer the call of librarians who are implementing gaming programs in their libraries – featuring board games, electronic platform companies, furniture and electronic games.
- "Graphic novel pavilion" – the opportunity to meet major graphic novel publishers and to learn all about how to add these books to your library.
- "Green friendly pavilion" – this is new – to showcase products and services to help libraries go green. This was the place to gather the latest information on furniture, signage, lighting, architectural or space planning services and computer recycling.
- "DVD/video pavilion" – this was a showcase of recorded materials for libraries of all types.
- "International pavilion" – multi-lingual and multicultural publications and library materials from publishers around the world.
- "Library school and instruction pavilion" – ALISE institutional members and other schools showcased their valuable LIS educational programs for librarians in this pavilion.
- "Small press/product area" – this small press/product area allowed attendees to get a first look at new and up-comers to the library market, and where independent presses launch their newest titles.

- “Spanish publishers pavilion” – this new pavilion was created for librarians who requested a convenient way to reach both new and established Spanish publishers.
- “Technology pavilion” – this featured the latest products and services designed to increase the efficiency, effectiveness and creativity of today’s libraries.
- “University press pavilion” – this pavilion served as a meeting point for a diverse number of university and research presses.

As usual, there were many author signings continuing throughout the duration of the conference, and plenty of demonstrations. Again this year there was an “Exhibits closing reception” sponsored by ERT. Foods and beverages were on offer together with various prizes for various raffles.

DEMCO donated \$1 for each visitor to their booth to the ALA Scholarship Fund.

The ALA/Proquest CSA Scholarship Bash this year took place at the Disneyland Resort. Delegates were told to grab their “mouse ears” ready for a “magical night”. This event is held to provide scholarships for graduate students in library and information studies.

As usual many vendors offered receptions. Ralph Brennan’s Jazz Kitchen was a popular venue as both Emerald Group Publishing and Ex Libris held receptions there. Blackwell held a reception at the Clarion Hotel. These are just a flavour of the many vendors’ receptions throughout the conference. As usual, OCLC’s “President’s luncheon” was a well attended event.

The reception for international visitors was held at MUZEO, a new museum complex of arts and culture – also the former Anaheim Public Library. As well as regional cuisine, hors d’oeuvres and an open bar, it was a friendly occasion and a wonderful opportunity to network with information professionals from around the world.

As usual the ALA annual conference was a valuable opportunity to meet colleagues and exchange ideas. The ALA 2009 annual conference will be held in Chicago from 9-15 July. Details are on the ALA website <http://www.ala.org>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.