"Becoming Sustainability Leaders: A Professional Development Experience for Librarians" in Focus on Educating for Sustainability: Toolkit for Academic Libraries

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Recommended Citation
Abstract

In this chapter, the author describes her work instructing other library and information professionals during a two-week course on sustainability. The author details the interactions amongst librarians, who are sincerely invested in sustainability-related issues.

Introduction

In January 2013, the Sustainability Studies Librarian at the University of Massachusetts Amherst was invited to teach a two-week online course through Library Juice Academy, which offers professional development workshops for librarians and other library staff. The course, The Sustainability Movement on Campus: Forming a Library Action Plan for Engagement was intended to expand the network of library professionals interested in deepening their role and finding allies in the sustainability movement, particularly in higher education. Others who were eager to jump start their engagement were equally welcome-- for we all learn from one another. To better understand the elusive term “sustainability,” the author considers this definition from The Sustainability Revolution, a book by Andres R. Edward (2005) in which he frames sustainability as, “...
an alternative that supports economic viability and healthy ecosystems by modifying consumption patterns and implementing a more equitable social framework” (p.3).

**Forming a Library Action Plan for Engagement**

The main goal of the course was to empower librarians to explore ways to engage in sustainability activities at their libraries and institutions as well within the library profession. Such activities include areas of teaching, outreach, and collaboration, as well as facilities design and management as seen in Appendix 1.

The course content was not to be received passively but rather, it was offered as a spur for participants to reflect on their roles within the grid of sustainability education. Girding this new cohort with confidence in their leadership potential, this quote from Vaclav Havel was placed at the top of the syllabus: “We must not be afraid of dreaming the seemingly impossible if we want the seemingly impossible to become a reality” (Quotd.org, n.d.).

The course welcomed 12 participants into a guided experience, including seven academic librarians and a paraprofessional, one school librarian, and three library school students. The course commenced with introductions on the forum for Moodle (the course management system). Participants’ subject specialties, mirroring the multi-disciplinary nature of sustainability, spanned a number of disciplines, from poetry, government documents, and life sciences to urban planning, special collections, and mathematics. Four others self-identified as reference or instruction librarians. Many were already involved with library and campus sustainability committees. Beyond sharing their professional backgrounds, participants wrote of their passion for community gardening, raising chickens, biking, volunteering for environmental organizations, making art (as sustainably as possible) and other creative, health-minded, community-related activities. Within the very first day, participants were finding common ground. For instance, one participant mentioned a campus garden project she oversees and another participant responded, saying she had been a leader at the same site years before. Their delight in this connection and continuity was clear. A library school student responded to a string of the posts, “I had no idea Sustainability in libraries was so big on the North/Eastern front, or that it could reach out in so many different areas, and this really inspires me to keep at it, and to keep looking into research, and formulating my own while I work on my MLIS!” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 8, 2013).

In the introduction, participants were asked: “What motivated you to take this course?” Repeatedly, participants wrote of the intersection of their personal
and professional lives. One participant responded: “My investment in sustainability comes into play in my personal life. Like [another participant] and others in the course, I am interested in permaculture. Because I live in the desert, I am especially interested in water harvesting and solar power” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 8, 2013). Another participant reflected: “Having seen how campus and community sustainability programs have made a difference in my life, I’d like to help to contribute so that others can benefit. ... My other motivation is the desire to have my personal interest in sustainability and permaculture not be completely separate from my work life as a special collections librarian, as it is now” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 9, 2013). After hearing the previous response, another participant stated: “I am motivated daily by my student staff workers, who, despite their majors and career goals, hold a social and environmental consciousness that amazes me, and gives me hope for the future” (Anonymous, January 9, 2013).

The websites, related readings, and Facebook page recommendations flew back and forth, flavoring the forum with the communitarian spirit characteristic of sustainability activism. The course got underway with a leadership assessment exercise, in which participants reflected on their individual styles and considered their individual potential for capacity building. Readings (see Appendix 2) were drawn from book chapters, professional and scholarly publications, and reports, all written by and for librarians. Participants also viewed short videos of students’ campus sustainability projects. Along the way, participants were invited to consider their relationships within their libraries and campus networks with their sights on making connections to specific groups (e.g. sustainability-related committees) and people (e.g. sustainability managers).

An early reading assignment, the text of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), framed the course within the context of climate change and higher education. The 650 campus administrators who signed the ACUPCC acknowledge they are, “deeply concerned about the unprecedented scale and speed of global warming and its potential for large-scale, adverse health, social, economic and ecological effects” (ACUPCC, 2006, para. 1). More than an exercise in ethics, administrators are bound to carry out certain actions within two years of signing. This includes developing an institutional action plan for becoming climate neutral, which includes, “Actions to make climate neutrality and sustainability a part of the curriculum and other educational experience for all students” (ACUPCC, para 5). Being familiar with this text helps participants justify their engagement with sustainability issues in the workplace. Since three Canadians were enrolled, the course also touched on the Talloires Declaration, an official statement signed by over 360 university administrators in over 40 countries, including Canada (Talloires, 2001, para. 1).
Both of these administrative statements offer a “green light” for activities once fueled mostly by grassroots efforts.

Day-by-day, participants identified an area to explore for an intended action: Campus, Library Building, Library Outreach, Faculty, Students, and Library Colleagues. The intention included a timeframe for completion: right away, during the next semester, within the year, or an alternative timeframe. Participants were given the option to share their intended actions in the Moodle forum and many took advantage of the opportunity. Reading others’ actions cultivated cross-pollination and inspiration to move forward; “You may have given me another action item! I haven’t seen any cisterns on campus, but I could talk to someone in our sustainability office and see if they have plans to install any” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 10, 2013). Postings were also peppered with comments such as “I’ve been meaning to …” and “I should be…” and “We haven’t started that yet but intend to…” Participants longed to engage sustainability issues but were constrained by time and institutional barriers. At times there were expressions of frustration. For example, “While I found it relatively easy to make changes and get ‘buy in’ in my previous positions, I find it much more difficult to make changes in an academic environment -- there’s a lot of bureaucracy and it is often so difficult to figure out just who (if anyone) is responsible for what on an academic campus” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 11, 2013).

The final part of the course looked at the library profession and potential for advancing sustainability engagement. All were encouraged to join the Sustainability Librarians LinkedIn group, which was launched by Beth Filar Williams, University of North Carolina Greensboro in 2011 and now boasts 270 members. Some mentioned their efforts to persuade ALA to approve the Resolution on Divestment of Holdings in Fossil Fuel Companies and Libraries’ Role in a Peaceful Transition to a Fossil-Free Economy (ALA 2013). The timing of this conversation was perfect as the author was concurrently working with a small group of librarians to initiate a Sustainability Round Table under ALA. The approval process for the Round Table provided more fodder for our course discussion. Some participants stepped up to help promote signing the e-petition (with one continuing to play an active role in planning future activities). Less than two weeks after the culmination of the course, ALA’s Council passed a motion brought by the Committee on Organization to create a Sustainability Round Table (SustainRT), described as, “a forum for ALA members to exchange ideas and concerns regarding sustainability in order to move toward a more equitable, healthy, and economically viable society” (Borman, 2013, para. 3). SustainRT was born!
The course culminated with the submission of a seven-part Action Plan that matched the needs of each participant’s library and institution and suited their comfort levels for professional involvement. In solidarity, the instructor wrote and shared her own Action Plan along with the class as well as offering individual feedback as the course progressed. Intended to be a fluid document, updated and revised over time, the instructor recommended posting the plan prominently in work areas. The course wrapped up with well wishes and obvious connections amongst the cohort such as “Hope to meet you all one day in person...This will be a lifelong passion of mine, so I’m sure we will.” “It is so inspirational to see the wonderful ideas and plans everyone is creating. I am looking forward to the creation of a Sustainability Roundtable where I hope we can meet face to face. Keep up the good work everyone. You are the change.” “It is nice to be enrolled in a class with like-minded folks.” One participant closely echoed the author’s own vision for the future when she wrote, “I hope one day, it [sustainability] will become just as common as eating and exercising, without requiring the word “conscious” anywhere, as it will become a necessary part of daily life!...I guess for now we serve as ambassadors of knowledge and can send these messages out to many in the various other ways that they might understand.”

Conclusions

Besides coming away with a tailored Action Plan, participants had tapped into a group of like-minded library staff and learned about professional forums for support around sustainability projects and ideas. They became aware of opportunities for collaboration within their libraries and institutions as well as acknowledging gaps in funding, communication, and willingness to engage with an eye toward solving these problems.

As for the instructor’s motivation for engaging in the sustainability movement on campus, an anecdote comes to mind. A student group on her campus recently presented a request to the Faculty Senate -- the campus divests from fossil fuel investments. Stating the irony of teaching sustainability while promoting a main culprit of climate change, the students were articulate and clearly impassioned about the topic. However, when questioned about the factual basis of their argument, their response did not instill confidence in their audience. Their citations were randomly selected web sites with little or no evidence-based sources. Librarians are a vital part of the force working to train the next generation of leaders in a globally challenged society. Helping shape students critical thinking skills and guiding them toward reliable resources will go a long way to-
ward their efforts on campus, in their professions, and as citizens advocating for a healthier, more equitable society. Had these students sought the assistance of a librarian, their presentation would likely have been more potent and productive.

The time is running out in May 2013, the planet’s CO2 levels climbed higher than they have been in at least 800,000 years. Perhaps crossing the 400 ppm mark will play a role in awakening the public to the dangers of runaway climate change (Montaigne, 2013, para. 3). There is an urgency underlying the work of librarians to be part of this awakening. Librarians need to be gadflies, support one another as professionals, foster communities of learning, empower the next generation of leaders and envision together so that the seemingly impossible becomes a reality.

References


Appendix 1:

Example of a Seven-part Action Plan

Part One - My Campus

Action(s) I plan to take:
A. Check on current status of Sustainability Committee
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
   B. Arrange for a joint announcement of our Sustainability Research Guide from the Library and the Office of Sustainability in the University’s weekly email newsletter.
   By when: right away/spring 2013/within the year/other:

Part Two - My Library - Building

Action(s) I plan to take:
A. Share ideas from Greening Libraries book with Facilities Department
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
   B. Discuss forming a library green team
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
   C. Add “Turn me off” stickers to lights and computers throughout our buildings. Deploy members of our Green Team to attach the stickers in both public and staff areas.
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:

Part Three - My Library - Outreach

Action(s) I plan to take:
A. Continue development of Sustainability Libguide and promote it to faculty
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
   B. Propose an exhibition for Earth Day 2013 highlighting books, DVDs, databases, and the Sustainability Research Guide.
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
Part Four - My Colleagues (librarians and other staff at our library)

Action(s) I plan to take:
A. Raise green issues at each staff meeting
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
B. Our collection development with regard to sustainability collections is a bit all over the place right now…In addition to the Environmental and Agricultural Studies librarians, I will invite other librarians to the table: Architecture, Civil Engineering, Transportation Engineering, Physical Geography, Sociology, Philosophy, and Anthropology.
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:

Part Five- My Faculty

Action(s) I plan to take:
A. Inquire whether faculty training is planned and offer support in the form of library services.
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other: summer 2013
B. Find out if my campus has developed Learning Outcomes for sustainability curricula.
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other: summer 2013

Part Six - My Students

Action(s) I plan to take:
A. Suggest service learning opportunities in the Library, in collaboration with the Office of Sustainability. Ideally these opportunities would align with curriculum, be interdisciplinary, and bring faculty onboard as well. For instance, a design competition tied to sustainability and library space or perhaps a waste audit.
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other: within the next couple of years

Part Seven - My Library Associations and Professional Networks

Action(s) I plan to take:
A. Campaign for ALA to disinvest from fossil fuel stocks
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
B. Be a more active member of the Sustainability Librarians LinkedIn Group
   By when: right away / spring 2013 / within the year/ other:
Appendix 2

Selected course readings


