

PROJECT UPDATE: EXPLORING WAYS TO INCORPORATE NEW ONLINE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES INTO THE TRIBAL COLLEGE LIBRARIANS INSTITUTE

Loriene Roy^{1,*} & Mary Anne Hansen²

¹ Professor, University of Texas at Austin School of Information, Austin, Texas, USA

² Professor and Research Services Librarian, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana, USA

* Address all correspondence to: Dr. Loriene Roy, Professor, University of Texas at Austin School of Information, Austin, Texas, USA, E-mail: loriene@ischool.utexas.edu

Abstract

For nearly 30 years, the Tribal College Librarians Institute (TCLI) has provided an opportunity for librarians working at tribal colleges in the United States to network. During these week long events they share updates on their services and learn from educators, subject specialists, and each other. While these experiences are valued by the attendees, this unique professional librarian community is seeking ways to extend their connections, communication, and learning opportunities beyond the face-to-face annual gathering and their electronic discussion list. This article summarizes the goals and past practices of the TCLI as well as new plans to utilize online learning technologies to enhance the TCLI's reach and impact.

KEY WORDS: tribal college librarians, indigenous librarians, tribal communities, professional development, online community of practice

1. INTRODUCTION

The first tribal college was founded in 1968 as Navajo Community College. Now known as Diné College, this higher education institution has two campuses, one in northeastern Arizona and one in northwestern New Mexico. The number of tribal colleges has expanded since the late 1960s: the nonprofit American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) lists among its members 37 tribal colleges (or developing tribal colleges) in 14 states (AIHEC, 2018). The early beginnings of an annual professional development gathering for librarians at tribal colleges began around 1989. Librarians at several of Montana's tribal

colleges reached out to the library of the state's land grant university, Montana State University (MSU), for assistance in integrating computers, email, and other technologies into their library functions. MSU hosted the Tribal College Librarians electronic discussion list (TCLIB-L) discussion list, which has evolved into a deeply embedded online tool that plays an integral role in connecting the tribal college librarians as a community of practitioners in between the yearly Tribal College Librarians Institute (TCLI) meetings. The discussion list was innovative in its early days and continues to be a valuable resource.

The push for tribal college libraries' incorporation of more cutting-edge technologies, while needed, must be viewed within the context of local human and technological capacity. Thus, online innovations that might be implemented in some learning environments in urban or non-reservation rural areas might be unattainable at tribal colleges. Technology that is dependent on high-speed internet access will be largely unavailable in Indian country where one-third of people lack access to broadband (FCC, 2018), a figure that the U.S. Census now estimates to be one-half of Native peoples residing on tribal lands (U.S. Census, 2018; Wang, 2018). If access to resources in tribal communities does not match the assumption that innovation is driven by technology, tribal college environments bring innovation of a different sort: an indigenous ecology or world view. Thus, learning in tribal settings is community based and shares, “a reflective process of seeing the world” stemming from a specific tribal community's history, language, philosophy, and spiritual foundation (Roy, 2015).

The TCLI has an ongoing valuable role in the online engagement among this unique community of practice. According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), a community of practice is a group that shares an interest, engages with each other, and, furthers the community's interest and learning. Through its communal interest in tribal college libraries, efforts to stay connected, interest in sharing and collaborating to advance its own learning, and the services it provides to tribal communities, the TCLI does indeed provide a means for its members to flourish as a community of practice.

This paper covers the history of the TCLI and then frames its structure on the model of the three elements of a community of practice: the domain, the community, and the practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). It discusses the accomplishments—and challenges—of the TCLI as an online learning community and also the impact of the presence of the TCLI. Finally, the article concludes with suggestions for TCLI's future that might incorporate more online learning tools and experiences.

2. HISTORY OF THE TCLI

In 1990, MSU Professor Emerita Kathy Kaya responded to the inquiry from a handful of tribal college librarians in Montana about coordinating an in-person gathering to advance

their professional development. That small gathering expanded the next year to include most of the librarians serving in Montana's seven tribal colleges along with a few tribal college librarians from Washington State. At this second meeting, the librarians unanimously agreed that this intimate professional development event, tailored to their needs, should be continued, and thus the Tribal College Librarians Professional Development Institute was born.

2.1 TCLI as a Community of Practice: The Domain

Tribal colleges have grown and multiplied from their early beginnings on the Navajo Reservation to institutions now operating in 16 states. Enrollment statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics show that tribal colleges in 2012 had a combined enrollment of 18,881 students and awarded 1,240 two-year or associate's degrees and 284 bachelor's degrees. Some three-fourths (78%) of these students were American Indian or Alaska Native (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

The libraries at tribal colleges are often dual-purpose, joint-use facilities, functioning not only as academic libraries but also as tribal community/public libraries, school libraries, and/or tribal archives. Tribal college library staff must balance responding to the research and information needs of their campus constituents while also meeting the needs of their greater communities. In addition to research assistance and information literacy instruction, their work includes developing and sustaining such services as after school and summer reading programs and intergenerational cultural programming, including Native language and traditional arts opportunities. Tribal college libraries provide not only a learning and social commons space but also a place where their community members can learn and share Native language instruction and learning and share cultural practices such as creating beadwork and traditional clothing, drum circles, and stick games (competitive games).

Tribal college libraries, like most institutions of higher education today, face financial constraints. Some of the tribal college libraries may have only one or two staff members, adding to the professional stressors of a small number of librarians having to do most or all functions of running a library. Additionally, TCLI coordinators have reported a fairly high turnover rate of librarians at the tribal colleges over the history of the institute. Tribal communities, in general, continue to face great challenges with regard to digital inclusion. These technological challenges can be amplified for tribal college librarians, since they are often the public face of the only publicly accessible facility for tribal residents to access various technologies. For example, at many geographically isolated tribal colleges, patrons will sit near the library in their cars to gain Wi-Fi access, long after the library has closed for the day, since many tribal members lack internet access in their own homes.

2.2 TCLI as a Community of Practice: The Community

Invitations to attend TCLI are extended to all library staff working at tribal college libraries, although working at an AIHEC-affiliated tribal college is not a prerequisite for attending TCLI.

Who are the tribal college librarians? Many, but not all, of the TCLI participants are Native. Each person has his/her own story of how he/she came to work in libraries in Indian country, but they all share common issues and challenges in serving their indigenous communities. Many are isolated professionally and geographically with few opportunities for professional development and education. Professional training and experience among these library staff members are varied; as is common among rural libraries of all kinds; many of the library directors and their staff have not had the opportunity to earn a master's degree in library and information science. These librarians acquire most of their work-related skills on the job. Without formal academic preparation, they often have less grounding in the background and theory of the profession than their degreed peers.

Some indigenous tribal college librarians are rising to the role of leaders and mentors among their peers. For example, the American Library Association recently recognized three “Emerging Leaders” of national distinction from among the Native TCLI participants—Aaron LaFromboise (Blackfeet Community College), Joy Bridwell (Stone Child College), and Rhiannon Sorrell (Diné College) (American Library Association Emerging Leaders Program, 2018). LaFromboise also served as an officer for the American Indian Library Association as well as being on the board of the Montana Library Association boards and a Chair and member of the Montana State Library Commission. These librarians were recognized as Emerging Leaders in part because they are tribal members who work and serve in their respective tribal communities. In addition, Bridwell was a recipient of a 2018 “I Love My Librarian Award” (ALA, 2018) and both Bridwell and LaFromboise worked in their tribal college libraries while completing online degrees. Additionally, all three are active in the American Indian Library Association, an ethnic library association affiliated with the American Library Association. These three tribal librarians have established themselves as leaders and role models, not only in their local communities but also at the national level.

Since TCLI was founded in 1990, coordinators have relied heavily on American Indian librarians serving in an advisory capacity since none of the TCLI coordinators are Native. The longest-running TCLI advisor is Dr. Loriene Roy, Professor at the University of Texas-Austin School of Information. Dr. Roy is Anishinabe, enrolled on the White Earth Reservation, and a member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. TCLI coordinators increasingly are enlisting Native tribal college librarians to advise them on both

professional and cultural programming at the annual meetings in recognition of the need for a Native librarian lens in annual programming.

2.3 TCLI as a Community of Practice: The Practice

The TCLI gathering provides four and a half days annually of educational and cultural programming relevant to indigenous peoples, tribal colleges, and particularly the professional needs of tribal college librarians. The format of early TCLIs consisted mainly of outside experts sharing their knowledge and expertise. Over time, the agenda has evolved to be more of a forum with the tribal college librarians presenting to each other on topics including their innovations in library services, teaching, cultural programming, and outreach. While initially a face-to-face gathering of this tight-knit community of like librarians, in recent years, TCLI's coordinators have included practitioners who are not otherwise able to attend and present in person through virtual means.

Each year, TCLI coordinators strive to create a balanced mix of topics from basic librarianship to the latest trends and developments in the field, while also and most importantly addressing cultural needs and concerns that are important in the respective tribal communities. This focus on cultural needs and competencies is essential because, even today, about one-half of the librarians are non-Native, and thus there is an ongoing need for developing cultural sensitivity and awareness. While the 2001 report from the American Indian Higher Education Consortium reports that non-Native employees are as equally respected at tribal colleges as Native employees, nonetheless, they are strongly encouraged to learn as much as possible about local traditions and values (AIHEC, 2001, p. 26). Most importantly, a formal gathering for librarians serving indigenous communities, many of whom are indigenous themselves, would not be authentic if it did not include a focus on cultural foundations first and foremost, including cultural greetings/blessings during the TCLI openings and closings.

Valuable group problem solving happens during the institute meeting each year: during "burning issues" sessions, the attendees introduce themselves, noting their current status of service at their library, and are given the opportunity to present a challenge for group discussion and individual counseling and advice. In addition, outside presenters provide updates on services and resources, especially those provided by federal agencies. A Bozeman Public Library's book discussion group collaborates with TCLI attendees, selecting a book that might interest them and hosting a discussion over an evening meal. New knowledge and skills are gained through multiple agenda activities. TCLI has traditionally featured outside guest speakers with expertise in an area identified by the tribal college librarians in the annual institute evaluations, as well as through the TCLIB-L listserv and direct communications with TCLI coordinators. Particularly important are the

indigenous librarians who serve as role models and even enter into mentoring relationships with some of the participants.

Past program topics have included information literacy, summer reading program ideas, intergenerational programs that incorporate Native culture and traditional arts, Code Talkers, the American Indian Movement, American Indian health information, succession planning, and the latest projects and trends in library science programs, typically presented by current library science students. The programs that participants have found the most beneficial over the years, according to their comments on the annual evaluations, are those programs presented by TCLI participants on their efforts and projects they are working on in their tribal libraries, such as information literacy; digitization; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs; and accreditation. Additionally, the work of Dr. Roy and her graduate students (and alumni) at the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin is shared. Dr. Roy presents updates on new opportunities, events, and her latest work, often with her students as co-presenters, at most TCLI gatherings at the request of the TCLI participants. They share news of forthcoming events of interest such as the International Indigenous Librarians Forum and the European Conference on Information Literacy. They also provide details of new initiatives offered by organizations such as the American Library Association, Libraries Without Borders, and SongwritingWith:Soldiers. The work of Dr. Roy and her students typically includes collaborations with tribal college librarians throughout the academic year to create pathfinders and/or LibGuides, redesign websites, and administer surveys to gather needed information.

Tribal college librarians are contributing more of the TCLI programming. They present talks and poster sessions on such practices as Native language cataloging, using a controlled vocabulary relevant to the respective language(s) spoken in the tribal community; indigenized information literacy instruction; intergenerational cultural programming; and digitization of cultural materials such as audio tapes of community elders. These collaborative practices not only provide a more authentic professional development experience for the tribal college librarians; they also help the MSU Library to fulfill MSU's land grant mission of engagement with the first citizens of Montana and beyond. TCLI has become a true partnership among many voices shaping each gathering, going far beyond MSU librarians merely providing one-directional outreach.

2.4 TCLI as an Online Learning Community: Accomplishments and Challenges

The need for continuing education in new technologies, including, at that time, email and ftp, brought these unique librarians together almost 30 years ago. The introduction of email

extended TCLI's reach and impact online. The TCLIB-L discussion list maintained by the MSU Library cements a sense of community among them and provides a forum for ongoing conversations and group problem solving. The TCLIB discussion list is the year-round asynchronous online venue where essential professional conversations and connections continue beyond the week-long face-to-face gathering each June.

The power of being together extends throughout the year through the TCLIB discussion list. While TCLI coordinators moderate the list, they recognize their role as facilitators, not tribal college library experts; therein lies the power of this ongoing online community of practice made possible by the discussion list. Tribal college librarians know and understand their unique world of librarianship better than anyone else and this knowledge enables effective peer-to-peer problem solving and continuing education. The online connections also motivate the tribal college librarians to attend the annual institute to meet their colleagues who have shared expertise and experiences through the discussion list. There, tribal librarians not only learn about library issues and skills, but more importantly they share their stories and support and educate each other about their successes and challenges. This heightens the collective expertise of the group. Once they leave the TCLI, the TCLIB discussion list serves a vital role in continuing these conversations while also keeping those who were not able to attend an annual gathering abreast of issues and efforts going on at their peer institutions. The TCLI would not flourish without the online discussion list: conversations that happen online throughout the year largely inform the content presented and shared at the annual gatherings. Additionally, the online discussion list would not flourish as a community of practitioners without the annual meeting. This intimate event is a catalyst for deep, long-lasting friendships among tribal college librarians, regardless of the number of miles in between them. Furthermore, the trust and friendships they establish make it easier for the librarians to tap their colleagues through the discussion list for help with issues, such as those having to do with daily practice, or to share successes. They have sought advice on topics such as the following:

- How do you handle unattended, underage children in libraries?
- How do you deal with users who have extensive fines and/or numerous items overdue?
- How are security issues addressed?
- What budgetary collection development decisions affect your job?
- How does consortial purchasing work?
- Which after school and summer programming ideas draw the greatest number of participants?

- How can we nurture relationships with instructors and administration to build support for the library?
- What are some books about water (or any subject) by Native authors?
- How are librarians handling historically inaccurate books, including weeding or retaining such materials for educational reasons?

3. “YOUR FACE IS SEEN”: THE IMPACT OF A NETWORK OF LIBRARIANS SERVING TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

From annual institute evaluations, as well as anecdotal evidence, TCLI coordinators have found that this annual gathering helps facilitate the acculturation of many librarians who are new to tribal college libraries, often contributing to their longevity and even influencing them to pursue graduate library science degrees. TCLI speakers are also introduced to the career opportunities of working as information professionals at tribal colleges, resulting in at least one speaker finding a new position as a tribal college library director. This personal affirmation not only helps individuals find and seek meaning through work and education, it also reinforces the power of coming together in the same space.

Dr. Lorie Roy, in describing her experiences at the 2008 International Indigenous Librarians Forum to TCLI Lead Coordinator Mary Anne Hansen, noted the integral power of coming together, using the term *he kanohi i kitea*, or “your face will be seen,” a term shared with her by Maori librarians at this gathering (personal communication, June 2009; Mead, 2003). This notion of the personal responsibility of attending important events has become the overarching ethos and annual goal of TCLI: to bring the tribal college librarians face to face so that they can share their stories and continue building the strength of their collective network.

TCLI participant evaluations over the years have been overwhelmingly positive. Participants overall have found most programs to be relevant and useful and they unanimously agree that each institute meets, if not exceeds, professional development needs, and more importantly their networking needs. Participants regard the institute as a unique opportunity to meet with other librarians doing very similar work; librarians they can closely relate to since they understand each other's situations. Annual evaluations are anonymous, giving participants the opportunity not only to share what was valuable to them each year, but also the opportunity to safely share ideas for improving the institute, as well as recommending future programs and presenters. Participants also use the listserv or direct contact with coordinators throughout the year to suggest programs and presenters. Gathering participants' suggestions and input about all aspects of the institute, both anonymously and through other means, contributes to the authenticity of TCLI being

“their” annual gathering. Many TCLI participants have come to regard this as “the meeting” they will attend each year because they have found that no other professional gathering addresses the specific needs of tribal college librarians as well as the institute. Long-lasting friendships have also developed among many of the participants over the years. In short, given the lack of information shared about tribal libraries at other professional meetings and given the low level of financial support available to tribal librarians for continuous education, TCLI is a vital and essential learning commons. This need is especially noted since professional library and information conferences rarely have content on this topic, and even attendees at the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (2018) often report that few programs are tailored specially for tribal college librarians.

4. GOING FORWARD TO INCORPORATE MORE ONLINE LEARNING TOOLS AND EXPERIENCES IN THE TCLI

Intentional and proactive collaborative practices are integral to indigenous librarians across the globe (Roy, 2007). It is of the utmost importance for tribal librarians to seek each other out to share information, establish contacts, and deliberate. Regional, national, and even international organizations exist that further these communications (Roy, 2007). TCLI serves as the international professional development gathering tailored for and with librarians serving the needs of college students and faculty in tribal communities. Its power is in providing the platform for these librarians to come face to face from their often isolated communities. The strength of TCLI comes from the collective; in other words, the value of TCLI stems from the work of the tribal college librarians themselves. Their voices and needs drive the programming. Native librarians, serving in an advisory capacity to TCLI coordinators, help shape the agenda each year based on a list of suggested programming from the collective.

TCLI programming for at least the next three years will include a focus on serving the needs of veterans and their families. Presenters will be identified among the tribal college librarians who are tailoring services and resources to veterans, along with other experts serving the library and information needs of veterans. More importantly, the emphasis on programming, in addition to services for veterans, will include programs presented by tribal college librarians. Dr. Roy will be invited to future TCLI gatherings to provide progress reports on her project to recruit more veterans into library science programs, as well as any other efforts she and her students are involved in with regard to providing services to veterans and military families. TCLI participants will also be tapped to contribute programs on any services or resources they are providing to veterans as well. This has been a long-standing practice of TCLI programming, but it has become clear to TCLI coordinators that the most important programs come from the TCLI membership.

Going forward, TCLI coordinators and advisors will also explore innovative uses of technology to expand program offerings and participation. It was the common need among tribal college librarians to learn new technologies (initially, how to use email) that was the original seed that created TCLI. It was the technology of email (specifically, the creation of a discussion list over email) that enabled the growth and nurturing of a community of practice among tribal college librarians. This discussion list continues to bind the community of practice into its third decade of existence. While the discussion list will remain a core means for connecting tribal college library practitioners, TCLI coordinators are exploring the use of other technologies. For example, some TCLI attendees now post information and updates on the TCLI Facebook page.

Over the past few years, TCLI has used web conferencing to bring in external speakers from a distance. Feedback from many of the tribal college librarians indicates that this is an effective method for integrating more outside expert presenters and collaborative partners at a distance who would not otherwise be able to travel to the institute. Additionally, TCLI planners will investigate live streaming of annual TCLI programs in order to share the content in real time with tribal college librarians who are unable to make the journey to meet face to face during the institute meeting. TCLI coordinators, presenters, as well as some participants have also shared via the listserv opportunities for free professional development webinars and online tutorials. TCLI coordinators will also explore additional online learning opportunities, with a goal of integrating year-round synchronous online contributions from the tribal college librarians. Such efforts could extend the value of face-to-face connections and familiarity into the online environment. Such efforts likely will include the recording and archiving of webinars as ongoing professional development resources for the tribal college librarians, building their capacity as a community to continue sharing and learning together while still observing the advice that “your face will be seen.”

The most hopeful change in tribal college library settings is the arrival of a new generation of tribal librarians. These are younger tribal members who are no longer employed as library assistants, but instead are serving as directors of tribal college libraries. They have completed the professional requirements, including master's degrees from programs accredited by the American Library Association, and often are in national leadership roles within professional associations. They have the potential to transform the services and community presence of their tribal college libraries while retaining their cultural perspectives. Since these employees are from the local tribal community, they are less likely to leave the area, thus reducing staff turnover. These younger, new professionals will likely be the strongest advocates for the arrival of next-generation technologies. This demographic change offers a new direction for tribal college libraries, where staff members

more closely represent the patrons they serve and are amenable and capable of incorporating new technologies and services that support tribal culture.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Washington, DC (Grants RE-95-18-0007-18; RE-06-14-0020-14; and RE-06-09-0100-09).

REFERENCES

American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) (2001), *Building Strong Communities: Tribal Colleges as Engaged Institutions*, Alexandria, VA: American Indian Higher Education Consortium. Retrieved November 15, 2018, from <http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/buildingstrongcommunities.pdf>.

American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) (2018). Retrieved September 22, 2018, from <http://www.aihec.org>.

American Library Association (ALA) (2018), Joy Bridwell Chosen for 2018 I Love My Librarian Award. Retrieved December 21, 2018, from <http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2018/12/joy-bridwell-chosen-2018-i-love-my-librarian-award>.

American Library Association Emerging Leaders Program (2018), Emerging Leaders Program. Retrieved September 20, 2018, from <http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/leadership/emergingleaders>.

Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (2018). Retrieved September 22, 2018, from <http://www.atalm.org>.

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (2018), FCC Releases 2018 Broadband Deployment Report. Retrieved December 21, 2018, from <https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-releases-2018-broadband-deployment-report>.

Mead, H.M. (2003), *Tikanga Maori: Living by Maori Values*, Wellington, New Zealand: Huia Publishers.

National Center for Education Statistics (2014), *Digest of Education Statistics. Fall Enrollment and Degrees Conferred in Degree-Granting Tribally Controlled Postsecondary Institutions, by State and Institution: Selected Years, Fall 2000 through Fall 2013, and 2011-12 and 2012-13*. Retrieved December 21, 2018, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_312.50.asp.

Roy, L. (2007), *Indigenous Libraries and Innovative Multicultural Services*, *Proc. of IFLA Int. Conf. on Innovative Multicultural Library Services for All*, Pretoria, August 15–17. Retrieved September 19, 2018, from http://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~loriene/prez_elect/media/publications/IFLA-keynote-lorieneroy.pdf.

Roy, L. (2015), Advancing an Indigenous Ecology within LIS Education, *Library Trends*, vol. **64**, no. 2, pp. 384–414.

United States Census (2018), Five-Year Trends Available for Median Household Income, Poverty Rates and Computer and Internet Use. Retrieved December 21, 2018, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/2013-2017-acs-5year.html>.

Wang, H.L. (2018), Native Americans on Tribal Land are 'The Least Connected' to High-Speed Internet. Retrieved December 21, 2018, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/06/673364305/native-americans-on-tribal-land-are-the-least-connected-to-high-speed-internet>.

Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015), Introduction to Communities of Practice. Retrieved December 21, 2018, from <https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>.