



Building Communities with Large Group Methods and Social Media

Two trends can help public libraries be a dream space where the public can learn new things, share ideas, meet new people and feel connected to the community.

1. Online tools like Facebook and Twitter are enabling individuals both to organize public gatherings easily and to participate in public discussions on the Internet.
2. Communities are finding easy ways to facilitate large groups of people to discuss matters of local importance. The methods of facilitation are called “Large Group Methods” (LGMs). The meetings themselves are “unconferences” or “camps.”

While libraries, especially public ones, have always been places for learning and connecting, social media and LGMs have the ability to enrich a community’s experience of a library. With only a little bit of planning, libraries have a great opportunity to show themselves as true community engagement centres, blending the best in available technology with positive experiences for patrons of all shapes and sizes.

Libraries in the 21st century need to open doors for communities to decide themselves what their needs are and how best to address them. This engagement process differs from many traditional practices. Literacy courses and tutoring programs involve learning largely chosen by an expert. Storytime and puppet shows are primarily performances put on by library staff. Other programs involve expert panels, facilitators and instructors as well.

Not everyone wants to learn on someone else’s agenda. Traditional practices require pre-work to choose and promote a program that best matches a community’s needs. With reduced funding available to libraries, and increased diversity of community needs, libraries need new ways to address learning needs. Both social media and LGMs offer an alternative to these traditional practices.

Case study: Podcamp Halifax

During an informal gathering of social media enthusiasts, an agent of a marketing firm suggested that a group of people get together to organize a podcamp in Halifax, Nova Scotia. A podcamp is an informal gathering that uses an LGM to facilitate learning about social media and podcasting.

Podcamp Halifax chose a method called Open Space Technology (OST) to facilitate its event. With OST, the participants choose what sessions are to be created at the beginning of the meeting. But once it was confirmed that Podcamp Halifax was going to happen here at the Alderney Gate Library in Dartmouth, the organizing team decided that we could facilitate Podcamp Halifax using a free PBworks wiki.

When our library simply promoted the wiki with a few tweets, the public filled the wiki with presentation proposals on a variety of topics ranging from geolocation (in both French and English) to *How to Unfriend Someone on Facebook*. With hardly any effort, a program covering a wide range of needs was developed and promoted to the local community. When all was said and done, the first Podcamp Halifax had 176 attendees participating in 22 sessions throughout the day. Andrew Baron, owner of the popular Rocketboom and Mag.ma websites, was the keynote speaker. The #podcampfx Twitter tag “trended” was one of the most used tags for the day. A small effort led by the community and supported by the library had caused a stir. The following year, Podcamp Halifax sold out a month early and had 200 participants for 21 sessions.

Podcamp Halifax also had an immense community impact. Many participants at Podcamp went on to organize their own gatherings. One member started his own networking group for small businesses in Dartmouth called DartNet. Many of the women who attended Podcamp Halifax also went on to participate in a group for women on Twitter called Halifax Chicks. Some fans of sushi started a group called Twushi. Podcamp Halifax was not only an event where people of like minds could meet, it was also a way of inspiring the community to help address its own needs using the breadth of knowledge it already possessed.

Opportunities for libraries

Anyone who has done programming may be asking themselves such questions as “How did we ensure the quality of the speakers?” “What about personal agendas?” “What if people get offended by the content?” While a

tutorial on LGMs is beyond the scope of this article, each method offers a way of empowering the participants to address these concerns by themselves. For example, Open Space Technology applies something called “The Law of Two Feet.” This law says that anyone who finds themselves in a place where they are neither learning from nor contributing to a discussion should use their two feet to move to a place where they are learning and/or contributing. In other words, rather than passively accepting knowledge from the library, the community takes responsibility for its own learning – all the library does is provide space, ensure freedom of movement, and reinforce (through facilitation and/or support staff) community values.

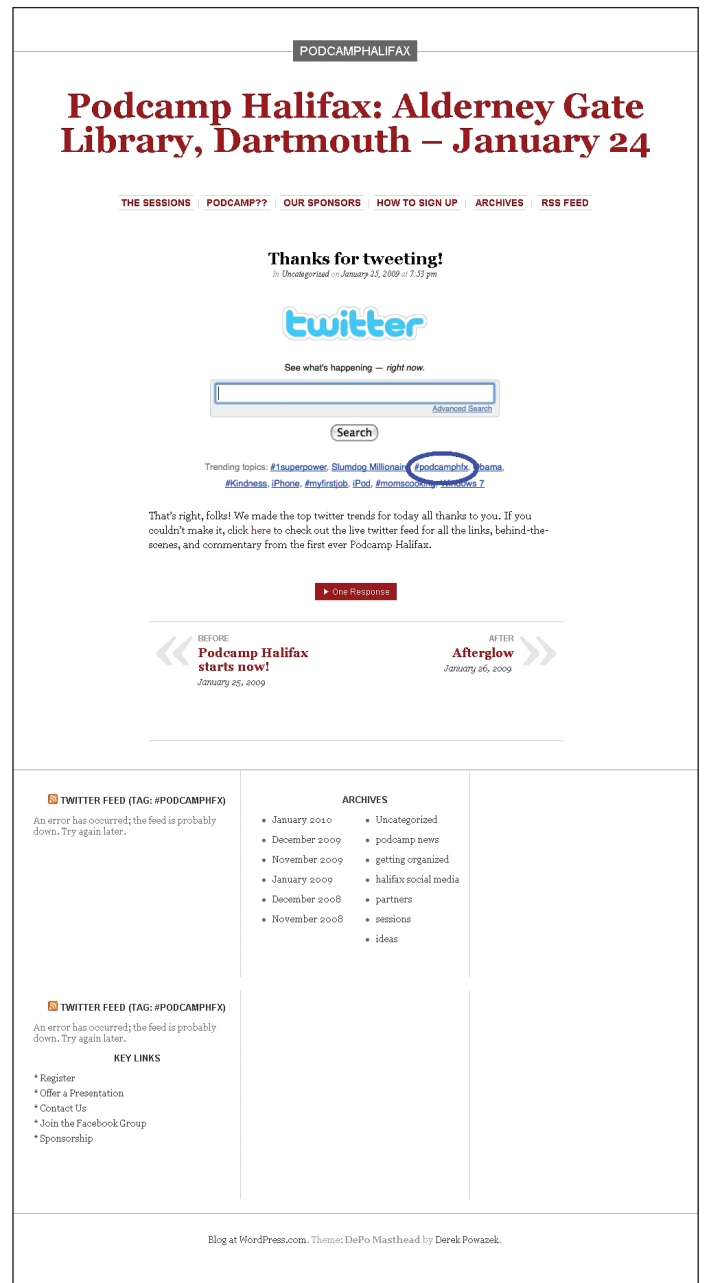
Podcamp Halifax is only one example of how a library can use a combination of Large Group Methods and social media together to create an engaged community. While some libraries may feel they are too small or under-resourced to organize a podcamp, there is a variety of things that any library can do to increase community participation in their own learning.

Acknowledge bloggers, Twitterers and podcasters

Putting resources into creating a podcast for traditional programs is a great idea, but not always necessary. Simply reminding people in a program to use a Twitter tag can greatly enhance a learning experience for participants who cannot make it to a program. When reminded, Twitter users will comment on events using their Twitter account, helping others to get an idea of the program and what is being offered. Inviting bloggers, videographers, podcasters and photographers to record what happened can offer another opportunity to share learning with a much broader audience. Needless to say, this means letting everyone in the room know, prior to the program, that pictures will be taken, and allowing cell phone use in the library. Many advocates of social media in libraries emphasize social tools, but opening the door for communities to use those tools freely can be just as, if not more, effective in promoting library programs.

Host a Large Group discussion

Podcamps, change camps, book camps, hackathons and even library camps are all great opportunities to invite communities to gather and share ideas. Libraries provide basic needs such as access to printers, writing utensils, breakout space, whiteboards, wireless access and bulletin boards – leaving the unconference planners with plenty of time to work on the important things, like planning a great unconference experience. Some method of facilitation is



Caption??????

also required. While Open Space Technology is the most popular method of hosting an unconference, there is a variety of other methods that work equally well. Public librarians would be wise to familiarize themselves with at least one LGM.


Participate in Large Group discussions

Encouraging librarians to participate in unconferences is another way to make sure the library is seen as an important community player. Unconferences exist on all kinds of topics. Book camp is an unconference about books.

Popular Large Group Facilitation Methods

Method	Good For	How It Works	Upside	Downside
World Café	Uncovering community knowledge	People respond or react to posed questions in small groups (café tables) and mix-and-match to share ideas and thoughts	Great for networking with a diverse group of people. Enables people to be honest and open with each other.	Needs well-thought-out and inspiring questions to be effective. Can be time-consuming to set up. Collects broad community themes rather than creative or unique ideas.
Open Space	Sharing ideas	Interested participants are invited to host a discussion by filling in a chart with their topic. Others choose their favoured discussions and use “The Law of Two Feet” (go where you are learning) if a talk is not for them.	Often results in new ideas, activities and business opportunities	Not good for resolving particular issues or conflicts. Participants are not likely to stay on topic.
Talking Stick/ Circles	Resolving community conflicts	Participants sit in a circle and a stick or other object is passed around as a way to permit people to speak.	Enables the sharing of emotions. Often promotes frank discussion of difficult topics	Can be perceived as too “touchy feely” for some. Has a slower pace than other methods.
Fishbowl Conversation	Engaging a large group of people on a single topic.	Four to five chairs are separated from the audience, with one vacant chair for anyone in the audience to join in.	Great for involving the audience in traditional presentations.	A little like musical chairs. Can take some time to get the discussion rolling.

Change camp is a conference on encouraging political engagement among citizens. Justice workers use a series of Large Group Methods they call Restorative Processes to prevent crime and deal with the damage caused to communities because of crime.¹ Public librarians sharing what they know outside the library can be a great way to assert how important libraries are to communities.

Engaging a public is less about using a bunch of tools and more about reminding patrons that they have the freedom to express themselves and to learn. Of course, a good part of that freedom comes from supporting a public library system that stays on top of the most important community trends. And when patrons are tired of being engaged, their library also has a huge collection of great books, friendly staff and good old-fashioned puppet shows to keep them entertained. 

Note

1. For further information on restorative processes, visit Restorative Justice Online (www.restorativejustice.org/). While emphasis is on the formal Restorative Justice conference (see www.justice.gc.ca/eng/pi/pcvi-cpcv/res-rep.html) intended to deal with crimes after they have been committed, Restorative processes can also include employing LGMs to prevent crime.

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