

Expanding the librarian camp-craft and skill set: Boot Camps for science and health librarians

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Abstract

Over the past decade, “Boot Camps” have become popular among research librarians as an alternative to traditional professional development venues, such as conferences. Boot Camps provide an intense immersion on current topics of interest as well as an opportunity for onsite learning in the presence of faculty, researchers, students, and other library patrons.

Key words: professional development; professional meetings and conferences; library science/education.

Origin of the term “Boot Camp”

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “Boot Camp” is an American slang expression originating in the 1940s in reference to new inductees (“boots”) in the US Marines and other branches of the armed forces. Boot Camps initially referred to a short, rigorous, and highly disciplined training course, typically held outdoors and in Spartan surroundings, and designed to prepare new recruits (most of whom routinely wore boots while in training) for military service. During subsequent decades, the term came to be applied to any type of intense educational or training event of either a military or a civilian nature (sometimes with a correctional or penal focus). More recently, Boot Camps have been associated with intensely-focused educational and professional development workshops or programs that run for a few consecutive days. Nowadays Boot Camps also apply to virtual events but the Boot Camps described here draw more on the original definition of camps as being conducted in a real-time, physical environment.

The librarian Boot Camp model

While librarian Boot Camps assume a variety of formats, they typically share characteristics that distinguish them from other types of professional development events.

In terms of length and venue, Boot Camps can be single or multi-day events. They welcome participants from around the world but often focus on potential attendees within a specific geographic region and seek to maximize the use of local resources, whether facilities or presenters. Most are organized by academic research libraries and affiliated organizations rather than by professional associations, commercial publishers, or conference planners. They usually are not hosted at independent conference or convention centers but rather at college or university campuses, making use of the host’s libraries, classrooms, laboratories, and other spaces. For multi-day camps, participants often stay in student dormitories (although a list of nearby hotels and motels may be provided for attendees seeking more luxurious accommodations). Meals and coffee breaks are included, with dinner accompanied by games or musical performances by participating librarians. Attendees eschew suits and formal work gear in favor of jeans and other casual clothing, including sometimes sturdy boots. The goal is to provide a casual and collegial yet focused environment for learning and exchanging ideas.

Because of their on-site nature, Boot Camps can easily tap into institutions’ facilities and staff. Academic deans, provosts, and faculty are on-hand to provide open remarks, presentations, and demonstrations or tours of their research spaces.

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Students can present their research and demonstrate what they have learned in their course work. Laboratories, incubators, and other spaces serve as the basis of tours and on-site demonstrations. For research librarians, particularly those wanting to learn more about what their researchers are actually doing in laboratories and other workspaces, these on-site tours are among the most valuable aspects of Boot Camps.

Examples of Boot Camps

Over the past decade, a number of librarian Boot Camp programs have been organized by librarians; several of these camps have become annual traditions. One of the first and most prominent, which has served as a model for others, is the New England Science Boot Camp series, initiated in 2009 by a consortium of health and science librarians working for educational institutions in the New England region of the US (Figure 1). The incentive (or “boot kick”) for the initial camp was the growing recognition by a group of science librarians and library directors at the University of Massachusetts that they needed a forum for learning more about the disciplines that they support. Particularly with the growing impact of eScience on their work, these librarians recognized that they needed to expand their skill sets, enhance their knowledge of their disciplines beyond the usual expectations of librarians, and find new ways to collaborate with their faculty and researchers. Some librarians lack a formal educational background in the fields that they support and so sought an

efficient and rapid way to become more knowledgeable. Members of this consortium determined that the means of realizing these objectives was to design a program that would directly involve their patrons and do so in an efficient, economical, and focused yet casual and collaborative setting. A Boot Camp seemed the most appropriate model for such a program.

The first New England Boot Camp was organized by members from the five University of Massachusetts campuses; in the following years, Bowdoin College, Holy Cross College, Tufts University, University of Connecticut, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute got involved, many serving as camp hosts. The New England Boot Camps typically run for two and half days and attendees can attend for all or part of the program. The camps are conducted annually in the month of June, when the participants have a lighter work schedules, and are held at a different campus each year. Each program consists of three multi-hour subject sessions, followed by a capstone session, and is interspersed with opening addresses, tours, meals, and other events. The 2014 Boot Camp, for example, held at one of the University of Connecticut campuses, offered sessions on computer science, pharmaceutical sciences, and evolution, culminating in a capstone session featuring two life sciences experts discussing the value of “communicating science.” As is typical of these Boot Camps, most speakers were academics or research fellows, enabling librarians to engage in direct discussions with the producers of the research that eScience librarians support. Supplemental activities included tours of the host’s nationally-known Biodiversity Education and Research Greenhouses, an evening talk on personalized medicine, and a “poster project runway” session. Overnight campers stayed in residential halls. Librarians with musical talents were encouraged to bring along musical instruments for a sing-along following the first day’s “cookout” dinner (the New England Science Boot Camp YouTube video channel is available at <https://www.youtube.com/user/nealsciencebootcamp> and singing about data sets at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnEW3BK7uFg>).

Merit badges were awarded for participation in events. Although the Boot Camp attracted attendees from outside New England, most came



Fig. 1. Generic boot camp logo

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Fig. 2 *New England Science Boot Camp participants earn merit badges for participation in various sessions; the badges' custom graphics reflect the sessions' disciplines.*

from within a few hours commuting distance and so shared transportation was encouraged (Figure 2). The New England Librarians Boot Camp series has received funding from the hosting organizations as well as from the Boston Library Consortium (BLC), a regional association of academic and research libraries, and the New England Region of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM-NER). Its success has inspired a number of other Boot Camps, which have extended the original concept to other regions and to other disciplines. Alternate regional camps focusing on the science and technology disciplines include the Western Science Boot Camp, organized by the Greater Western Library Alliance and partially funded by the Pacific Northwest Region of the NN/LM and the National Library of Medicine (NLM) as well as by participating universities and several major publishers in the medical, science, and engineering disciplines; this camp targets a much broader geographic region, covering the central and western United States. Librarians have organized Science Boot Camps in other areas of North America, including the Great Lakes and Southeast sections of the US and the "True North" region of Canada. Librarians also have taken the concept beyond health and the natural sciences. Since 2011, librarians at Tufts University as well as fellow members of the BLC and of other local academic libraries have organized single-day Social Sciences Boot Camps, featuring workshops and presentations on topics ranging from GIS, food, and political elections to emerging research tools and scholarly communication issues. Speakers have included academic experts in these fields as well as local or regional contacts from organizations such as the National Bureau of Economic Data and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and a panel of doctoral

students discussing their use of library services and sources in the research process.

Organizing Boot Camps: criteria for success

Successful librarian Boot Camps share several characteristics:

Convenient location. The location should be geographically convenient to the majority of the members of the target audience, which typically consists of local or regional groups of information professionals. Although teleconferencing events or posting videos after the conference may be done, these Boot Camps are emphatically in-person, location-specific programs. Boot Camps welcome attendees from around the world but are intended to appeal to potential attendees who can easily commute to the camp location.

Affordability. Many Boot Camps are intended as an alternative to the major annual library conferences that many librarians - for budget and scheduling reasons - cannot attend. Boot Camps charge very low and flexible conference fees, which typically cover programs, meals, and lodgings; librarians working for the hosting institution often are given free or subsidized entry. Offering housing in student dormitories as an alternative to hotel rooms and promoting ride-sharing or public transportation options help to reduce attendance costs. The first New England Science Librarian Boot Camp charged a tiered schedule of registration fees ranging from USD\$50 to USD\$200 and other Boot Camps usually cost under USD\$500.

Funding. These librarian Boot Camps are not part of established, well-funded conference series, rather they are grass-roots initiatives that require creative financing approaches. In addition to the university or other institution hosting the events, potential sponsors include regional or local library consortia and associations. Grants-making foundations and agencies which support professional development for librarians or research may be willing to fund Boot Camps, especially if the case can be made that such programs deliver continuing education more efficiently and affordably than do other venues. To keep costs down, the event organizers operate on "shoe string" budgets and dispense with unnecessary expenses, for example, favoring simple websites and

email rather than print communications to handle publicity and registration processes.

Program topics. As with all educational programs, Boot Camps must focus on topics of relevance to its audience. This is the most challenging aspect of Boot Camp planning as librarians have many other alternatives for continuing education. Successful Boot Camp programs seek to present “hot topics” and emerging issues in a unique setting that provides direct interaction with program speakers, the presentation of topics from a non-librarian lens, and tours of physical spaces normally off-limits to the public. Extra-curricular events that draw on the talents and interests of hosts and attendees and on local topography or cultural traditions also add appeal. In observance of the boots-aspect of the program, the 2011 New England Science Librarians Boot Camp, for example, held a “Non-sensible Shoe” dinner to which campers wore all manner of footwear while a librarian who is also a musician strummed a guitar and sang original lyrics about data sets to the tune of classic folksongs.

Commitment and support by participating institutions. Because Boot Camps lack permanent paid staff, the organizers of these events depend on the volunteer efforts of dedicated librarian groups and consortia. These volunteers require support, financial or otherwise, from the directors of their libraries as well as from the host institutions, which provide space and services at minimal or no cost. The ability to draw upon strong networks, partnerships, and passionate librarians is key to Boot Camps’ success (and a beneficial result of such efforts is the development of a foundation for other collaborative regional efforts).

Conclusion

The success experience of librarian Boot Camps prove that these programs can provide valuable educational opportunities for librarians and for their patrons. By offering an informal and fun yet intense on-site learning setting, these camps enable librarians an efficient and memorable means of professional continuing education. They also highlight to faculty and other library patrons the

degree to which librarians are willing to go – even dressed in camping outfits – to expand their knowledge and improve their delivery of library services.

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FURTHER READING

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Five Years of Boot Camp: Lessons Learned

https://prezi.com/tbmg-a8_2it3/five-years-of-boot-camp-lessons-learned/

Examples of Boot Camp Programs

New England Science Boot Camp - http://esciencelibrary.umassmed.edu/science_botcamp

Science Boot Camp West:

<http://guides.lib.washington.edu/ScienceBootCampWest2014>

Social Sciences Librarians Boot Camp: <http://sites.tufts.edu/sslbc2015/>