Sharing COVID-19 experiences of health information and library professionals: an EAHIL interactive workshop

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Abstract

Our annual EAHIL conference in June 2022 took place in Rotterdam, Netherlands – the first EAHIL conference to have an in-person component since our 2019 conference in Basel, Switzerland. The global COVID-19 pandemic affected health information and library professionals around the world. At the EAHIL 2022 conference, themed "Broaden the Horizons," the workshop "Libraries After COVID-19: a Learning Conversation" was offered to bring health information and library professionals together to discuss themes related to how the pandemic affected them and their institutions and ideas for the future. Using workshop facilitation strategies adapted from design thinking and Liberating Structures, this interactive session surfaced common themes among participant experiences and various ideas for the continued evolution of library and information services in the "post-COVID world."

Key words: *COVID-19; cultural diversity; librarians; libraries, medical; organizational culture.*

Introduction

Our annual EAHIL conference in June 2022 took place in Rotterdam, Netherlands – the first EAHIL conference to have an in-person component since our 2019 conference in Basel, Switzerland (thank you, Łódź, Poland, and Istanbul, Turkey, for hosting extraordinary virtual events!). The global COVID-19 pandemic affected health information and library professionals around the world. At the EAHIL 2022 conference, themed "Broaden the Horizons," the workshop "Libraries After COVID-19: a Learning Conversation" was offered to bring health information and library professionals together to discuss themes related to how the pandemic affected them and their institutions and ideas for the future. Using workshop facilitation strategies borrowed from design thinking (1) and Liberating Structures (2), this interactive session showed common themes among participant experiences and various ideas for the continued future evolution of library and information services in the "post-COVID world."

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic affected health information and library professionals and their institutions worldwide. Many institutions closed, while others remained open while navigating how to do so safely to protect workers and library users. Almost everyone radically changed their ways of working, teaching, and meeting with their communities, moving from the university, hospital, or organization setting to the online environment. Not only were we all trying to understand and cope with the emerging threats and evolving scientific understanding of the pandemic itself, but we also had to experiment with and learn new ways of working (3-6). After several years of "hunkering down" during the height of the pandemic and experimentation with leaning into the "new normal" as it has been termed (try it! – do an internet or scholarly search for: "new normal" AND COVID AND libraries), members of the EAHIL community came together in person for the first time in several years to share experiences and lessons gained, such that we can reflect and brainstorm ideas for coping with the next disruption and even thriving in this "new normal".

Session structure

As the facilitator of this session – "Libraries After COVID-19: a Learning Conversation" – and given the unprecedented challenges and experiences that our EAHIL community had been through during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was essential to design a session that would allow participants to feel safe, included and engaged. Session inspiration and design were aimed to a) support participants' reflection, b) allow time to continually refine session purposes and goals in real-time as the session unfolded, and c) foster non-judgmental, supportive conversation with equitable participation according to participant comfort. To create this type of session for participants, I leaned on my experience with design thinking (1) and Liberating Structures (2) to create an interactive EAHIL workshop designed for participants to share and learn from one another using guided exercises to explore topics such as:

- What was difficult during and after COVID-19, and did you find any unexpected solutions?
- What turned out as a positive outcome that you might not have explored if it wasn't for the pandemic?
- If you faced another crisis in the next five years, what did you learn from COVID-19 that you would like to make sure you remember next time?
- Were there new things you tried during the pandemic that worked so well that you will keep doing them in the future? What needs to be done to make it happen?

Learning outcomes for the session were created to let participants know what to expect, as well as to focus the discussion. Since experiences related to COVID-19 could be rather broad, it was essential to provide some focus for the workshop in hopes that everyone could come away with some valuable ideas for moving forward into the future.

Session learning outcomes

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:
- illustrate various examples of how the COVID-19 pandemic challenged information professionals;
- describe examples of positive changes or opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic;

- discover ideas for increasing resilience;
- develop ideas for possible innovations in libraries and health information services.

The agenda for the session included the following:
1. session introduction, including group grounding (*Figure 1*) and design thinking exercises;
2. conversation café, modeled on the Conversation Café Liberating Structures exercise (2);
3. navigate the future discussion, modeled on the W^3 Liberating Structures exercise (2);
4. sharing and wrap-up.

Fig. 1. *Session introduction: group grounding.*

During the introductory part of the session, we used design-thinking style activities (1) to foster a safe environment in the room and engage participants' creative thinking (7). *Figure 2* shows a few artful and poignant stick drawings shared in response to the prompt: "Think back to 2020 when you first found out about the COVID-19 pandemic. Draw a stick figure of a person just finding out about the pandemic". A simple, one-minute exercise requiring only markers and paper offered an easy way to loosen up, generate safe sharing, and prepare participants to interact.

The "conversation café" portion of the session centered on the questions:

- What was difficult during and after COVID-19, and did you find any unexpected solutions?

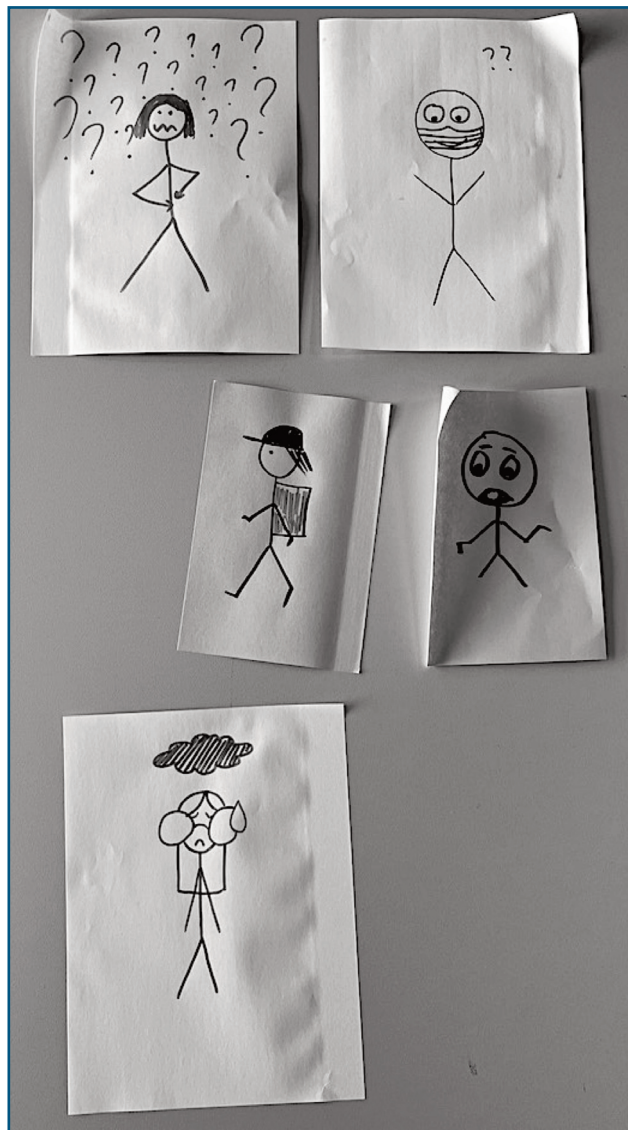- What turned out as a positive outcome that you might not have explored if it wasn't for the pandemic?

Fig. 2. *Examples of a few artful stick drawings representing a person who just found out about the pandemic.*

Participants broke into small groups, each with a "host" or facilitator who ensured equal participation. Talking objects – see the Conversation Café description in Liberating Structures (2) – were used to enhance focus and listening. This part of the session generated deep, personal sharing with respectful listening. Despite participants coming from all parts of the globe, we found many shared personal examples that allowed us to re-alize the commonality of our experiences, despite the isolation of COVID-19 (particularly during the early part of the pandemic).

The "navigate the future" conversation shifted our discussion to the future. Using the W3 – "What, So What, Now What?" – conversation framework as a model for the next small group exercise, participants discussed how "what" happened (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) was significant (i.e., "so what?"), and then shared ideas for "now what" – impressions for what opportunities and positive outcomes may be emerging from such a traumatic worldwide event and how reflecting on our common experiences and thinking about how to move forward can help us build organizational resilience (8, 9). Ideas shared and key takeaways from the workshop about how to move forward or prepare for future environmental disruptions (pandemic or otherwise), included those listed below and are echoed in some of the research literature (4-6, 10):

- build a crisis response team (and don't build a new team for every crisis);
- keep hard copies of crucial information;
- build relationships beyond the library;
- communicate and share knowledge, including leaning into our expertise in locating and making quality information accessible;
- look for unexpected opportunities;
- look for balance (digital-physical; secure-open; work-life; quiet-stimulating; rest-active; reading-doing);
- get comfortable working and teaching remotely and hybrid – it's here to stay;
- meet users where they are; accessibility and inclusivity (in spaces and online) are critical;
- experiment with and advocate for opportunities for innovative online services and resource digitization, keeping in mind the diversity of our users;
- keep readjusting and be flexible (with technology, resources, and each other).

The session concluded with opportunities for all participants to hear and see all the ideas generated from each group, so all participants were left with the same takeaways.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis of enormous proportions with profound effects felt worldwide. It is said

that out of crisis also come opportunities. Based on the active, engaged learning conversations during this EAHIL 2022 session, it is evident that our profession is ready to reflect and move forward into the "new normal" as the effects of COVID-19 begin to wane. To encourage creative thinking about how health information and library professionals can continue to evolve our resources and services, here are a few final design-thinking-inspired prompts for reflection or discussion:

- Empathize: What do the people we interact with want from us? What are their needs, and what goes through their minds when interacting with our services or resources?
- Define: What is a "problem" we would like to work on or improve to enhance our users' experiences? Are we inspired to find a solution?
- Ideate: Brainstorm! How can we think about all types of solutions to uncover the broadest potential ideas for approaching the problem we're trying to solve?
- Prototype: Can we create a small test case to see which of our ideas might be most helpful to our users? Can we break down a big solution into smaller parts to give it a try? There are no failed prototypes – each one will provide information that will get us to better solutions.
- Test: Try it! Get feedback on your prototypes, ideally within the actual context of what the user wants to do. Iteration is fundamental to creative solutions, so don't be afraid to keep testing new ideas for service and resource delivery.

There will always be obstacles and challenges – big (like COVID-19) and small – that stand in our way or create disruption. By sharing and providing safe spaces for one another to discuss and develop new ideas to evolve our health information services and resources while also taking care of one another and ourselves, we have much potential to broaden our horizons and improve our communities' access and use of information to improve health.

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