

Presenting at a conference - you CAN do it!

Little did I know that attending the inaugural New Librarian's Symposium in December 2002 would lead to my involvement in presenting a poster and a paper at the 10th Special, Health and Law Librarians Conference in August 2003!

During a session at the [New Librarians' Symposium](#)¹ in 2002 (NLS1) delegates were asked to record a professional or personal goal on a slip of paper for a time capsule. Lisa Cotter documented her goal to present a poster at a conference, as a step towards the daunting prospect of one day presenting a paper (see [Figure 1](#)). The following year, Lisa and a colleague actually had a poster *and* paper accepted for presentation at a national conference.

For many, the thought of presenting at a conference, or publishing in a library science journal, would not even come to mind, let alone be actually acknowledged as a daunting prospect, or even be written off as inconceivable. By sharing the experience of the authors as first time presenters and showing it is an achievable goal, this paper seeks to encourage new librarians (and also those who have been in the profession for some time) to consider presenting a poster or paper at upcoming conferences.

There is much to gain from writing and presenting a paper to your peers. Self-satisfaction is a major benefit and an important one, however there are many more. In most workplaces conference attendance is limited due to the cost involved in fees, travel and accommodation, as well as in the staff leave necessary to attend the conference. Presenting a poster or paper is a clear way of demonstrating why your employer should send YOU to a conference, ahead of, or as well as, one of the "big wigs". Once your attendance is secured, you are in a better position to network more effectively. Meeting people will become much easier, since other delegates might actually seek you out to discuss your presentation. In the bigger

¹ <http://conferences.alia.org.au/newlibrarian2002/>

picture, by presenting your ideas, research or project, you are helping the profession by contributing to the bank of evidence from which well-founded decisions can be made. This is one concept promoted by the relatively new model of evidence-based librarianship (EBL).

Your work environment dictates, to some extent, how innovative you can be in deciding on a topic to present at a conference. It does not need to be groundbreaking research or a detailed theoretical analysis but could simply be discussion of a topic of interest and benefit to the library and information science community.

Donna Robertson has worked in libraries for almost 20 years in both para-professional and professional capacities, yet this is the first paper she has written for public presentation. Why? Donna cites never recognising the opportunity, being too busy keeping up with the daily grind, a lack of confidence in ability and failure to see projects she had worked on as being presentable, as the most likely reasons.

Quite often presenters are speaking from first hand experience based on a project they have been involved in as part of their employment. All of us have this experience, whether it is from a beginner's perspective participating in only one aspect of a small project or team process, or in the role of a project manager coordinating a more comprehensive study or project. Topics of a practical nature usually generate significant interest from industry members, as they are able to relate to what is presented, and may find solutions to issues they have also been trying to deal with. A presentation need not only deal exclusively in successes. Discussing projects that had not progressed quite as planned can be just as enlightening as showcasing a grand achievement.

Deciding to present a topic at a conference can provide an opportunity to develop a project of personal interest. Such an initiative may also be implemented in your work place. You can create your own opportunity and

in turn gain the respect of your peers and management. It can be far too easy to talk yourself out of taking such a step ...too hard, haven't got time, what would I speak about? Don't give in to lack of confidence. Think outside the square – choose a topic that will challenge you personally and professionally.

If you are uncomfortable with the thought of presenting an entire paper by yourself, ask someone to work with you or present in a format that you will find easier to deliver. A poster presentation or a demonstration of a skill or process may not seem as scary. Similarly, your first presentation need not be at a large-scale national conference. You could get your feet wet and build confidence by presenting a project report at a staff forum in your own organisation. Local ALIA meetings might be another place to gain experience and receive supportive feedback. Look out for those conferences that encourage submissions from first-time presenters - keep an eye out for the call for papers for New Librarians' Symposium 3!

In the early days of Lisa Cotter's current position her Program Manager commented, "You're working in an interesting situation. You should think about writing a paper for a conference." Her reaction was not far short of horror, and included a definite feeling of "As if I would ever be able to do that!" The suggestion was quickly dismissed and she thought no more about it. However, the seed was sown...

The seed lay dormant until NLS1 in 2002. Lisa was inspired to "participate" by the example set by the great work of the inaugural NLS organising committee, and also encouraged by a senior colleague's recent tip that a sure way to secure attendance at conferences was to present something at them. The time capsule activity at NLS1 saw Lisa commit to taking steps towards becoming a first time presenter.

With the ambition of wanting an opportunity to present a poster as a "safe" way of getting in on the conference scene Lisa teamed up with a colleague,

Dr Suzanne Lewis, to identify potential topics for presentation. By considering what was noteworthy about the library they worked in, and listing the major projects they had been involved with, Suzanne and Lisa shortlisted the ideas they believed were most suitable as content for presentation.

The next stage was to identify upcoming conferences, and establish how the shortlisted topics could be adapted to the conference themes. Two concepts were selected to be developed into abstracts for submission for the [10th Asia Pacific Special, Health and Law Librarians' Conference](#)². One was a poster presentation illustrating issues which had been overcome by the unique partnership between The University of Newcastle and Central Coast Health (CCH) libraries (Cotter & Lewis, 2003). The partnership sought to deliver a seamless library service to undergraduate nursing students based at the Gosford Hospital campus, and remote from The University's main campus. The other was for delivery of a full paper relaying what had been learned about relocating a library (Lewis & Cotter, 2003). At the time of writing the abstract, CCH Libraries had moved twice in two years and were in the process of planning two further moves for the following year - but that's a whole other story!

Both submissions were accepted for presentation. By collaborating on preparing these presentations, the authors were able to enhance their skill set by combining ideas and perspective, writing and technical skills, and were able to encourage each other and push each others boundaries. It was not until the final weeks before the conference that Suzanne "strongly encouraged" Lisa to take on a speaking part in the delivery of the paper, advising it would be "good for the soul". Only after the paper was competently delivered was Lisa able to agree, and is now grateful to Suzanne for challenging her to step outside the comfort zone.

² <http://conferences.alia.org.au/shllc2003/>

Lisa cites plenty of rehearsal as vital to the success of delivering her first paper. Pilot presentations to supportively critical audiences of colleagues at the CCH and The University libraries quickly showed areas that should be improved, excluded or explained. Colleagues made various recommendations for how best to present the paper. Some advocated reading directly from a script as the best way, while others advised the best papers were always presented using only dot point prompts. After trialing various methods of delivery, Suzanne and Lisa realised the best method was the method that allowed them to make the best presentation they could. The rehearsals made it pretty clear that for Lisa, dot points alone would not be enough for her debut performance!

Enhanced networking was one of the unexpected benefits enjoyed as a presenter at the conference. The poster drew a lot of interest from other librarians involved in teaching hospital partnerships. During the breaks, Suzanne and Lisa stood by their poster and were able to make contact with a lot of librarians experiencing similar issues without the need to actively seek them out. Delegates approached the presenters to discuss the issues outlined by the poster. Likewise, the paper on relocating libraries was a great source of small talk to fall back on when meeting new people at the social functions. Doubts that their paper was of no interest to most people were quelled as many delegates surfaced who were about to relocate as well, and showed a keen interest in their topic. Suzanne and Lisa were surprised by the number of people in their audience frantically taking notes throughout the paper. Quite a few who had been in the audience as well as others who had heard about the paper made contact after the conference seeking advice and further information.

As she was going through the process of preparing to present her first poster and paper, Lisa completed a short Facilitated Online Learning Interactive Opportunity ([FOLIO](http://www.shef.ac.uk/scharr/eblib/briefing1.htm)) [course on evidence-based librarianship](http://www.shef.ac.uk/scharr/eblib/briefing1.htm)³.

³ <http://www.shef.ac.uk/scharr/eblib/briefing1.htm>

EBL is a decision-making framework concerned with the application of evidence-based practice (EBP) to the field of library and information science. It does not necessarily address our role in supporting EBP (which those working in the health field will be well aware of), but in actually applying the practice to our everyday decision making as librarians (Booth & Brice, 2004).

One definition of EBL is provided by Eldredge (2002) who says "evidence-based librarianship seeks to improve library practice by utilising the best available evidence in conjunction with a pragmatic perspective developed from working experiences in librarianship. The best available evidence might be produced from quantitative or qualitative research designs, although EBL encourages more rigorous forms over less rigorous forms of evidence when making decisions".

The course highlighted the importance of developing the quality of library science research, including the need to publish workplace experiences. Lisa and Donna believe that for higher quality research to be published, an important first step must be to actually promote the idea that presenting or publishing papers is an achievable undertaking. New and experienced librarians should be encouraged to aspire to presenting their work, dispelling the common assumption that it is an endeavour reserved for the elite of the profession.

The future of EBL will rely upon librarians making their experiences, the successes and the failures, available to the library community. While the ideal is to publish higher levels of evidence such as systematic reviews or randomised controlled trials, the acknowledgment of "best available evidence" allows new librarians to take up the challenge of contributing to the profession by publishing or presenting more practicable lower levels of evidence such as case studies, as a first step.

The librarians at CCH have come some way to meeting the challenge by taking the opportunity to redevelop the library's intranet site by a project guided by the principles of EBL. The goals set for the project included not only to have a proven better site, but also an explicit intention to share our findings with the library community.

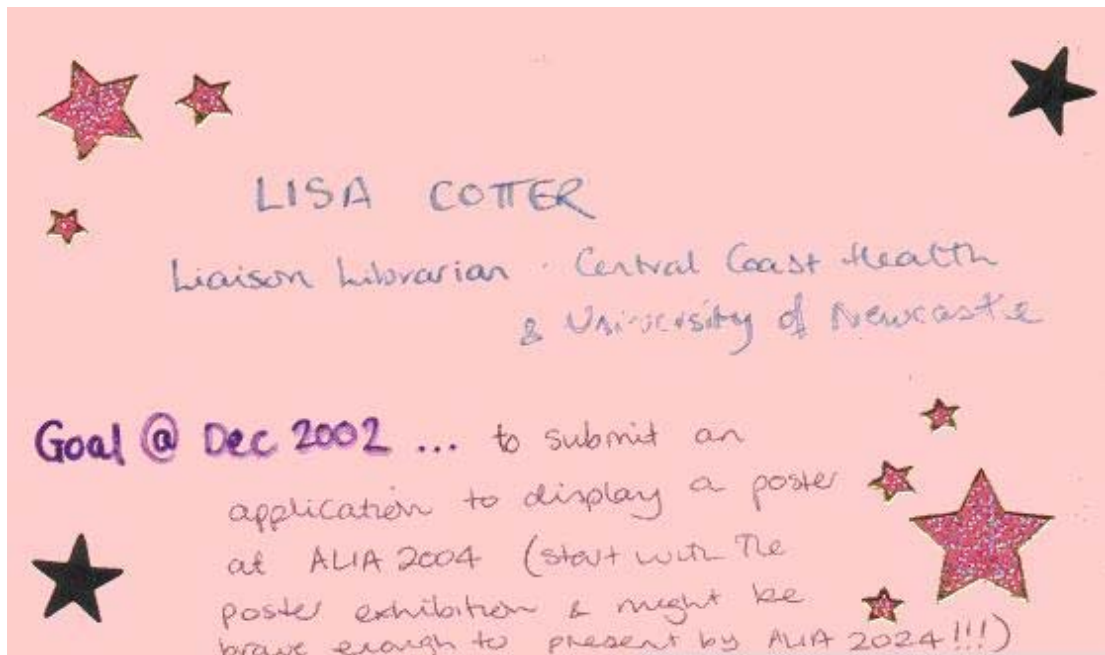
With this intention in place from the outset, the project was able to progress upon a defined framework most simply described by Crumley and Koufogiannakis (2002) as "...asking questions, finding, critically appraising and incorporating research evidence from library science (and other disciplines) into daily practice."

Most of us underestimate our individual ability in having achieved or worked on anything that could possibly be of interest to our peers. It is important to remember that the everyday things your library has accomplished will not necessarily mirror the experiences of your peers. Sharing your experiences may just save another library from that well-worn cliché "reinventing the wheel", or falling into a trap which may have otherwise been avoided. No library can do it all - we can all learn from each other. We tend to regard people who present at conferences and publish as leaders in the industry and admire their ability to be able to do this. These people should be admired, but it is important to recognise that YOU CAN DO IT TOO.

Although daunting, presenting at a conference is achievable. By sharing their experiences, the authors hope to show new librarians that it CAN be done. Next time you see a call for papers notice, don't disregard it ... take up the challenge and take that next step. Ask yourself "What could I present?" Donna and Lisa look forward to seeing your presentations over the coming years, and wish first-time presenters at [New Librarians' Symposium 2](#)⁴ the very best of luck.

⁴ <http://conferences.alia.org.au/newlibrarian2004/>

Figure 1 Lisa Cotter's goal (not very artistically) documented at NLS1.



REFERENCES

- Booth, A., & Brice, A. (2004). Why evidence-based information practice. In A. Booth & A. Brice (Eds.), *Evidence-based practice for information professionals : a handbook* (pp. 1-12). London: Facet Pub.
- Cotter, L., & Lewis, S. (2003, 24-27th August). *Towards a seamless library service*. Paper presented at the 10th Asia Pacific Special, Health and Law Librarians' Conference, Adelaide, South Australia.
<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/services/library/gosford/pubs/index.html#partnership>
- Crumley, E., & Koufogiannakis, D. (2002). Developing Evidence Based Librarianship : practice steps for implementation. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 19(4), 61-70.
- Eldredge, J. (2002). Evidence-based librarianship: what might we expect in the years ahead? *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 19(2), 71-77.
- Lewis, S., & Cotter, L. (2003, 27th August). *Relocating your library*. Paper presented at the 10th Asia Pacific Special, Health and Law Librarians' Conference, Adelaide, South Australia.
<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/services/library/gosford/pubs/index.html#relocating>