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Vanessa Irvin & Wiebke Reile

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LINQing librarians for better practice: using *slack* to facilitate professional learning and development

Vanessa Irvin^a and Wiebke Reile^b

^aLibrary and Information Science Program, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA;

^bCommunications & Information Sciences Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA

ABSTRACT

Public librarians face various factors that can affect professional practice: socio-cultural nuances of diverse information needs, isolation due to system-wide location and/or geography, and systemic disconnection from professional networking and learning opportunities. To address these factors, an inquiry-based professional development model called *The Librarians' Inquiry Forum* (LINQ) was devised and employed with a select group of Hawai'i-based public librarians via the cloud-based collaborative workspace platform, *Slack*, as a means of building a community-of-practice for professional learning and development. This article reports the evolution and early implementation of the LINQ model. Inquiry-based research often reveals data that raises more questions than answers. Questions raised from the reflective research performed with LINQ revealed ways in which the LINQ librarians learned "better" ways/approaches of practice. LINQ was found to be a viable method for enhancing public librarian professional development.

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Introduction

One of the ongoing concerns in Library and Information Science (LIS) research and discourse is that there is an inconsistency (and sometimes absence) in teaching pre-service librarian competencies and inquiry focusing on servicing diverse populations, which includes cultural and mobility-based communities. Diversity topics are necessary in today's world and need to be included in LIS curriculum so that pre-service librarians learn how to competently service vulnerable populations such as homeless citizens, homeschooled students and parents, immigrants, and disabled patrons (Reardon 2016; Westbrook 2015). In LIS, such competencies are framed by the theories of cultural competency, equitable access, community engagement, and inquiry-based research (Irvin 2016; Mestre 2010).

CONTACT Vanessa Irvin  irvinv@hawaii.edu

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Triangulating the ideas of cultural competency with equitable access and community engagement underscored with a reflective inquiry-based approach allows librarians, and public librarians, specifically, to methodically identify professional practices that work and don't work, to share professional experiences that need to be heard and supported, to reflect on one another's stories for professional learning and development. This research asks the question: "In what ways can public librarians learn from one another in real-time interaction via online communications, for professional development?" In short, what happens when, amid active "busy" days serving the public, the public librarian receives support from colleagues via a post or comment, or discussion thread, or receives much needed information *in the moment* from a colleague via a resource or artifact that is shared within a community of practice convened online, accessible as easily as a tab on one's web browser, or via a notification from the online platform's application installed on one's mobile device?

To begin exploration of this question, we collaborated with the Hawai'i State Public Library System (HSPLS) to convene a select group of public librarians, working across the six inhabited islands of Hawai'i, as a community of practice, using the cloud-based collaborative workspace platform *Slack* (<http://www.slack.com>). Branded as *LINQ: The Librarians' Inquiry Forum*, narrative data from librarian participation in discussions on *Slack* revealed ways in which public librarians can systematically use social networking and/or social media to technologically mediate professional collaboration and learning across physical and social distance to enhance professional practice and service towards diverse communities seeking culturally and socially competent service at the public library.

Contextualizing the complexities of a nuanced paradise

The Hawai'i State Public Library System (HSPLS), boasts 50 locations across six islands, where branch libraries are often distal from one another, across swaths of rural and mountainous landscapes (hawaiilibraries.org). Small and rural library locations are often a one-librarian show, with a small supportive paraprofessional staff. Case in point, within the HSPLS, where our research was conducted, most of the librarians participating in LINQ work in rural locations where they were the only librarian on staff. One librarian had just one other staff member working the entire library with her, at the end tip of one of the Hawaiian Islands. Another librarian was working split-time between two rural locations located within 15 miles of one another. Lastly, there were two LINQ librarians and each served an entire island where there is only one public library.

What is unique and specific to the HSPLS is that the library system is situated within an indigenous culture that is marginalized in some ways (historically and socio-economically) and privileged in others (tourism).

This dichotomy begs the question of agency for library and information services for the everyday citizenry, which in Hawai'i is incredibly diverse. To tease out the complexities and nuances of Hawai'i-based norms (local) alongside Hawaiian cultural values (indigenous) is a tall order for public librarians on the frontlines of public service across the islands.

The State of Hawai'i's organization, infrastructure, and administration is consistent with the mainland American framework. Indeed, there is a normative presentation of "library" that is akin to public libraries across the swath of geography on the mainland United States. Secondly, in Hawai'i, due to the historical coming together of many peoples from many places during the transition of Hawai'i from a sovereign monarchical nation to an occupied U.S. territory to a state of the U.S., the population is intensely diverse, which includes multiple Asian cultural groups (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Thai), a multicultural presence of Polynesian/Oceanic groups (Fijian, Maorian, Melanesian, Samoan, Tongan), Latino (Mexican, Portuguese, Puerto Rican), Euro and African Americans (predominantly from the universities and military bases), and most importantly of all, the *Kanaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiians), many who are descendants of the original Polynesian settlers of the Hawaiian Islands (McDermott and Andrade 2011).

Due to the fact that Hawai'i is the most diverse state in the country (Welch 2011), HSPLS's librarians are concerned with professional practices that must meet diverse needs, in isolated locations across the state within a framework that is multilayered with Asian and Polynesian values and aesthetics orbited by mainstream American hegemonic character.

Literature review: Framing the agency of public librarian practice

Since Hawai'i's diversity is embedded as a natural status of its local culture, we wanted to learn, in what ways was this diversity addressed in the HSPLS librarians' approaches and practices within their service communities, and with one another as colleagues and neighbors across islands? *LINQ: The Librarians' Inquiry Forum* was designed to serve as a reflective space where HSPLS librarians could decrease physical and social isolation from town to town, island to island, so that even though separate geographically, they could still connect, interact, share, and learn from one another in real-time, with the convenience of a social networking technology. Therefore, the conceptual framework for this research was guided by the following concepts: librarian identity, librarian practice, and librarian inquiry.

Librarian identity

With this dearth of LIS study and research on the topic of diversity, it follows that there may be a lack of reflective attention to the formation of an overall

professional *identity* for practicing librarians. Lack of reflective study creates an important question: What is the identity of the professionally trained librarian? In what ways is one's cultural heritage, ethnicity, mobility, and socioeconomic status an aspect of the formation of professionalism for public librarians? What is the LIS curricula's goal for educating and producing "librarians"?

These questions are important because LIS as a profession is quite homogenous with an 88% white female population (ALA Office for Diversity 2012). Yet within this homogeneity, there is diversity in cultural heritage and various identities connected with gender, mobility, and socioeconomic status. However, these diversities are not typically unpacked in the LIS classroom (Irvin 2016; Kumasi and Manlove 2015), let alone in LIS practice. Pointedly, in this study, the librarian participants consisted of 15 females and 1 male, of which eight were Asian, five were European-descent Americans, and two were of Native Hawaiian heritage. Thus, it is within the information need of a wholistic professional identity construction that LINQ model is designed to address.

Librarian practice

For the LINQ project, we posit that librarian professional practice is an ongoing, iterative habitus of LIS values acquired from LIS education. Librarians learn the ethos and values for librarianship in library school. LIS values echo the American core values of freedom, democracy, and fairness (Rodger 1998) with a commitment to open and equal access to information, unbiased customer service, and activation of community voice within library activities. While these values are part of a librarian's professional heritage, the application of them may complement a person's personal values, but can also counter one's personal perspective, as well (Rodger 1998). It is in library school where these ideological tensions are discussed and reflected upon as part of the process of becoming a LIS professional.

The question then becomes the following one: "Beyond library school, in what ways does librarian professional practice shift over the course of a career to reflect LIS ethics and values in heightened, wiser ways, based on a synthesis with professional experiences?" I believe this question is a crucial lifelong learning question *and stance* for effective professional practices of librarians—particularly librarians who serve the public to promote the public good. LINQ opens up space for practicing librarians to keep conversations happening that address their questions about practice and that serve as a checks and balance for ethical practices. LINQ's design allows practice to become a point of critical inquiry.

Librarian inquiry

Although librarians answer questions as a foundational aspect of their professional practice, one problematic epistemological issue is this idea that

librarians “know it all” and therefore have no questions to ask or ponder or need support in unpacking. Librarians often have questions about funding, best practices in dealing with challenging patrons, how to best engage their service community, as well as concerns about staff relations, professional development and networking. One study investigating public librarians’ reader response to library books in a book club revealed that librarians often feel “fragile” about the questions and challenges they experience within their daily work (Irvin Morris 2012). Librarians often don’t feel trusting to ask challenging or critical questions in fear of professional reprisal and/or citizen confrontation (Irvin Morris 2012). Questions, librarians do have. They also have the need to collaboratively discuss and share these questions and ideas as a means of learning from one another in order to “do better” (Lytle 2008; Moreillon, Cahill, and McKee 2012).

A focus on improving services to library patrons is the goal of librarian professional development. As librarians, we point people into the directions they need to seek answers to their questions. In turn, to continuously improve our practice, we must ask ourselves (and one another) questions about what we are doing and why we are doing what we are doing, *and* if what we are doing truly is contributing to the public good not just for the citizenry, but for ourselves as members of that same citizenry. LINQ seeks to remedy the problem of librarians feeling fragile when outwardly providing service, by creating space for them to collaboratively look within, in the spirit of mutual support, for professional learning and development.

Methodology: Forming the *librarians’ inquiry forum* (LINQ)

LINQ embraces practitioner inquiry as a means of situated socio-professional learning for public librarians who are geographically disconnected/isolated from one another within the same library system or within the same practice of librarianship (i.e., public, school, special/archival, and academic libraries). Utilizing the cloud-based collaborative workspace platform, *Slack* (<http://www.slack.com>), LINQ addresses the isolation factor (that continues to be a challenging aspect of librarian professional practice in the public sector (Kelley, Rapp, and Warburton 2011)), by organizing public librarians from the most isolated place on earth, Hawai’i, into an online community of practice. The methodology for LINQ began with a year-long pilot study whose data informed us on how to best design LINQ as a strategically effective forum for at-work networking and collaboration.

“The patron stance”: Pilot study

To familiarize ourselves with the geographic context of Hawai’i’s public libraries within HSPLS, we conducted a one-year explorative tour of all the HSPLS

libraries on the island of O'ahu to learn about public library services within a Hawai'i-based context that is a mix of global diversity, Polynesian indigeneity, and mainstream American character. Our tour involved visiting all 25 branch locations across the island, plus one independently-run public library (Hawai'i State Public Library System, 2015). For each visit (at a minimum of 90 minutes), we were focused on three major components as our "library experience": access, services, and aesthetics.

The outcomes from the themes of "access" and "aesthetics" were conformational of our expectations as insider/outsider visitors (considering our professional identities as a degreed LIS practitioner/educator and doctoral level information science researcher). We determined that HSPLS's care, service, and regard for disabled patrons, elderly patrons, and children is appropriate and did give us a unique sense of Hawai'i-based social mores within library services. However, outcomes from the theme of "services" gave rise to the question: "How are the librarians doing?" because our experiences with asking reference questions to librarians varied from excellent to worrisome, with a heavy lean towards "worrisome." While most librarians we interacted with were welcoming and excellent in their professional knowledge and service, there were some librarians who were curt and others who appeared disaffected by our presence. For example, when we asked one librarian a reference question, the response was: "Google it" (Irvin and Reile, pilot study field notes, February 11, 2016). We weren't sure if varied responses to our presence were intellectually charged, or if we were treated with unnecessary caution/trepidation due to other factors such as race (one researcher is African American, the other German American, which bespeaks of a tense racial history with Whites in Hawai'i) (McDermott and Andrade 2011), gender (women), size (one is plus-sized, one is a marathon runner), or a host of other undetermined reasons/issues.

Nevertheless, if we subtract the "familiar" (or personal) from the "strange" (or (mis)understandable) (Miner 1956; Tavares 2008) we can place a disaffected librarian anywhere on the planet. Thus, "Google It" could have (and probably does) happened anywhere. Therefore, we become concerned about what is happening with library services coming from degreed librarians, because if the professional training of librarians is not enough to override dispositions that are seemingly tired, disaffected, or burned out, then we want to make meaning out of the library experience of librarians. We want to inquire profoundly to ask, critique, share, debate, and realize a heightened understanding of what public librarians are experiencing in their daily work, because their experiences inescapably impact the people they serve.

LINQ+HSPLS: Implementing an online community-of-practice for librarian inquiry

Part of our implementation planning involved our ultimately visiting as many of the 50 libraries within the HSPLS system as possible, so that we could gain a fuller understanding of the contexts within which the participating LINQ+HSPLS librarians were involved, statewide. By the end of 2016, we'd visited 34 of the 50 HSPLS branches (68%), which included all of O'ahu (23), Kaua'i (4 of the six branches there), Maui (3 of the 6 branches, plus a bookmobile), Hawai'i-the Big Island (2 of the 12), and Lāna'i (1 library on the island). Additionally, we'd visited the independently-run Makiki Community Library on O'ahu, for a total of 35 public libraries visited.

Slack was chosen as the collaborative workspace platform for LINQ+HSPLS for a few reasons: 1) its acronym explains the efficacy for using *Slack* as a workplace-oriented site for a community of practice: "Searchable Log of All Conversation and Knowledge"; 2) the affordances of the platform allows users to engage with one another easily; and 3) our interviews with LINQ+HSPLS librarians revealed that many of them had trepidations about using more popular social networks like Facebook; they felt that *Slack* offered a more anonymous, "safer space" for online discourse that was professional in nature, due to *Slack's* documented purpose and use as a workplace "social network where we spend our workdays" (Locke 2016, para. 2).

Lastly, *Slack* was chosen for building LINQ+HSPLS as an inquiry-based online community of practice because it is searchable, allowing for retro-active access to discourse and artifacts for reflective inquiry and learning. Also, *Slack* offers integration of various applications into the platform such as email, Google Drive, Twitter, YouTube, analytic tracking capability, etc., and the importance of the platform being available as a downloadable application on any mobile device (i.e., cell phone, tablet, desktop) enhanced the platform's accessibility and usability. It was important for testing the sustainability of the group that methods for sharing all information could be in one place, and *Slack* affords that ability (Figure 1).

LINQ+HSPLS design

Seventeen librarians across the state of Hawai'i were identified by the Hawai'i State Librarian (who heads up the HSPLS) to participate in LINQ. The participants were all "Branch Librarians," which means they were all managers or head librarian of the locations where they worked. The LINQ+HSPLS librarians typically led a staff of 2–24 people, depending on where they were located. The LINQ+HSPLS librarians hailed from the following islands: Kaua'i: 2; O'ahu: 8; Lāna'i: 1; Maui: 2; and Big Isle (Hawai'i): 4, for a total of 17 initial participants.

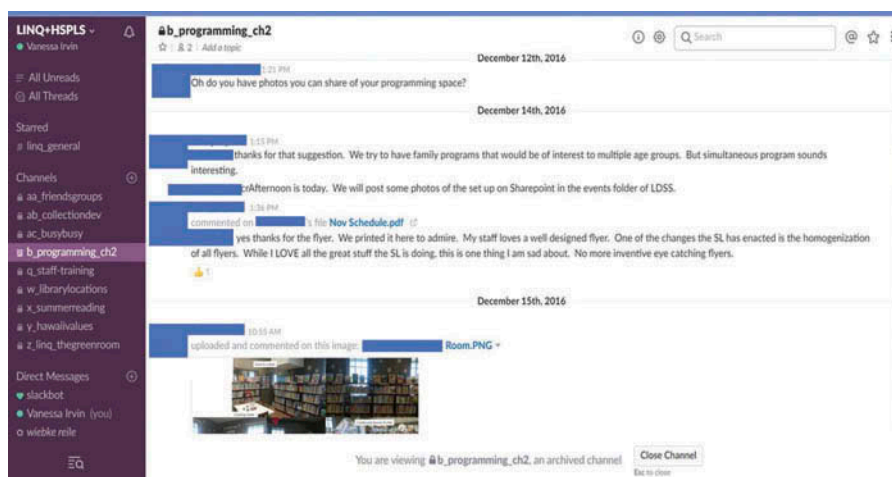


Figure 1. LINQ+HSPLS slack interface.

Only one librarian declined participation at the onset of the project: her apology was that she was just too busy. The remaining 16 librarians were asked to register and log on to *Slack*, free of charge, to orient themselves to *Slack*'s interface. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during site visits to each librarian's work location (except for two interviews conducted via Skype), and were audio-recorded with permission.

LINQ+HSPLS was a 10-month program which began on September 1, 2016, and ended on June 30, 2017. During the initializing phase (months 1–3), weekly inquiry questions were posted in *Slack* channels by the principal investigator to allow the librarians to become acquainted with one another, and to learn the value of participating in inquiry-based research in real-time, online, during work. At the end of the third month of LINQ+HSPLS, one librarian withdrew from the project. When asked during a brief exit interview as to why the decision to leave LINQ+HSPLS, the response was, "I'm just too busy." This "busy-ness" then became a coded category for us to explore amongst the remaining 15 librarians: What does "busy" mean for the public librarian? How does "busy" play a role in engaging or disengaging professional learning and development?

After four months of mediated discussion, *Slack* analytics revealed five librarians as the most active "writers" (with the remaining participants "reading"), with three of them starting to ask inquiry-based questions within discussion threads (topics) and channels (forums). Instead of waiting for a prompt from the facilitator, these librarians began setting topics and asking prompting inquiry questions, such as the following ones:

- What did you learn from the institute you attended? How do they "harness community knowledge"?
- How do you define Query?

- What do you wish you learned in library school? Did you learn it? Do you teach it to your staff? Still waiting for training?

The fourth month, therefore, ushered in the sustainability phase of the group. The principal investigator contacted the leading participants to ask if they would be interested to lead discussion for a month. This approach was crucial in determining the efficacy of LINQ's design: Is LINQ sustainable with librarians facilitating their own inquiry group? How will they promote and sustain interest with one another? In what ways will they sustain this group? We felt the design would be successful if at least three librarians independently sustained the group for three consecutive months. Three LINQ+HSPLS librarians did commit to rotating group facilitation.

Results and discussion

LINQ+HSPLS reader/writer activity on slack

At the beginning of LINQ+HSPLS, there was a higher number of individuals who were only reading posts and not responding. We attribute this usage to librarians reducing their learning curve of *Slack*. Case in point, the only time all 16 participants were on the platform was at the beginning of the study when they were registering and orienting themselves with the interface. During month #2, at four instances 10 participants were on the platform at one time reading posts. Starting month #4, there was a spike in librarians reading posts, and over the following four months there were five instances where there were eight readers on the platform.

Overall, channel participation stayed consistent over ten months. The highest number of postings for one day totaled 95 messages, which occurred at the beginning of study, potentially explainable by questions related to navigating *Slack*. Typically, channel activity never exceeded more than 30 posts/comments on any given day, across the entire length of the study (Figure 2).

There were typically eight librarians reading posts at any one time on the platform. Five users participated intermittently. Factors such as disinterest, a personally high technological learning curve, and a reluctance to participate in the study could be potential explanations for the users not engaging with the platform. The level of engagement rose to its highest numbers after month #4, which indicates that for online inquiry-based groups, it may take about four months to establish a sustainable community of practice.

Additionally, the librarians were private messaging each other quite often. Out of 1,900 messages for LINQ+HSPLS over a nine-month period, 394 messages were sent directly between the librarians, accounting for 23% of all LINQ+HSPLS *Slack* activity. This is an interesting data point, mainly due to

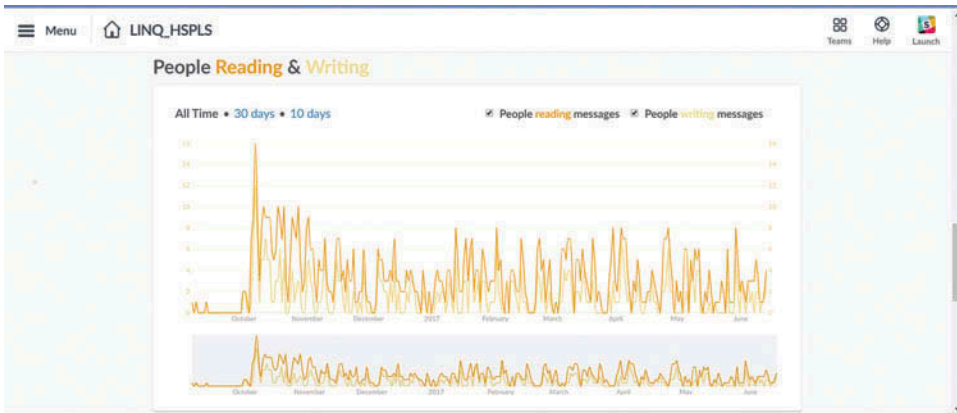


Figure 2. LINQ+HSPLS reader and writer activity, September 1, 2016–June 1, 2017.

the aspect that even within a private, anonymized community of practice, the librarians still engaged in private interactions away from the group.

LINQ+HSPLS engagement with practitioner inquiry

From the interviews, there were some common concerns that librarians were keen to discuss such as homelessness, programming, and reference services. These concerns were interpreted as questions for inquiry. These questions were posted by the principal investigator/facilitator to *Slack* in the form of private “channels”. An example of a channel topic for reference questions was as follows: “What is your most asked query these days? How has the query impacted your practice?”

When the group entered the sustainability phase, one librarian moderator created a channel to discuss “favorite resources” to which she stated the purpose as follows: “Share the resources you have found to help others expand their learning opportunities. Could be blogs/websites/books, etc.” Another librarian moderator posted a channel to discuss staff training: “How do you train your staff at all levels? What kind of resources do you wish were provided to help you train your staff? Are there any in-house training materials that you’ve created and are willing to share?” Lastly, a third librarian moderator, during her month of sustaining the group, created and posted a channel to discuss the librarians’ “wish list”: “What’s on your library’s wishlist [sic]? Is it furniture, programs, staff, policies? What would it take to make those things happen?” As librarians became comfortable with collaboratively interacting as a community of practice, they became more interested and invested in the value of inquiry topics they wanted to engage.

Another data point for LINQ+HSPLS engagement is that the librarians emailed the principal investigator requesting topics to discuss, complete with a topical inquiry question. During the sustainable phase, one of the facilitating

librarians emailed to request three channels to be created for discussion, even though it was not her month to facilitate. The principal investigator responded suggesting adding administration privileges back to the librarian so that she can freely enter the sustainable aspect of the group to add topics as she sees fit.

Engagement is an indicator of a reflective stance on the part of the participants in a practitioner inquiry group (Lytle 1996). Librarians asking questions of their own practice as a contribution to a communal, collaborative discourse is the edifying impetus upon which LINQ+HSPLS thrives. Librarians become “active and reflective, as constructors of their own professional practice and generators as well as users of knowledge” (Lytle 1996). LINQ+HSPLS librarians are systematically, yet organically (at any time of the day or night, at work and beyond), collecting, analyzing, and interpreting shared data from their work sites. Many artifacts have been shared within the group, from pictures of their library collections and rooms, from documents to help one another plan programs, make decisions, co-interpret organizational policies, and manage staff, to forms lost by one participant and found and shared by another participant across islands, within minutes.

Conclusion: Outcomes and onward questions

It is evident from the measured pace of engagement, as reported by our data analysis of user participation, that the LINQ+HSPLS librarians learned from one another. In various ways, practitioner inquiry via an accessible online social network, benefitted librarian professional identity and practice. To revisit our framing research question: “What happens when, amid active days serving the public, we receive support from a post or thread or artifact that is shared in a community of practice convened on cloud-based collaborative workspace platform?”, we could identify a few early, meaningful outcomes emergent from LINQ+HSPLS, as follows:

- LINQ+HSPLS was sustainable by the librarians for four consecutive months. Thus, LINQ is proving to be a useful, meaningful model for ongoing professional learning and development for public librarians working in large library systems and/or practicing in isolated areas be they rural or urban, geographic or virtual.
- The librarians learned how to navigate a new cloud-based collaborative workspace platform (where they can use that knowledge to help library users).
- The librarians learned how to collaboratively build an online community to engage one another for co-constructive professional development.
- The librarians learned how to make their group sustainable by making LINQ a part of their daily routine so that critical inquiry into their

professional practice became data for collaborative professional learning concurrent with their professional practice.

These early outcomes of LINQ+HSPLS's activities and experiences underscore the case for ways in which social networks can be put to best use as a learning tool for inquiry-based professional development. Case in point, the LINQ+HSPLS librarians were (and continue to be, as of this writing) engaged in continuous learning due to the socio-professional discourse of their inquiry group, mediated, in a sustainable way, online.

As an inquiry-based collaboration model, LINQ focuses on the power of questions for critical engagement and collaborative learning; thus, our discussion concludes with considering ongoing questions that the qualitative data is projecting. Some questions include the following ones: How are the "readers" on LINQ using the information shared, as opposed to the "writers" who are more active in leading and sustaining the group? In other words, in what ways are the members in the pews experiencing LINQ as opposed to the choir?

Additionally, some data patterns are emerging that we want to code and analyze. One pattern we're excited to unpack is this notion of "busy." Many of the LINQ+HSPLS librarians (at least 6) stated they were "too busy" or "so busy" to apologize for low LINQ participation or for struggles in responding to LINQ contact (i.e., email, phone calls, being mentioned on *Slack*). Indeed, "busy" was the reason for two librarians withdrawing from the group early on. Thus, our question is: What does it mean for a public librarian to be "too busy"? Is the "busy" due to administrative obligations? Or community needs? In what ways does (or can) inquiry-based networking (e.g., LINQ) help to un-busy the "busy"?

Another pattern that leaves us with questions is the notion of librarians being "not savvy" with technology. About four of the LINQ+HSPLS librarians shared in their interviews that they were leery to try *Slack*, that they "don't do social media." However, after our site visits where we worked one-on-one with some of the librarians to teach them *Slack*, all participants have been engaged on *Slack*, except for one librarian. Thus, the question for "no savvy" becomes: What does it mean to "don't do online professional development *at work*" whether you know how to interface with the platform or not? We want to learn and document various ways in which librarians, as information professionals, learn from online community building and sharing for professional development. We believe that LINQ has a strong narrative to contribute to LIS discourse to improve professional development initiatives for public librarians who are often understaffed and under-resourced for learning opportunities beyond their daily work. Replicable anywhere, we continue

our research with LINQ to unveil librarian narratives embedded within inquiry-based questions so that we all can learn from one another in order to better our practice.

Notes on contributors

Vanessa Irvin, Assistant Professor, Library and Information Science Program, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawaii has research interests that include the socio-cultural anthropology of urban and rural libraries, reading interests and social epistemologies of library users, multicultural literature, especially pertaining to picture books and storytelling, and professional development practices of public service librarians.

Wiebke Reile, Doctoral Candidate, Communications & Information Sciences Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawaii has research interests that include exploring social interactions amongst public service professionals in communities of practice on social media platforms. Wiebke has significant field and research experience implementing media literacy practices with professional groups collaborating on social media.

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