Library Community Engagement in the Online Environment: Impact, Lessons Identified, and Way Forward

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Abstract: The primary objective of this research is to assess the online community engagement programs of the De La Salle University (DLSU) Libraries delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers utilized a mixed-method approach to get a holistic view of the participants' assessment. The findings of the study revealed that DLSU Libraries has been successful in implementing community engagement programs via online means despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. Though excellent in the overall program components, there has been recorded a minimal scope for improvement which can greatly help in creating a roadmap for enhancement of future community engagement efforts.

Key Words: community engagement, outreach services, academic libraries, libraries and COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has changed in the provision of information sources and services in all types of libraries ever since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the highly stricken programs is community engagement. Community engagement and community outreach are used interchangeably in the field of librarianship that the researchers decided to use the term "community engagement" to incorporate activities where librarians and library staff work with their community members to solve issues for the betterment of the community. This may or may not require community members to be physically present in the library (American Library Association, 2018; Lashley, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic did not hinder libraries to innovate and develop ways to continuously serve their patrons and their community. For instance, a study by Penaflor and Labangon (2021) revealed that all member libraries of the ASEAN University Network Inter-Library Online (AUNILO) are able to deliver different types of community engagement and outreach programs.

Traditionally, libraries conduct community engagement by means of face-to-face instructions, hands-on activities, and programming on campus (Meyers-Martin & Lampert, 2013) e.g. in-person seminars and workshops, book drives, book donations, and storytelling sessions. The De La Salle University (DLSU) Libraries, by way of illustration, identified seven key programming activities for its community engagement thrust: (1) Adopt-a-Library, (2) KIRA Tells a Story, (3) WeAreInfoSMART, (4) LORA, the Librarian, (5)LiBRO, (6) GoGreen!, and (7) other activities in support of the poor and marginalized sectors of the society (De La Salle University Libraries, n.d.). These community engagement activities are attuned to DLSU's core values of faith, service, and communion. The activities are conducted in-person or with the involved community, spearheaded by DLSU Libraries' Social Engagement Committee.

With the imminence of technology in the past decades, coupled with the outset of the pandemic, the community engagement practices have now been transformed into flexible formats that can potentially reach many people (Meyers-Martin & Lampert, 2013). As such, DLSU Libraries started transforming its community engagement programming activities into virtual means to accommodate the demands of time without compromising the commitment to serve communities.

1.1 Research Questions

Delivering a community engagement program is one thing; assessing its impact is another. Purposeful assessment, according to Graves, et al. (2018), provides evidence of impact and opportunities for improvement. They further emphasized that "..outreach conducted without assessment might be viewed as tangential to organizational missions, that is, as a nice-to-have but nonessential activity." It is in this premise that the researchers ventured on this topic. The primary objective of this study is to solely assess the online community engagement activities of DLSU Libraries delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the researchers aimed to answer the following questions: (1) What is the perceived quality and impact of the online community engagement programs on the participants? (2) What are the lessons identified from the accomplished community engagement programs? and (3) From the overall assessment and lessons identified, what strategies can the researchers recommend for future community engagement activities?

1.2 Online Community Engagement Programs

Two online community engagement programs were assessed in this study. First is the three sessions of WeAreInfoSMART— programs which help group of individuals gain information literacy skills, whose target recipients are students and teachers of public and small private schools. Topics discussed under this lecture-type program are (1) finding relevant literature, (2) organizing and writing literature review, (3) ethical and legal use of information, (4) copyright and fair use, (5) citing and referencing. Second is the three sessions of LORA, the Librarian— training and workshops on the different aspect of library work intended for librarians, library staff, volunteers working in community/barangay libraries/centers, public libraries, public school libraries, and library and information science (LIS) students who are undergoing on-the-job-training. Topics discussed were mainly about library innovation and strategies in coping up with the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research is significant first and foremost to the DLSU Libraries administration and its Social Engagement Committee for they will be able to explore the impact of their programs and create a roadmap for improvement. Secondly, this research is beneficial to DLSU, as the social engagement efforts of its departments—The Libraries, for this case, reflect the institution's commitment and contribution to the betterment of communities. The researchers hope to invite more Lasallian community members to get involved and participate in the various community engagement activities within and outside the university. Lastly, this research will benefit organizations conducting community engagement, as a model option for designing, delivering, and assessing their community engagement efforts.

2. METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a mixed-method approach. In the quantitative approach, the researchers utilized the online post-evaluation survey accomplished by 1,855 participants out of the 3,401 virtual attendees of the six online community engagement programs held last 2021. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the attitude and perception of the participants towards each community engagement program.

The resulting data were organized and presented through tabular form using Microsoft Excel. Data were analyzed using frequency distribution, mean, and standard deviation. In the qualitative approach, the comments and suggestions from the online post-evaluation survey were collated, coded, and examined using the six-phase thematic analysis model of Nowell et.al (2017): (1) data familiarization, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming of themes, and (6) producing the report.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the assessment of the participants to the program flow, resource speakers, topic relevance, and their overall satisfaction with each online community engagement program attended. Lessons identified and possible ways forward were also determined.

3.1 Impact

Program Flow and Implementation. This area covered the pacing, time allotment, sequencing, platform option, the learning experience of the participants, and the like. The highest mean is 4.83 under the program *LORA, the Librarian 2,* with a verbal interpretation of 'excellent' and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.39. The lowest recorded mean is 4.41 (SD=0.61)

Data indicated that all participants considered the program flow exceptional. This is strongly evident in their comments:

"Just want to commend the efficiency and his interactive approach during the webinar."

"It[']s so warm and amazing to be part of t[h]is webinar. I hope I can see you all in person when COVID-19 [is] gone. I am deeply thankful for all the help and support you have given to me."

"…The platform was very effective, no glitches whatsoever."

"The webinar is great, it is well managed."

Moreover, it is noted that there was an inclination towards online programs which have a more free-flowing conversation style than online programs in the form of one-way method e.g. lecture. This also explains why *LORA, the Librarian 2* garnered the highest mean, as the form of this program is panel discussion style, allowing a two-way communication where both the speakers and the participants take part in the exchange of ideas.

Resource Speakers. In terms of resource speakers' knowledge, expertise, presentation delivery, personality, and public speaking skills, the upmost average is 4.84 (SD=0.39) under *LORA, the Librarian 2,* and a grand mean of 4.71. This indicates a highly positive view of the participants to the resource speakers of each session, as reflected too in their comments:

"The speaker is very knowledgeable to the topic he discusses and he has a clear voice while discussing."

"The speaker is superb that I can't even think [of] an adjective to describe him."

"They are all great at presenting[,] that's why I learned so much from them."

"I like how calm and reflective tone a speaker has. It makes the message more palatable."

"I would like to commend our credible speaker. The credibility of speakers would be an effective way to easily believe, trust and absorb the learning given."

"Thank you for choosing a resource speaker who is very grounded in his explanation and made the subject matter easy to grasp."

"I think the speaker was the right person for this webinar…"

From the four program components, the resource speaker element accumulated the highest mean. This reflects the success of the organizers in selecting the right resource speaker for the right topic and the right target participants. Likewise, this exhibits how effective the resource speakers are to the participants.

Topic. When it comes to topic relevance and usefulness in school, work, and career, *LORA, the Librarian 2* reaped the highest mean of 4.83(SD=0.41) and *LORA, the Librarian 3* with the lowest mean of 4.31(SD=0.70), both considered invaluable. *LORA, the Librarian 2* was consistently the leading program as it tackled timely matters involving the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the participants view the topic as practically useful and relevant for them:

" I will use the knowledge I learned today and apply all the advice that our speaker shared. Thank you DLSU Libraries for this very informative webinar."

"This webinar series is really helping students like us to accomplish our research effectively"

"I really appreciate the topic[,] it is very timely with the current online setup and the realities we have now in our libraries in terms of sharing contents and information from our various resources. I really learn[ed] a lot."

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Overall satisfaction. As to the overall satisfaction, the highest recorded mean is 4.87 (SD=0.37) and a grand mean of 4.60, implying the positive view of the participants to the entire program:

> "This training workshop really help[ed] me to create new ideas and activities for our library."

> "The training workshop is very worth my time."

> "It was such [an] informative and worthwhile activity that made us all better to best librarians in time of the pandemic."

3.2 Lessons Identified

The previous section highlighted the many strengths of the programs. Predominantly, all four program components were viewed as excellent by the participants. The highest-rated component is the resource speaker followed by the program flow and implementation. While DLSU Libraries aimed for exemplary programs, there are still a few areas for improvement identified by 44 participants (2%), which are as follows:

Program Flow and Implementation. The preeminent feedback points to this component. Researchers observed differing views with regards to the time frame. While some participants find the online programs lengthy, others find them insufficient. A few participants requested an extended time. These are evident in the following responses:

> " I suggest that you should not exceed the said time for the next meeting. This has an effect on the listeners because the longer the discussion takes, the shorter their attention span gets. But I would like to thank DLSU Libraries for conducting an effective free webinar."

> "…I really learn a lot. I just wish there could have been more time for the open forum and even for the topic presentation because I noticed the speaker had skip[ped] some points to discuss further due to time constraint[s]. Nevertheless, it's very informative and nicely done."

> "Pl[ea]s[e] consider those of us watching from Africa about the timing."

Aside from the time duration, the participants stipulated the (1) availability of the recordings for later viewing, (2) inclusion of interactive elements for audience engagement e.g. polls, (3) reduction of background noise in the speaker's end, (4) platform orientation and navigation, and the (5) suggestion to permit more participants in the sessions.

Resource Speakers. Albeit commendations and praise towards the resource speakers outweigh dissenting comments, a lot can be learned from those. 10 participants (1%) raised concerns on further elaboration of the topic by giving practical examples and applications. Few also commented on one of the resource speakers' presentation elements i.e. font size, display, and instructional pacing:

> "It was a clear[,]concise teaching, but my main concern was the text display[.] It was quite on 240p display and [I] couldn't quite read the texts."

> "I am weak when it comes to communication and comprehension. I can't pick up on the lessons taught to me right away, I hope the speaker doesn't speak too fast and my cellphone signal is often weak."

Topic. Compelling and fascinating topics are one of the primary reasons why participants get drawn to joining an online program or a webinar (Kirchner, 2021; Zoumenou et al., 2015). The university library did not fail to offer a variety of topics that received a lot of positive feedback especially in terms of the programs' strong sense of innovation and on its relevance and usefulness for school, work, and professional development. Nevertheless, some shared their comments on the topic's comprehensiveness:

> "More definite prerequisites before dwelling into complex and profound topics."

> "… two-hour webinar for bulky information is too short."

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"I think I had information overload after the webinar. But still, the webinar given was very informative and timely. And the speaker delivered what we needed to learn."

3.3 Way Forward

DLSU Libraries has been successful in implementing its community engagement programs in online mode despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. This research was able to explore the perceived quality and impact of the programs from the viewpoint of the participants. Though excellent in the overall program components, there has been recorded a minimal scope for improvement which can greatly help in creating a roadmap for enhancement of future community engagement efforts.

Suggestions for future topics. The top five topics recommended by the participants for the upcoming online programs are information technology-related learning sessions (15%), intellectual property, copyright, data privacy, and plagiarism (11%), the future of the librarianship profession (9%), innovative library services (9%) and acquisition and collection management of digital resources (8%). The COVID-19 pandemic amplified people's reliance on technology that many are seeking out programs, such as webinars, that could enhance their technology competence. In fact, researchers reported an increase in digital literacy skills acquisition and use of technology during COVID-19 (Lobo & Dhuri, 2021; Winter et al., 2021). The suggested topics can be used by DLSU Libraries in developing their next online programs, as these are deemed critical in today's highly online and fast-paced world. This will additionally compel people to attend as these topics came from them.

Program Flow. Time duration has been repeatedly mentioned under the scope for improvement. While many participants are good with the time frame, there are some who find it lengthy. The researchers suggest slicing the topics into bite-sized workshops/webinars, which can be asynchronously or synchronously done. It is also note considering to devise modules in a learning management system based on

varying competency levels e.g. beginner, intermediate, advanced modules. Cruz and Gonda (2021)'s recommendation on delivering a ladderized-level based program presents a good point too.

What's more? The six online community engagement programs of DLSU Libraries enumerated in this research majorly falls under the category of 'instruction & services-based outreach' mixed with 'collection-based outreach,' 'partnerships and community-focused outreach' and 'multi-pronged themed events and programming.' These are four out of the six outreach categories presented by Farrell and Mastel (2016). The remaining categories of 'whole person' and 'just for fun outreach,' as well as the combination of two or more categories, are worth deliberating too.

4. CONCLUSIONS

DLSU Libraries is on the right path of delivering online community engagement as evident in the recognition, participation, and patronage of communities (Cruz & Gonda, 2021). The impact of the online programs on the participants reflects the university's and the library's commitment to lifelong learning and innovation despite disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of how small or large a program is, how successful it was in the eyes of the organizers, or its mode of delivery, assessment should not be overlooked. It is only through assessment that an organization can measure its programs' impact on the participants, identify weaknesses, find solutions and adjust the future programs accordingly.

This research highlighted only the assessment of online programs from the perspective of the participants. Another angle worth considering for further study is an exploration of the lived experiences of the organizers themselves. This will give light to the challenges they faced and solutions made. The lessons identified may turn to lessons learned for other program organizers.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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