

Chasing Reference

Librarians and Collaborative Blogging

Amy Barlow, Heather Love Beverley, Carrie Dunham-LaGree, Sarah Elichko, and Emily Hamstra, Guest Columnists

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I'm quite excited about this column because it touches upon so many interesting subjects at once: RUSA, professional marketing, collaborative blogging, and the Emerging Leaders program. I met Amy Barlow two ALA Midwinter Meetings ago in Dallas, and she immediately struck me as an enthusiastic new librarian who was going places. Judging from this excellent column written in collaboration with her entire Emerging Leaders team, they're all a credit to RUSA and the Emerging Leaders program itself.—*Editor*

The American Library Association's Emerging Leaders program "is a leadership development program which enables newer library workers from across the country to participate in problem-solving work groups, network with peers, gain an inside look into ALA structure, and have an opportunity to serve the profession in a leadership capacity."¹ As part of this program, Emerging Leaders are put in small groups, and each group is assigned a project. Projects are proposed by ALA divisions, committees, and roundtables to address various needs within ALA. Each Emerging Leaders group works with whoever proposed the project in order to meet the project's goals and intended outcomes.

In 2012, the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Publications and Communications Committee proposed an Emerging Leaders project to create a blog for RUSA members. This blog would encourage professional conversations about emerging trends relevant to the members of RUSA. The blog would encourage RUSA members to share ideas about issues relevant to reference and user services. Amber Prentiss, committee chair, helped to instigate the project; Michael Hermann, incoming committee chair, served as the project's mentor for the Emerging Leaders team; and Andrea Hill served as the RUSA staff liaison. The goals and outcomes of this project, set forward by the Publications and Communications Committee in the original project proposal, are as follows: Emerging Leaders will make editorial decisions about blog content, style, and presentation; will recruit reference and user services library professionals to serve as contributors, as well as writing themselves (if individual members so desire); will develop recommendations for marketing the project; will develop recommendations for the blog's future; and will keep the RUSA Publications and Communications Committee apprised of their progress. Emerging Leaders Amy Barlow, Heather Love Beverley, Carrie Dunham-LaGree, Sarah Elichko, and Emily Hamstra were selected to work on the project. We worked together from the very beginning of this project to ensure that we were meeting the goals and intended outcomes, while creating a vibrant new blog for RUSA.

As a group, we reflect the diverse makeup of RUSA. Amy Barlow is the reference and instruction librarian at Quinebaug Valley Community College, Heather Love Beverley is the youth services assistant manager at the Cook Memorial Public Library District, Carrie Dunham-LaGree is the librarian for digital literacy and general education at Drake University, Sarah Elichko is the social sciences librarian at Swarthmore College, and Emily Hamstra is the learning librarian and kinesiology librarian at the University of Michigan Shapiro Undergraduate Library. This broad range of perspectives added great interest to the collaborative writing of the blog. Our varied work environments added unique perspectives as we each wrote about our library's services, collections, and programs.

We met for the first time at the 2012 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Dallas, Texas. At a lunch meeting with Michael Hermann, our project mentor, we discussed the goals and intended outcomes for the blog. We decided that we wanted the blog to appeal to reference librarians but also be a resource for a library user who might stumble across the blog as a tool to learn more about the library profession. It was a goal for us from the beginning that the blog would appeal to members of RUSA and compliment the official RUSA blog, which is generally updated by the RUSA staff and board to publicize upcoming events, new resources, and continuing education opportunities.

PLANNING AND LAUNCHING

We left our first meeting with the blog's title, *Chasing Reference* (<http://chasingreference.com>), and a strong sense of the blog's direction. "Chasing" evolved from an anagram of our first names: Carrie, Heather, Amy, Sarah, and Emily. From our initial brainstorming session at ALA Midwinter in January 2012 to our first post in April 2012, launching *Chasing Reference* took a little over two months. During that time, the group met virtually in ALA Connect on a biweekly basis to make decisions and assign work tasks. Free, web-based office solutions made it easy for us to schedule meetings, set agendas, and contribute to working documents. Before our first virtual meeting in February, we collaborated on our own time, using Google Docs to draft a basic agenda of only six action items. These action items led us through the entire planning process. Our goals were (1) to identify the focus and audience of the blog, (2) to determine how frequently we would post, (3) to find a platform and domain, (4) to design the website and develop style guidelines, (5) to plan for the blog's implementation and publicity, and (6) to develop a comprehensive timeline for the project.

Our first step was to give *Chasing Reference* its *raison d'être*. Our purpose would be to "bring together experiences of reference librarians." True to the original Emerging Leader project description, we made editorial decisions to ensure that the blog would provide broad-themed content aimed at stimulating professional conversation. The tone and presentation would be professional, original, and fun. Also, the blog would have strong ties to RUSA, with content that would explicitly reference RUSA sections whenever relevant, alongside



Figure 1. The Logo of the Chasing Reference Blog

an icon on the blog that linked to the RUSA website (<http://rusa.ala.org/blog>). Outside of RUSA members, we identified nonmember librarians and aspiring reference librarians as a potential audience.

As a strategy for capturing and expanding our audience, it was important to publish posts in a consistent manner. We decided to post items at 8 a.m. (EST) on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Monday and Wednesday posts were stand-alone, topical posts and included interviews, news, features, essays, and guest posts. Friday posts would be a collaborative effort. On the first Friday of the month, we featured our "What We're Reading" series, in which we each wrote about what we're reading, from books to blogs to articles. All other Fridays featured "Curiouser and Curiouser: What Caught Our Eyes Online This Week," in which we shared our favorite links from the week. To manage our shared deadlines, we utilized scheduling polls at Doodle.com. Not only did this ensure a fair distribution of writing responsibilities amongst the five collaborators, the Doodle poll made it possible for each of us to select our own publishing deadlines.

After selecting Wordpress as a platform for the blog, we browsed template options, settling by consensus on the Reddle design. Graphic designer Anna Lehr Mueser graciously created our playful logo (see figure 1), which inspired the blog's subtitle, "Down the Rabbit Hole of Librarianship." A single member of our group who had experience in Wordpress developed and, with input from all of us, finalized the design of our website. We agreed to adopt the writing guidelines of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (16th ed.), providing links in the text to cited sources when possible. All of these decisions, along with guidelines about bylines, linking, tagging, and formatting posts, were documented as policies for the benefit of ourselves and future writers. With everything in place we were ready to soft-launch by April 2012, beginning with a "Day in the Life" post by each of us to introduce ourselves and our unique work environments to our readership. We planned a true launch of *Chasing Reference* for May, at which point we would market it through social media, word of mouth, professional discussion lists, and at the ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California in June 2012.

WRITING AND REPORTING

Despite the importance of designing and planning, the ultimate success of a blog depends on the quality of its posts.

Our group began discussing possible blog post ideas during our first meeting at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in January 2012. We created a list of potential posts in Google Docs. This process was useful for defining which topics might fall within the blog's broad scope, while the list itself was valuable in times of writer's block.

The connection between *Chasing Reference* and RUSA provided some structure to guide topic selection. Many posts fall roughly within the interests of particular RUSA sections. For example, aligning with the focus and activities of the Collection Development and Evaluation Section (CODES), we have written collection development-related posts ranging from recommended reading for college and college-bound students to suggestions for keeping up with the latest in fiction. Aligning with Emerging Technologies in Reference Section (MARS), we have featured posts related to emerging technologies such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and teaching library users about mobile apps. Posts on the release of the 1940 Census and finding US Congressional hearings complement the interests of the History Section (HS). By focusing on the breadth of RUSA's activities and building from the diversity of our own interests, we have included content relevant to public, academic, and special librarians alike.

Guest posts have been a valuable source of new ideas and voices on the blog. To solicit guest posts, an announcement was made at a RUSA board meeting. A group member also followed up with board members individually via email. In June 2012, RUSA president Gary White featured two new book awards from RUSA, the Andrew Carnegie Medals for Fiction and Nonfiction. Mary Paglieri Popp (vice president/president elect of RUSA) wrote two guest posts: one that highlighted Mark Kupersmith's work on library jargon,² and another that discussed recent research on search behavior among library users and nonusers.

Throughout this project, our group has relied on site statistics to evaluate the reach of our blog. One advantage of using the Wordpress platform is that it has allowed us to easily review these statistics. In addition to indicating how many visitors came to the blog in a given day, the statistics also include referral links. For 2012, our top referring sites were Twitter, Facebook, and Google Reader. This information has provided guidance on the most effective outlets through which to publicize our blog.

A significant boost to our site traffic occurred after the Emerging Leaders poster session at the ALA Annual Conference on June 22, 2012. Participation in the poster session was an integral part of the Emerging Leaders experience. Not only did we have the opportunity to hear about other Emerging Leaders projects, but our group had the opportunity to explain the purpose and focus of *Chasing Reference* to many interested conference attendees. We used tablets to allow visitors to look at the blog and encouraged interested visitors to become guest contributors. We were particularly motivated to reach out to new readers because our group had already decided that this experience would mark a mid-point in the project rather than a capstone.

As RUSA intended this blog project to become a multi-year Emerging Leaders project, our group began considering the long-term future of the blog at our very first meeting. We agreed that ending the blog abruptly after the ALA's Annual Conference, when most Emerging Leaders projects end, would risk sacrificing the good publicity and interest that would hopefully be generated by the poster presentation. Our tentative plan was to continue blogging at least until the ALA Midwinter Meeting in 2013, when the 2013 class of Emerging Leaders would take over. To help sustain the project on a longer term basis, we developed a modified weekly posting schedule.

PASSING THE TORCH

Chasing Reference was created with the intention of being a multi-year Emerging Leaders project. Throughout the process, we made conscious decisions on what should be left for the next team to continue so that the blog can continue to evolve beyond our current tenure. Most notably, we decided that while our main mission was to create the foundation of the blog, next year's team would be tasked with creating a full-force social media launch of *Chasing Reference*, truly bringing the blog into social awareness with its own presence on Facebook and Twitter. Up to this point, all social media outreach for Chasing Reference has been done on a personal level, through each of our individual accounts and various discussion lists. We continued to create and add new content to *Chasing Reference* to ensure that next year's team had an active blog to take over.

In January 2013, a new class of Emerging Leaders started and was assigned their projects for the term. With a wealth of opportunities presented by various associations within ALA, not all projects were guaranteed to be selected. Unfortunately, *Chasing Reference* was not assigned to a team. This led to an interesting dilemma regarding the future of the blog. While we were always aware of the possibility of our project not being continued by the Emerging Leaders program, we did not have solid plans in place for that outcome. We immediately set in place a continued posting schedule throughout the spring to keep *Chasing Reference* current and contacted our mentors and guides in RUSA for our next steps. Yes, it is a setback for the blog, but not an insurmountable one; in fact, it could be seen as the opening for a wealth of new opportunities.

We are now in the process of examining the new possibilities for the future of *Chasing Reference*. The beauty of the blog being an Emerging Leaders project was that, on a yearly basis, a set of fresh voices would be added. It is this feature that we, as the current creators, feel is our biggest strength and draw. We started with a diverse selection of voices, and we would like to continue offering a selection of diverse voices. With our RUSA mentors and guides, we are deciding whether we shall continue writing *Chasing Reference* ourselves with an increased effort to recruit guest bloggers, if *Chasing Reference* will be handed over

to a RUSA committee or task force to maintain and recruit additional writers, or if we shall solicit volunteers throughout the organization to join and help us on our journey down the rabbit hole of blogging. Above all, our team and RUSA strongly feel that *Chasing Reference* has a future and will continue on, even if the original plans have changed.

CONCLUSION

Maintaining a collaborative blog has been an interesting and informative experience—one might even say that it has indeed been “curiouser and curiouser.” We’ve found that the policies and guidelines we initially set in place in our first months of working have been vital to maintaining a cohesive blog consisting of many voices. Of equal importance has been the clear and constant communication between group members, both to ensure continuity in the blog and to build a working rapport with each other. It is important to note that our team only had the pleasure of meeting in person twice: once at ALA Midwinter in Dallas and again at ALA Annual in Anaheim. In between those times, we have worked together

across the miles to consistently bring engaging and thoughtful content to *Chasing Reference* each week. Our guidelines, policies, and clear communication skills have been the key to success for that. In addition, it has also proved extremely important to maintain flexibility. The very nature of blogging, particularly collaborative blogging, is one of constant change. Schedules change, jobs change, technology changes, topics change, and even future plans change, and the ability to adapt to these changes is key.

Our experience in the crafting and creation of *Chasing Reference* has been invaluable. We have learned from each other and our readers, and we have enjoyed the experience immensely. The future of *Chasing Reference*, though unknown, is bright, and we hope that you join us as we continue our adventure down the rabbit hole of librarianship!

References

1. American Library Association, “ALA Emerging Leaders Program,” accessed February 8, 2013, www.ala.org/educationcareers/leadership/emergingleaders.
2. John Kupersmith, “Library Terms that Users Understand,” 2012, accessed February 8, 2013, www.jkup.net/terms.html.

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