

## Analyzing *La Cuna*: New Approaches for Mentoring in Professional Associations

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### Abstract

This case study explores the implementation of *La Cuna*, an online mentoring forum in a small, subject-based professional association, the Seminar for the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM). Designed using the social network software Ning, the forum functioned as an informal learning community for 38 members and was an innovative response to geographical challenges and changing technological skills. Using participation data and a questionnaire to analyze the implementation and development of the hybrid e-mentoring community, this study reveals challenges and benefits that should be considered when managing similar professional development activities. While the forum failed to maintain sustained participation, findings revealed the need to assess professional association member needs regularly and highlighted the importance of continued exploration of online learning tools. Through the description of this project, professional associations and other learning communities will gain insights into the creation and implementation of an online e-mentoring learning community, which will be useful as librarians and groups attempt to meet member professional development needs.

Author keywords: Mentoring; Ning; Learning community

### Introduction

According to frequently repeated statistics from the American Library Association, 58% of librarians now working will have retired by 2019.<sup>1</sup> While recruiting and retaining academic librarians with subject knowledge is a perennial challenge for administrators, libraries with specialized programs such as modern language and area studies face the double problem of recruiting librarians with strong language and cultural abilities as well as other skills that are necessary in the academic library.<sup>2</sup>

Within the field of Latin American Studies, the number of undergraduate, masters and PhD degrees granted has grown sharply since 1970.<sup>3</sup> Librarians reacted to the growth of these programs by developing broad multi-lingual and multi-regional collections as well as establishing the Seminar for the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), the professional organization for Latin American and Caribbean studies librarians. Despite the growth in library specialization, training for Latin American studies librarians was either non-existent or developed haphazardly. It was not until 2008 that

the University of Illinois introduced the first Latin American librarianship class, a unique course offering among library and information science (LIS) programs. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from SALALM suggests that the number of positions is decreasing as some vacant Latin American studies librarian positions are never re-opened for recruitment. Thus, staff retirement and library reorganization mean that non-specialized librarians must increasingly take on area or subject responsibilities despite a lack of specific skills or language training. This is particularly problematic in fields such as Latin American librarianship that requires familiarity with the “unique characteristics” of the Latin American publishing industry and other collection development.<sup>4</sup>

Mentoring has often been used as a way to support these new librarians.<sup>5</sup> Mentoring programs vary considerably in their scope, but many are hosted at the librarian’s home institution. While this is useful to help with the local tenure or promotion requirements, the local mentor cannot always advise on specific subject-related problems. Increasingly, professional associations also provide a mentor experience. Within the field of



librarianship, recent examples of mentoring have come from the Western European Studies Section (WESS) of the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the New Members' Round Table (NMRT) of the American Library Association (ALA).

In the field of Latin American and Iberian librarianship, SALALM offers a supportive network of local chapters and an electronic mailing list that encourage information and knowledge sharing. However, simply contributing to email lists really does not create the personal connections needed. From the author's own personal experience, an ethos of collegiality engendered by strong personal contacts also helps new librarians feel accepted into the field. Participation in professional association events can often be intimidating and it takes time to build professional contacts, especially for new librarians who are geographically or institutionally isolated. Given SALALM's memberships of around 200 members with varied collection foci and expertise, and it is not always possible to set up suitable or geographically proximate local chapter or, by implication, traditional mentoring pairs.<sup>6</sup>

In order to create foster collegiality and mentorships, the author established an online mentoring forum, *La Cuna* ("the cradle" in Spanish) using the social networking site, Ning. Designed to enable an informal "sheltered" discussion forum, it aimed to provide a space where new librarians could ask questions about aspects of Latin American, Iberian and Latino studies librarianship or where more experienced mentor librarians could lead a discussion on a topic related to the field. A key feature was its informality. Self-selecting mentees and mentors were intentionally not matched in pairs in order to encourage wide-ranging, fluid, multiple-way knowledge sharing. The forum also offered a knowledge management function by recording discussions for future reference. It was envisaged that participants would use the space to pose practical questions (e.g. book buying trips), to have discussions on a topic, (e.g. managing a Latin American reference collection), or to receive specialized training in Latin American or Iberian studies librarianship that would not be available through home institutions. Accordingly, *La Cuna* proved to be very subject focused where findings could readily be

applicable to other small professional associations.

Ultimately, the project failed to encourage wide and sustained participation in knowledge sharing among librarians in Latin America. There were many possible reasons for the lack of success, one of which included Ning's sudden discontinuation of free access to the software. Despite this failure, a review of its setup and operations will be helpful in understanding library developments in Latin America and also be instructive to those considering mentorship programs in similar organizations.

Accordingly, this paper examines the implementation and usage of the online mentoring forum by looking at site usage and participant feedback gathered through a questionnaire. The first section of this paper will situate *La Cuna* within the framework of professional association mentoring and e-learning communities. The second section will study the implementation of the project, including the format, organization and use statistics. The third section will examine some of the challenges that affected the project, including lessons learned and recommendations for future implementations of similar projects. Though specific to SALALM, this findings in this case study may help other small, subject-based professional better understand how to develop and implement e-mentoring programs. Findings could also be applicable to other small online learning communities that are looking to create a more formal way to increase member participation, or for physically situated learning communities looking to expand and to span geographical or temporal impediments.

## Literature Review

The concept of mentoring is fairly common in library literature. Numerous programs have been established to help library students, new librarians and tenure-track librarians in their professional careers, and the literature provides a good overview of definitions, established structures and best practices. Alanna Moore, et al., provide a general overview and analysis of common mentoring practices while Bonnie Osif reviews mentoring programs focused mostly on programs established within the home institution.<sup>7</sup> Both

articles also cover the concepts of formal and informal mentoring and discuss advantages and disadvantages of both techniques. Mentoring within professional associations forms a significant subsection of the mentoring literature; Diane Zabel provides a clear review of this literature, which builds upon Ann Ritchie and Paul Genoni's excellent overview of the concept.<sup>8</sup> Professional associations are interested in promoting mentoring schemes for several reasons. Firstly, mentoring is often seen as an "advantage of professional membership" and is used to attract new recruits to the association.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, mentorship programs are seen as an educational tool, to provide "continuing professional education and professional development" for members of these organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Mentoring is also seen as vitally important in subject-specific associations. George Paganellis provides details of the WESS job shadowing and mentor program, while Jeanne Davidson and Cheryl Middleton study mentoring as a recruitment and retention tool in the field of science librarianship.<sup>11</sup> Davidson and Middleton explain exactly why subject-specific mentoring is so valuable, stating that:

The specialized subject areas often intimidate new librarians who may not have a science background. In addition, many science librarians work in branch libraries or special libraries with few staff and fewer people to help with questions that may arise. In these circumstances they may be called upon not only to understand the discipline, but also to be adept at all areas of librarianship.<sup>12</sup>

Mentoring in subject-specific associations is seen as a way to pass on knowledge and to support members.

However, the literature also shows that mentoring programs do not always succeed in their goals. Davidson and Middleton notice that "formal mentoring opportunities sponsored by professional associations are not used as much as they could be" and Samantha Hines reports on the moderately successful ALA NMRT mentoring scheme, found useful by only 50% of mentees.<sup>13</sup> Freedman mentions Eby's 2004 findings of "negative aspects of mentoring reported by protégés,

including mentor/protégé mismatch, manipulative mentor behavior and lack of mentor expertise."<sup>14</sup>

In response to these problems as well as the growing role of technology, a new area within mentorship literature is the rise of e-mentoring. According to the National Mentoring Center, e-mentoring involves "...mentoring projects that use technology to facilitate and support mentor relationships."<sup>15</sup> E-mentoring takes advantage of new technologies to solve some of the time, geography and equality problems of traditional mentoring, while also giving more time for reflection and learning.<sup>16</sup> David Megginson reports on an early email-based e-mentoring scheme, stating, "e-mentoring now stands in its own right as a different kind of development process from face-to-face mentoring."<sup>17</sup> Hines describes another early email-based mentoring model established by the NMRT, noting that participants who liked the online format requested that the NMRT "host a mentoring blog community where people could respond to the discussion topics as a group and share knowledge that way."<sup>18</sup> Janet Hilbun and Lynn Akin praise e-mentoring for transmitting "knowledge and [the] professional canon."<sup>19</sup> Lisa Gieskes a library mentoring program held through Second Life which connects University of South Carolina Library and Information students and alumni.<sup>20</sup>

Like traditional mentoring programs, e-mentoring programs do not always meet program goals. Hilbun and Akin mention that e-mentoring schemes require considerable "administrative support, technical support and planning," as well as structure, objectives and communication tools.<sup>21</sup> Megginson notes that access and technology competence are two of the major drawbacks in his program while Blummer states that libraries "remain slow to adopt learning communities to foster education and collaboration in their profession."<sup>22</sup> Vrasidas Charalambos, et al. maintain that a significant challenge "is to examine if online communities are worth the effort and investment and if they actually make a difference in increasing the efficiency of an organization."<sup>23</sup> They note that other challenges can be technological or social, including social organization and community spirit. Finally, Buchanan, et al. relate that the "difficulties in empirical research on e-

mentoring include small sample size and cross-sectional data” and

self-reported data, observer effects, self-selection bias, challenges in establishing reliable control groups, variability in processes, too many variables which may affect measurements of mentoring outcomes, [and] the usual challenges in research on social phenomena and interactions of isolating cause and effect even where correlations can be made.<sup>24</sup>

While many of the same problems are present in traditional and e-mentoring programs, the scope and possibilities of e-mentoring extend beyond one-on-one professional development. For Randy Bass and Brett Eynon, learning in the 21st century is socially situated learning and the structure and format of online learning communities have a significant effect on learners:

First, [online learning communities] have the potential to create intellectual communities that all too rarely occur within and around classrooms. Second, they have the potential to connect students to communities of practice outside of the classroom where knowledge and ideas are continuously negotiated. And finally, the public nature of many new media pedagogies fundamentally changes the ways that students engage the full range of cognitive and emotional dimensions of their learning.<sup>25</sup>

Technology not only enables a much wider scope for the e-mentoring program, it also affects how people learn. Librarians organizing e-mentoring programs need to be aware of and adapt to the effect of an online learning environment of learners. For Blummer, Bell, and Charalambos, online learning communities are natural extensions of e-mentoring programs, which have an interesting potential for more efficient and directed learning.<sup>26</sup>

Learning communities have been shown to provide many benefits for participants, for mentoring, communication and other professional development. Charalambos et al., provide an excellent overview of learning communities in education, and identify how online learning communities provide

an instant network of contacts with useful skills (social network capital), a personal and distributed intelligence, mutual trust, just-in-time answers to questions (knowledge capital) and psychological support from others who might share common experiences (communion).<sup>27</sup>

Bell emphasizes how online learning communities can support professional development and isolation in the library because “discussion lists offer weak foundations for learning environments: lists serve well as vehicles for information-sharing, but persistent changes in knowledge or behaviors rarely take place there.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, Blummer provides a thorough survey of learning communities in professional associations and provides implementation strategies and examples of program benefits for both participants and the professional association.<sup>29</sup>

Outside the LIS field, e-mentoring has often been implemented successfully both inside and outside organizations. Interestingly, it has often been used as a tool to encourage professional development for women, due, in part, to the emphasis on asynchronous communication. In Tenhunen and Leppisaari’s 2010 managerial study of women, 60% of respondents were somewhat interested in an e-mentoring community and 10% completely interested.<sup>30</sup> Hamilton and Scandura provide an excellent overview of the challenges and procedures involved in setting up an e-mentoring program.<sup>31</sup> Headlam-Wells, Gosland, and Craig analyze a UK-based female manager e-mentoring program. While the program relies on traditional pairing, the authors found “the opportunity for the learning networks to be multi-dimensional” was a distinct advantage of the system.<sup>32</sup> The experiences from the business and management literature show similar benefits and challenges to LIS studies, though the foci of non-LIS programs are more firmly based in theories of communities of practice and social learning.

Thus, the literature reveals that although many studies have assessed traditional and e-mentoring programs, there has been considerably less exploration of professional learning communities. The growing interest in online learning communities in libraries as well as the lack of evidence-based studies on professional applica-

tions provided an additional impetus to study this hybrid mentor-learning community.

## Implementation

### Selection of an online platform

*La Cuna's* main foci were creating and sharing knowledge, while enabling members to get to know each other. The technology chosen to host *La Cuna* needed to encompass social networking and group or collaborative content creation functionality (e.g., creation of shared committee documents). A social networking service such as Facebook provides an interconnected group website, which usually includes user profiles and facilitates interaction within a group in an online space. A collaborative content space provides a single but broadly-accessible area where multiple members can post, edit and record information, similar to Wikipedia. When *La Cuna* was being developed, there were very few free web-based platforms that could perform both functions. While Drupal and Moodle provide some core educational networking functionality and a wiki or a blog would have allowed for collaborative content creation, Ning's emphasis on collaborative content and social networking seemed like the best fit.

Ning (<http://www.ning.com>) provides an easy-to-use customizable website, which allows users to create and maintain all aspects of a social network (including the creation of profiles and personal information spaces), as well as content development needs such as discussion forums and file uploading. At the time of implementation, it was available free of charge. In July 2010, Ning introduced a pricing structure for all accounts. Although Pearson later began sponsoring educational use, the option was widely known.

### Content and Organization

The first implementation of *La Cuna* consisted of five main sections:

- the main *La Cuna* homepage;
- My Page, which detailed each participant's personal information, (as much or as little information as the participant wished to record);

- the Members page, where every participant was listed;
- the Forum, where discussions were housed; and
- Resources, which housed help documentation for the site.

The Forum contained five sections (Reference, Collection Development, Instruction, Cataloging and General Queries) to provide easy navigation to topics of interest. The resources page included step-by-step instructions and videos to help members get started on *La Cuna*, as well as a video explaining how to set up RSS feeds or emails to provide alerts about new discussions. Finally, the main page brought elements of all of the other pages together, including most recent discussions. The site was closed to the public, with only the main page being visible to non-registered participants. Participants were not automatically subscribed to new discussions or groups; instead they had to either change their email preferences (opt in) to receive email updates or subscribe via RSS. This was a setting provided by Ning that could not be changed and which proved problematic later because users did not realize new discussions had started.

### Membership

SALALM has around 200 personal members and 50 organizational members. Personal members are generally academic librarians who undertake a wide range of traditional bibliographer or liaison duties. Most SALALM members are based in the United States although a growing number work in Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe. SALALM Members range from retirees who established SALALM and have been active in the field for over 40 years to new graduates and student members.

To recruit participants for *La Cuna*, the author sent advertisements for both mentors and mentees to SALALM's mailing list. Consequently, as an active member of SALALM, the author knew most participants directly and most users would have known the author was a new librarian too. While this could have been a strength because participants felt comfortable participating in the scheme, the author worried that participants could also have felt uncomfortable trusting a new

librarian with potentially personal data. In order to try to reduce this fear, the informal and non-directed nature of the mentor forum was stressed in original emails to emphasize that the online space was facilitated rather than directed by the author.

When Ning announced the change to their pricing structure in Spring 2010, the author sent a questionnaire to participants in order to assess whether to apply for funding to continue hosting *La Cuna*. The questionnaire addressed usage and opinions about future directions of *La Cuna*. Fourteen people (37% of those who had joined) answered the questionnaire. Participant responses came from both new members and more experienced members. While the response rate was low, SALALM is a small association and the feedback helped assess the usefulness of *La Cuna* as an e-mentoring platform for SALAM.

## Lessons Learned

### Usage Statistics

Thirty-eight people (16% of SALALM members) joined *La Cuna* by 2010. Most participants joined when *La Cuna* was launched while new members were invited throughout the year. Participants included males and females, as well as newer and older members of SALALM, both in age as well as experience. Members were predominantly drawn from the United States, although there were several European and Latin American participants. Within the US, most members were located in areas which do not traditionally have large Latin American collections or extensive SALALM networks, e.g. Indiana, Illinois or Pennsylvania. Despite the large number of SALALM members who work in the northeast United States and California, the participation rate from these areas was low, possibly due to the presence of active (in-person) local chapters. The questionnaire corroborated these usage statistics; although SALALM has a network of local chapters and a vibrant electronic mailing list, nearly 50% of participants joined *La Cuna* to meet people. Most of these respondents had fewer than five years' experience, which could indicate that new professionals in the Latin American field experience a certain amount of isolation, both geographically and within their institution. Though

no one explicitly stated that they were lonely, online activity might help to mitigate this isolation, as well as serving to indicate interest in creating "communities of common concern and interest."<sup>33</sup>

Over six months, there were nine discussions, which averaged 2.88 comments per discussion. The most popular discussion was a thread asking for advice about setting up a Catalan collection, which attracted eight comments. Both the number of questions asked and the answers or comments received were surprisingly low for a community of 38 people. Unfortunately we did not have available analytics for Ning site usage so there was no record of page views or visits to the site and it was impossible to see how many people used the site for purposes other than asking questions. Most questions were asked within the first month of participation, and contributions petered out as the spring semester progressed.

In an attempt to gather more detail on participant usage the questionnaire asked participants how they used *La Cuna*. Of the fourteen respondents, seven stated that they used *La Cuna* in a passive role, checking out answers to questions while four stated that they had no real interaction with *La Cuna* after signing up. Thus although the number of questions asked was low, participants showed some indication that they valued the structure of the forum and being able to return to view the questions and follow up answers. Where professional communication is limited to electronic mailing list interaction, it can be hard to track answers to questions as conversations become disjointed and lose their original meaning. *La Cuna* allowed for threaded replies, as well as automatic archiving of answers for future reference, a feature that is not currently possible with the SALALM electronic mailing list.

It is unknown how individual participant demographics impacted participation in *La Cuna*. Many factors could have affected individual participation, including average years of experience in the field and current position, possession of a relevant higher degree, and languages spoken. Although participation characteristics have not been studied extensively in the literature, for Headlam-Wells et al, traditional mentoring participation has often hinged on the mentor and

mentee's environment.<sup>34</sup> For e-mentoring, Hamilton and Scandura believe that gender, age, ethnicity and personality have a greater impact on participation in mentoring schemes where technology plays a role.<sup>35</sup> This is perhaps related to the asynchrony or relative anonymity of many online mentor programs, which could promote more inclusivity. Freedman states that a change of career path remains important in the use of mentorship programs, while Davidson and Middleton report that years of experience are still key, both for mentors and mentees.<sup>36</sup> As a whole, the broad group of *La Cuna* participants was fairly representative of the SALALM membership, but a wider survey of SALALM would have provided insights into motivation for initial participation (or lack thereof), and response within *La Cuna*. Future research should address these avenues in order to be able to provide more accurate analysis of participant usage.

Timing could have affected the rate of participation. From the questionnaire, the most frequently cited reason for not asking a question was the personal lack of pressing questions between launch and survey. The forum was also launched in the middle of the academic year, when librarians are generally busier with less time to reflect or start new projects. The short time between launch of *La Cuna* and distribution of the questionnaire could also have affected participation rates, either due to the lack of questions, or because a trusted and supportive atmosphere for newer librarians had not yet been created.

A secondary problem could have involved the visibility of the forum in everyday participant workflow. Alerts for new discussions or comments had to be manually set up by each participant, which meant that if participants did not know how to do that, they may not have noticed new comments or discussions. Furthermore, as *La Cuna* used a separate technology (Ning), which was not integrated into existing SALALM communications, participants would have needed to make a special effort to incorporate it into their workflow as well as learning how to keep up with the forums. Finally, the visibility of the forum to international members could have affected participation. While SALALM has many international members, and questions within *La Cuna* were in Spanish and in English, promo-

tional material and the initial navigational structure of *La Cuna* were written entirely in English, which may have lowered initial interest.

A third potential reason for low participation involved other participants and perceptions of expertise. In a field as broad and specialized as Latin American Studies, many librarians are experts in one area and participants may have perceived that some questions were too specialized for forum members. This is illustrated by two questionnaire comments that indicated that questions were answered quicker on LALA-L, the SALALM electronic mailing list. However these comments came from respondents with more experience in the field (over five years) and could imply that they were more comfortable within SALALM and using the electronic mailing list to communicate and learn. Furthermore, while this may have impeded question and knowledge sharing among longer standing members, it should not have had an effect on newer member questions.

Most questions within the forum were categorized as Collection Development (5), followed by Reference (2) and General (2) while no discussions about Instruction or Cataloging were started. While area studies cataloger positions still exist, position announcements for Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) catalogers only comprised 12% of all LAC announcements between 1970 and 2007 and it is assumed that few new librarians are being hired into these positions.<sup>37</sup> The lack of instruction discussions is more surprising because almost 60% of all LAC job announcements mentioned instructional duties.<sup>38</sup> However, it is more likely that LAC instruction is less subject-specific, and that new instruction librarians rely on other instruction-focused organizations or groups for professional development. The same could also be true for LAC catalogers. The focus of *La Cuna* on collection development was hardly surprising due to the previously mentioned unique nature of the Latin American publishing trade.

Basic conclusions that could be drawn from these usage statistics are that many forum members seemed to be willing to share knowledge and were open to asking questions in the online forum, especially members in geographically or

institutionally isolated locations. However, this did not translate into sustained participation, and it was also evident that many variables could affect the success and usage rate of the forum. This included the timing of the forum, the visibility of the forum in everyday participant workflow and perceptions of expertise. Once again, the literature does not always fully assess reasons for success or failure of online learning communities. For Blummer, success is more likely when the program is linked to institutional goals and a thorough needs assessment, which Osif corroborates, stating that programs must be “tailored to local demands.”<sup>39</sup> Charalambos, et al., provide a more thorough analysis of characteristics of successful online learning communities, which include clearly defined tasks, a common sense of responsibility between members and joint vision, control and ownership.<sup>40</sup> Future research could investigate reasons for success or failure among individuals and groups more thoroughly.

## Challenges

While *La Cuna* formed a novel way of communicating and learning about professional topics, low participation provided evidence that the project was not without substantial challenges, which could broadly be categorized as relating to the use of technology and changing roles of mentoring.

One of the challenges that *La Cuna* initially faced involved the barrier that Ning’s platform provided to participating in new discussions. It appears that, unlike findings from the literature review, most participants did not seem to have any trouble using the technology to access the mentor forum. In the questionnaire, only one person cited technology as a reason for not answering a question, which implied that as a whole, the technology was easy to use. However, the low participation rate and decrease in the number of questions could have been linked to Ning’s requirement that participants had to opt-in to receive email updates on discussions. While the help documents clearly explained how to subscribe to discussions via RSS and by email, it seems likely that people did not find or use these resources. Automatic updating or alerting for new discussions and comments is key, particularly for a new service and format of learning.

Related to this challenge, another criticism of *La Cuna* indicated a broader information and technology overload. LALA-L, the SALALM website, the SALALM Facebook page and *La Cuna* all compete for participant attention, perhaps contributing to low traffic. Although the four tools had different strengths and purposes, it could have been unclear which one could help a new member in a particular context. Additionally, all four tools use different technologies, meaning that members had to learn about and create profiles for four separate tools. These criticisms could imply that members who wish to engage in online professional activities dislike the fragmentary, ad hoc way that professional communications have developed and that they are looking for a more streamlined and efficient set of tools.

The lack of a clear organizational policy towards the integration of new communication and learning tools into SALALM activities meant that there had been little exploration of SALALM member needs and habits. Thus it was unclear how many SALALM members wanted to participate in online professional activities. From personal conversations with both *La Cuna* members and non-participants, it is clear that some SALALM members worry about privacy issues. It seems that there is a sense of unease about how far a professional association’s e-presence should go; many indicated that they feel uncomfortable mixing private and personal life through Facebook, for example. A survey of all SALALM members would give a better picture of why people did not join *La Cuna*, including whether this was linked to fear or dislike of online activities.

A final challenge lay in the fact that Ning decided to stop free access to its social networking software. This is part of a wider problem of relying on third party software programs, which may change, be bought or disappear without warning. While educators were later able to purchase cheap access plans, the increase in price forced an early examination of the use and purpose of the forum in order to decide whether to apply for sponsorship. Consequently, it was hard to judge the full impact that *La Cuna* had on participant learning.



## Changing Concepts of Mentoring?

A secondary challenge lay in participant needs and expectations of the mentoring process. *La Cuna* started with the idea that membership of the forum would comprise new (less than three years experience) and experienced (more than 10 years) members of SALALM. It was also assumed that despite the casual, group format, new members would ask questions and experienced mentors would answer questions. However, many librarians who were neither new nor very experienced (3-10 years) joined and were active in the forum. Furthermore, participants at all levels of experience asked questions, particularly in regard to web resources. From the questionnaire, over 50% of respondents indicated they joined *La Cuna* to both ask questions and share knowledge. Similarly, one of the participants who indicated that they received the most benefit from *La Cuna* had over 10 years experience in the field. Thus it would seem that participants did not see themselves in any clearly defined mentor or mentee role, possibly because of changing job expectations and information realities. Librarians may also possess different levels of expertise within the very varied nature of the job. Furthermore, the fact that members with different levels of expertise asked questions freely of each other indicates that participants seem to be equally happy if not happier asking colleagues for advice rather than relying on a traditional mentor pairing. Often referred to as a Millennial trait, this may become more apparent as the digital native generation joins professional associations. Related to these observations, and rather surprisingly, one respondent mentioned that the low participation in the forum was due to embarrassment. The respondent actually had a fair amount of experience (6-10 years), so it is possible that he or she felt embarrassment asking a question in a forum marketed for new librarians. If so, this effect would be a drawback of marketing the forum as a mentor forum. Potentially, the forum should be marketed more broadly as a forum for discussing Latin American librarianship rather than specifically as a mentor forum.

## Future Considerations

### Future Plans

In 2009, the president of SALALM, Pamela Graham, presented a comprehensive strategy to “to investigate, research and recommend measures that can be taken to improve efficiency in several SALALM functions via the use of technology.”<sup>41</sup> This included a radical shake-up of SALALM communications, including the cessation of the print newsletter. Findings from *La Cuna* had a direct influence on these proposals and subsequent decisions. Accordingly, in late 2011, SALALM will release a new, integrated community for all members. Created in conjunction with the SALALM executive committee, the process has involved the entire SALALM membership through a series of usability tests as well as open panels at the annual conference. Hosted by Wordpress, a free blogging software, SALALM’s new website will integrate member social networking and provide a space for content creation and collaboration, including committee workspaces, wiki functionality, and open forums. While LALA-L, the electronic mailing list, will be maintained, the SALALM blog, as well as *ad hoc* committee web pages and print communications will all be folded into the new website. Personal profiles will be created for all members, which can be used as the basis for a social network. Furthermore, although alerts for new blog posts and discussions will not be seamless, members will automatically be notified when information is updated. Finally, the web pages will be trilingual, written in English, Spanish and Portuguese. Thus the new webpage will actively combat many of the difficulties that faced *La Cuna*, including fragmentation of communication, alerts for new posts, and wider member visibility.

Within the new website, *La Cuna* will appear not as a mentor forum but as a reference forum. The forum, which is open to all members of SALALM, will provide a place where members can easily ask questions about any aspect of Latin American and Iberian librarianship. While members still have to “join” the group, questions asked in *La Cuna* can be featured on the SALALM home page under a new section entitled “Question of the Month.” This should improve visibility of *La Cuna* and highlight the advantages of

threaded question discussions. Removing the designation of mentor/mentee may also encourage both experienced and un-experienced participants to participate in the forum.

### Recommendations

Although participation in *La Cuna* was low, the experience of *La Cuna* was ultimately positive, particularly in the quest to develop a new integrated web presence for SALALM. Lessons learned include the importance of institutional support, the understanding of member needs and flexibility with technology.

Firstly, institutional support plays an important role in the acceptance and success of a new initiative. While *La Cuna* was a SALALM-approved activity, the fact that it was a new technology which also overlapped with other programs (such as the blog and the Facebook page) meant that the purpose for *La Cuna* was unclear. Participation in *La Cuna* may also indicate that technologies that tie in with member workflow, which includes professional SALALM activities or common software programs, will stand a better chance of adoption.

Secondly, it is important that professional associations regularly survey and become aware of how member needs are changing. Changing job responsibilities and technological skills are an obvious sign of new member needs, but less visible effects such as the effect of technology on learning preferences are also important. These changing skills and preferences, such as attitudes to privacy, may also affect usage of new software programs.

Lastly, it is also important that institutions are flexible enough to adapt to new technologies. This involves choosing the appropriate technologies for user needs and wishes and being aware of the drawbacks of technology, such as changes in pricing or hosting structure. Associations should also be aware of the potential need to invest in technological infrastructure (such as server space) in order to provide a reliable and efficient service for members.

### Future research

As professional associations look to improve member experience and value, it is important that research continues to address member preferences and needs. Future avenues for research could involve replicating this project on a larger scale for a longer period of time to assess trends in mentoring and e-mentoring. Along with wider mentoring studies, future research should also include further exploration and assessment of professional association e-tools and e-presence, to make wider judgments about their adoption and efficacy.

Research on member participation would also enable a closer examination of adoption and usage of new tools. Can member participation be linked to experience in the field, or in a particular position? Do the educational background, languages spoken or relevant expertise impact participant response? Wide surveys of membership would enable conclusions about motivations to join mentor forums to be drawn, which would also facilitate the design of more successful mentor forums.

### Conclusion

This case study provides insights into the implementation and assessment of a small, professional association's experimental e-mentoring online learning forum. While participants confirmed the need for an e-presence and an online information exchange forum, participation rates and issues with the software made it hard to judge the effect on participant knowledge and skills. Findings implied, however, that there is an interest in moving away from traditional mentoring activities and that professional associations should be aware of changing member information realities in order to best meet needs. New participatory Web 2.0 tools may help professional associations achieve these aims but adoption of the tools brings its own problems, such as maintaining community engagement and privacy. An overreliance on third party tools may also cause issues, as was the case for *La Cuna* when Ning suddenly introduced priced plans.

Findings from this mentor forum have helped guide discussion about the future of the Seminar

for the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM) e-space. A collaborative e-workspace which was designed to strengthen the inherent weaknesses of *La Cuna* will bring together social networking, committee workspace and knowledge management. Future research will assess SALALM's new web space and determine whether experience with *La Cuna* has helped develop a more successful member area. SALALM is committed to the creation and maintenance of a strong, participatory membership in order to serve the growing number of Latin American researchers and students. The experience of *La Cuna* has played a vital role in helping develop its online activities, which will also serve as a strong foundation for the future.

### Endnotes

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