

Experiences of developing an educational course for librarians in international cooperation. MedLibTrain: a joint Polish-Norwegian project

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Abstract

Medical librarians from Poland and Norway participated in the joint project MedLibTrain, and developed a training program for medical librarians performing teaching tasks. The project was developed in tight Polish-Norwegian cooperation, with the use of seminars, group discussions, mutual reviewing and communication on a web platform. The result was a course handbook containing readings and educational aids in English and Polish. Challenges we experienced during the project were concerning communication, language, research and writing skills, accompanied by a tight time schedule and limited budgets. Sharing these experiences can hopefully be useful for others in cross-national projects.

Key words: libraries, medical; librarians; teaching; education, continuing; international cooperation.

Background

In 2009/2010 ten librarians from Krakow, Poland together with seven librarians from Norway worked on the development of a training program for medical librarians performing teaching tasks. Newly published articles on international trends in health science librarianship show that pedagogy, teaching and training is among the common trends in medical libraries in several European countries and in both Norway and Poland medical librarians are involved in teaching (1, 2). Traditional library education does not provide sufficient competence and continuing education is therefore in high demand. In the MedLibTrain project we developed a course for teaching staff in health libraries, in order to adjust and enhance librarians' competency as information literacy teachers.

The MedLibTrain project was well designed before the work started, but even so we experienced some unforeseen problems and challenges concerning workload, communication, and research and writing

skills. Limited time and budgets made these more urgent. Project work across national borders often causes practical challenges (3). In this paper we share our experiences on international cooperation in the Polish-Norwegian MedLibTrain project, and hopefully others can benefit from them.

Communication between partners

Librarians from Poland participating in the project mostly worked at the same library and knew each other; in contrast, only some of the Norwegian librarians knew each other beforehand. We had only a month from the project was settled at the first meeting, and the time to prepare introduction, do literature searches and read articles was short. At the first meeting the time schedule was tight and there were many things to sort out and decide but we were all enthusiastic about the project and curious to meet the other project members. The distance between Poland and Norway made the cooperation and communication challenging. Also, some of the Norwegian participants were located far from each other

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and were not able to meet on a regular basis. The Norwegian project members therefore used a blog for discussion and information. Distance is of course no hindrance for cooperation when using modern communication systems. In addition to email communication, the project members shared and exchanged documents on the e-learning platform Alfresco. Basically partners communicated in English but since a Polish version of the handbook was planned, and some Polish partners preferred to write in their native language first, many mid versions of the Polish edition were created and translated back and forth from English to Polish.

Oral communication was easier, more efficient, and less time consuming compared to written communication. During the project, all participants met three times, once in Poland and twice in Norway. When volcano ash from Iceland stopped flights over Europe we instead held a Skype meeting. In December 2010 the project was finished and a final project dissemination conference was held in Krakow, Poland.

Since none of the participants used English as a mother tongue, we found that plenum discussions at our meetings were most fruitful when supplemented with group discussions respectively in the Polish and Norwegian team.

Our project showed that a good knowledge of English language was an advantage for efficient communication. This is confirmed by Immonen et al. (3; p. 845). Further, we saw that to write in more than one language and the use of translators complicates work and the result is not time and cost effective. It is better to avoid multilingual tasks; otherwise a separate budget for translation services has to be carefully planned. Nevertheless, to meet in person is crucial for getting to know each other and definitely makes it easier to discuss informally and to clear misunderstandings swiftly. Personal contact contributes to better knowledge of the partners and building bridges over cultural differences (3; p. 846). At our meetings, informal gathering at lunchtime, dinner or visits to a museum and other cultural events were essential for creating a good climate for discussions in the project.

We believe that more face to face meetings would benefit participants in international projects, and even be beneficial to the quality of the results. Especially in the

beginning of a project this is crucial for the common understanding of the goals of the project and getting to know each other in person. One should also emphasize the opportunities online communication represents (video-conferencing, Skype) and usage of these tools should be thoroughly planned in advance.

Research skills

Not all the participating librarians had sufficient knowledge of research methods. This is normal since librarians do not have many opportunities to conduct research. However, this is now changing with the advances of evidence-based librarianship. For the project this meant that, along with realization of the project goals, an intensive self education took place, and this added to the workload.

We learned that the project should be preceded by a careful checkout and self-checkout of qualifications needed. Before submission of a project proposal it is recommended that interested parties meet and discuss the goals of the project and agree in advance to what type of work and what commitment it requires. This is possible in some financing programs and there are also opportunities to request funds from sources which support preliminary meetings of potential partners. Anyway, doing research is a very good way to learn how to do research.

Writing skills

Many of us had little or no experience with scientific writing. Not in our own language, even less so in English. But the review process made us aware of how we used language and made us be more precise and careful. As the amount of new versions of the handbook arose, the text became uniform, since it was based on our collective writing and reviewing. Being "forced" to write we progressed in this skill. We now possess an understanding of the written scientific language and realize that we need further practice to master academic writing.

Mutual reviewing

Along with writing own chapters, all the project participants had to review modules written by project members from the other country. It may be difficult to express negative remarks to someone not very well known. Receiving feedback might also be difficult. Questions like these were addressed in the project: To what extent can we be critical? How to voice the

opinions in a nice way? Be polite or honest? How to handle cultural differences? We believe that being more honest and direct in the review at an early stage might be wise. Critical reflection might save time in the project, but you can lose creativity and writing spirit. On the other hand, comments and feedback on your text motivate and inspire you to be more creative in the writing.

Translation

Another issue during the MedLibTrain project was translation. We chose different approaches – the Poles wrote their modules in Polish and then translated to English. The modules by the Norwegians were written in English and were not translated into Norwegian. There may be linguistic weaknesses in this work, but tight budgets and deadlines meant this could not be fully prioritized. Writing in your native language makes it easier to express yourself precisely. Therefore, English native speakers should be closely related to the project group, for either translate text written in your native language or contribute with advice and help in the writing process. For this task it is best to find a person who knows the professional terminology.

Project administration

For international projects funded from either EU or some other international body, there are many rules and regulations to follow. In the MedLibTrain project one member from each country was especially engaged to work with the project administration. These two persons had each a coordinator role for the time schedules, billing, writing stage reports and so on. Having a national coordinator dealing with this kind of work was a great advantage for the project process, and saved the other project members a lot of time which could be used on writing the handbook. We strongly suggest engaging project coordinators who can work with administrative duties of the project.

Time schedule

The timetable of the project was very tight. This required very strict discipline of the participants. The workload was underestimated at the stage of writing the proposal; especially some barriers like English fluency, writing skills, research skills appeared to be higher than expected. Intensive collaboration made it even more difficult. Deadlines were important to maintain progress in the project, but were quite stressful at times. We learned that it is very important to do realistic

estimations when planning work flow and tasks. These should take into account all expected barriers and all limitations. There should be some time set aside for unexpected events, such as sick leave, job change or eruption of a volcano.

Another aspect on workload is that the time spent with project work has to be clear from the beginning. Besides this, one should anticipate the necessity of doing extra work in critical phases of the project. This must fit in with the workload of the project members outside the project (see 3; p. 846). Pay attention that holidays often are placed at different times in different countries and can affect keeping the schedule.

Money

Unfortunately, the financial crisis made the switch from Euro to Polish Zloty not in the project's favour, and made the original funding less valuable. Problems like this are not easy to foresee, but there should be set aside some money for unexpected expenses. Underestimation of the workload was another reason for the miscalculation of the costs. Some project members offered to work voluntarily, not expecting how serious and time consuming the work ahead was. Working without appropriate salary after some time became annoying, especially when the workload was much higher than expected. Even then it should be stressed that all project participants were highly motivated to create a useful and needed teaching aid.



Fig. 1. Participants in the MedLibTrain project at the meeting in Bergen September 2010.

From the left: Urszula Zdeb, Malgorzata Marejan, Marcin Stasiak, Frøydis Løken, Hege Sletsjøe, Jolanta Cieśla, Anne Stenhammer, Regina Küfner Lein, Karin Bakkemo, Ewa Czarnik, Barbara Niedźwiedzka, Irene Hunskår, Randi Bolstad, Lucjan Stalmak, Ireneusz Korfel, Malgorzata Sieradzka-Fleituch
(Foto: Regina Küfner Lein)

For future projects it is important to estimate the budgets very carefully, and realistically. A careful and in depth analysis of probable personnel workload is extremely important. In the budget unexpected costs have to be assumed and planned for.

Final project results and conclusions

After mentioning the difficulties and barriers above there were many fruitful aspects of this collaboration! Some are very concrete, such as two books that all participants can be proud of (4) and several publications and presentations given at national and international conferences. Some benefits were intangible, but even more significant. The project members had a great deal of experiences together both in teaching and in librarianship as a whole. Putting this together with our project goals and our way of evidence-based work in the project, there were significant cultural exchanges, new impressions, especially in network building, professional development and language skills among the participants. Our knowledge in known and unknown subjects was greatly increased and in addition our research and writing skills have tangibly improved.

Despite our struggling with language and tight deadlines, we learned a lot about project work and international collaboration. We gained experience and took part in each other cultures and working conditions. According to Immonen (3; p. 846-847) knowledge about hierarchical work structure, decision-making and responsibility in each country, may be vital for a cross-national project to succeed. During two years of collaboration, we obtained more insight and understanding of each others' way of thinking and working styles.

There is no question that despite hard work, participation in an international project like MedLibTrain is an interesting and very rewarding experience. We have also learned that together we are stronger and when we put our best forces together – it is possible to fulfil such a large project. With the experiences from this project we surely will be able to handle a new project in a different way. Mainly we will stress the importance of good contact and communication.

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