# Feedback from DLF Fall Forum 2009
to the DLF Transition Committee at CLIR

Eric Celeste & Geneva Henry
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As you all know, this is a sensitive time for the DLF and there was a legitimate concern that now might not be the best time for a DLF Forum. The good news is that the Forum was a great success for those who attended, leaving most with a sense that the DLF has an important future and that they had had a voice in defining that future. In the end, the participants agreed to make some recommendations to the DLF Transition Committee along organizational and activity dimensions, they included: open up the DLF membership, change the name to "Digital Library Forum," continue the face-to-face Forum, encourage online collaboration between meetings, focus on identifying best practices, training, mentoring, matchmaking, and building a bridge between administrators (the CNI crowd) and developers (the Code4Lib crowd).
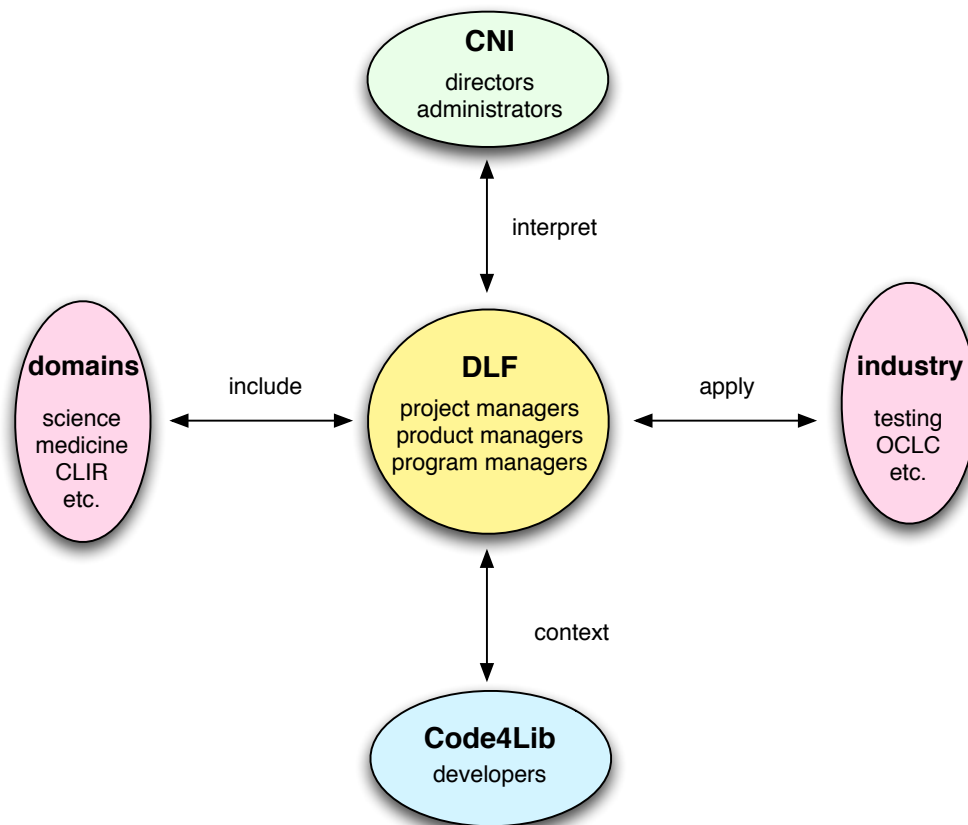
Background

CLIR and the DLF Transition Committee gave serious consideration to canceling this Fall 2009 Forum. Not only is DLF in a fragile state while we redefine its mission and rebuild its staff support, but member institutions have been stressed by the financial meltdown and many are trimming travel budgets. By the time CLIR staff focused on the Forum, many typical program building dates had passed, including the date for the call-for-papers and the initial announcement of the Forum. Still, a persuasive set of advisors to CLIR insisted that the Fall Forum should be allowed to proceed and the contract with the conference facility in Long Beach made canceling the event financially daunting. Sayeed Choudhury, Associate Dean for Library Digital Programs at Johns Hopkins University, stepped up and offered to take a lead in planning this Forum.

In July he wrote an initial proposal for the Forum, describing a meeting that would focus on defining the next great research question facing libraries and then building financial commitment toward a joint "skunkworks" to dig into that question. After some initial positive feedback, the Transition Committee in October shone some harsh light of reality onto the notion that library administrations could be as responsive as Sayeed had hoped. Not only would money for a skunkworks not be committed, but it was already too late to ensure the presence of library directors at the Forum. With the help of the planning committee he had built, Sayeed shifted the focus of the Forum off the task of building a skunkworks and on to the topic of "Strategies for Innovation" and how institutions can creatively meet today's challenges.

Innovation

The first day of the Forum immersed the attendees in a discussion of innovation: what is it, how to encourage it, what dangers it presents, what examples we can look at in our community and others. The goal was to get discussion flowing, to engage the participants in an open and honest discussion of what barriers to innovation they encounter. This largely succeeded, with discussions that were frank enough that the participants did not want to share a transcript of the conversation outside the room. We did have the first day of the Forum available in Entropia, the island in Second Life operated by DLF, but only a few users took advantage of that accessibility and none of the discussion was driven from Second Life. Twitter, on the other hand, provided a rich back-channel conversation that wove in and out of the face-to-face discussion at various points.

Sayeed stressed the rarity of "right" answers and the need to analyze local circumstance to develop a course. He talked of the importance of relationships, especially with top-level administrators. He also highlighted the value of teams that are not exposed to daily fire-fighting and can concentrate on new challenges, his "skunk works." Bess Sadler challenged Sayeed's point a bit, pointing out that libraries depend on reliable systems and building new tools in ways that facilitate regular testing and sustainability is possible. She described the importance of ending the

war between system administrators and developers, monitoring systems, and building stable foundations. Katherine Kott discussed the shifting demands of a research, and the balance between collaboration and competition in new technologies. She shared Raymond Miles' collaborative entrepreneurship model and the need to select innovative developments to be "productized," how to pool risks and distribute gains, and asked whether DLF and CLIR might have a role in such a process. She also noted some of our cultural dampers on innovation, including hierarchy that thwarts creativity and our emphasis on consensus (pointing to "Future Leaders' Views on Organizational Culture" at http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/crljournal/preprints/Maloney-Antelman-Arl.pdf for some details). The discussion touched on our users tolerance for continual change in systems, where to get resources to make innovation work, recognition for key staff, techniques and tools for monitoring and performance enhancement, building community, asking (or not) for permission, streamlining process, need for more coders, the competitive advantages of libraries, the need for trust, and the difference between thinking you are being innovative and real innovation.

That was just the first two hours. The discussion of innovation included John Ober talking about CDL's approach, Jon Dunn contrasting that with Indiana, Jenn Riley on the tools we use, Josh Greenberg with a few stories of partnership and organization structure at NYPL, Brad McLean on the opportunities of bringing projects together, Mike Winkler on the IT bazaar, and Brad Wheeler on the importance of looking beyond institutional walls toward the rising "meta-university." Discussions around all these were rich and engaged, everyone in the same room for the whole day, focussing on this dimension of our work. Many participants were exhilarated by the experience.

Spirit of the Forum

In many ways this was an unusual Forum. As we all know, the attendance was much lower than usual of late. Some of this was attributable to budgetary constraints at our institutions, but it was also due to the late-breaking and relatively vague nature of the meeting agenda. CLIR was prepared to have as few as 50 participants at this meeting, but the registrations finally had to be closed at 85 the week before the Forum. Half the participants came from California, and many had never before attended a DLF Forum, but a significant number were long-time participants in DLF who came to the Forum not just for its programs, but also for the connections the Forum keeps alive with their colleagues.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the liveliest part of a Forum is the corridor between sessions. The generous timing of these breaks, with ample treats in the hall to draw people out, are a long tradition and ensured that though the shape of this year's Forum was different, this essential networking time was still well used. A few attendees made a point of emphasizing to us the value this interaction has for them and the reasons it cannot be replicated in an online venue. The attendees are mostly of middle-management in the technology shops in academic libraries, they feel that CNI is for their bosses and Code4Lib is for their staff. DLF is one of the few venues that really cater to their need

to connect with colleagues from other institutions and learn what is happening and what new developments there are in best practice.

It is not that this crowd does not know how to use new media to collaborate. As mentioned above, the Twitter back-channel was very active and these people use Twitter and other tools to work together in daily life, not just at meetings. But they value the chance to work face-to-face at least a few times a year. The DLF Forum has been critical in that role.

Although this meeting was structured quite differently from past Forums, one very down and dirty session did sneak its way onto the schedule. Late in the planning a session on the Blacklight searching front-end was added as a pre-conference Tuesday evening. It is a testament to the appetite in this group for hands-on in-depth sessions that the room was packed and extra chairs had to be found to accommodate the interest. The Blacklight session brought to the table a recurring theme during this Forum: the need for integrated testing plans as systems, even experimental systems, are built out. The diversity and engagement of the room around the topic of testing was notable, similar to the energy that past attendees have carried out of past rooms to investigate OAI or METS.

Recommendation Building

The final day of the Forum really turned into a consideration of DLF itself and what it should become. The project managers and developers groups met separately, then reported out to the whole group. The whole group then discussed and formed recommendations for CLIR.

The project managers identified obstacles to innovation: time & resources, organization & culture, the need to support legacy systems, and limited knowledge of industry best practice. They suggested that DLF could help them develop best practices in project management, software development, and community building (referring to a coding community around community source efforts). DLF could help convince institutions that community source software is not only good, but should be a priority. DLF could help them take an ethnographic approach toward understanding users. And, of course, DLF could continue to sponsor the Forum. This led to an interesting discussion on how institutions approach ending efforts, closing down projects, with a wide variety of input and ideas shared.

The developers described three areas that needed some attention and then thought about the process by which DLF could help the community. The three areas (metadata tools, interoperability, and linked data) were important potential areas for future meetings to focus on, but the process recommendations will be of most interest to the transition committee. They saw DLF as a "middle layer" between the administrators in CNI and the coders in Code4Lib, as a home for project managers, product managers, and program managers at our institutions. From this position DLF could make sense of the demands of directors and help coders understand the context within

which they work. DLF could reach out to industry for engagement and examples of best practice and to other domains like science and medicine to ensure we are solving problems that need to be solved. The developers thought DLF should be a venue for bringing people together, matchmaking, and sharing requirements. The DLF should do this both at meetings and via an online (wiki? listserv?) presence. Finally, they suggested DLF sponsor skill development through mentorship and on-site training by community experts.

This led to a set of principles discussed after lunch:

• Libraries must transform themselves to better support the mission of our institutions
• Innovation is an essential component for transformation
• Innovation comes in many varieties
• Successful innovation can not happen without effective people, processes, practices and technologies

This resulted in a long list of "therefore the DLF should" items which were later boiled down to the following recommendations:

Organizational Recommendations

• DLF membership should be opened up and governance revisited
• Change the name to Digital Library Forum to reflect this (suggestion)
• Forums should continue but we should revisit the format
• There should be some opportunity for activity between forums through online collaboration tools

Activities

• Identifying, leveraging, sharing best practices – both within and adjacent to our community
• Training and in-depth discussions
• Individual and institutional mentoring
• Continue to be the bridge between diverse communities (e.g., CNI = administration, Code4Lib = developers)
• Matchmaking role

Areas to Explore

• Building a research agenda
• Building a shared collaboration infrastructure
• Reporting out from DLF to other venues
• Soliciting content from other domains

There was some final discussion of these recommendations, but it is fair to say that this did more or less capture the sense of the group present at the Forum.

Additional ideas percolated through the Twitter backchannel, suggesting DLF could provide a safe haven for sharing failures in digital library work. While people often talk about the need for this, especially in experimental research, there are not really any venues available where failures can be openly discussed without negative consequences ensuing. There was a lot of interest in this idea among the Twitter participants, most of whom were at the forum, but it did include several who were not.

Some Ideas from Individuals

We had an opportunity to chat with Brad Wheeler for awhile at the end of the first day of the Forum. Brad is very interested in having DLF consider a role as an umbrella organization for open source projects related to digital scholarship. He sees this as operating in much the same way as the Kuali Foundation, where people can join the Kuali consortium and they can contribute resources (time and/or money) to open source project development. Kuali's focus is on enterprise systems, thus is not a good home for the kinds of projects that could be brought together by a DLF umbrella organization.

While this is an interesting concept that the transition committee may wish to explore, there was not much discussion of this type of role by the forum participants that were present. Since DLF/CLIR does not have infrastructure to offer in support of development activities such as a common software release repository, maintenance of code versioning, or software development tools, taking on this type of role should be cautiously considered.

Mark Diggory from [@mire](), a repository services company, expressed some ideas about the role of industry in DLF. He would like to see an opportunity for companies engaged with digital library services and products to participate in DLF. Perhaps an industry membership option could be considered. Other discussions that came up during the forum related to industry involvement were generally viewed as favorable when the focus was on research, but wary where vendors could be looking for business. As contributors to the discussions and research activities, industry members would be welcomed, but they would clearly have to steer clear of any sales activities. Jon Dunn, in discussing the citation work in the Sakaibrary project at Indiana, identified a conversation he had had with someone from Google Scholar at a DLF forum that led to the successful work he ended up doing by partnering with Google Scholar for the development. This is a clear example of the win-win benefits that can be gained by including industry at the right level in this mix.

Bess Sadler from UVa has been a long-time activist in Code4Lib and was one of the presenters at this Forum. She told me that the DLF name carries a lot of baggage in that community. Most Code4Lib participants would not consider DLF as a venue for sharing because it has been so

closed in the past. Some would also tune out at the mention of DLF because it has a reputation of not being engaged in the vital conversations of the field. It is perceived as an insulated club, with much too high an opinion of itself. In fact, Bess thought even keeping the initials "DLF" while changing the words (a substitution of "Forum" for "Federation" was mentioned twice at the Forum) would probably preserve too much of the baggage.

Bess worried that positioning DLF as a layer between CNI and Code4Lib, though, would not help build solutions, but only further isolation. She hoped DLF could be more forceful in thinking about itself as a place where some of that boundary between administrators and coders can be eased, if not erased. She claims that at Access (a Canadian library technology community meeting) both of these constituencies meet productively, informing one another. She thought Access might be a valuable model for DLF.

Implications for Program Officer

Based on the discussion at the forum, some of the desired characteristics for a new DLF Program Officer in CLIR can be inferred. It will be important to attract someone into this position who has experience with the academic digital library projects community. Given the need for growth and the desire to open up the organization, the program officer will need to be comfortable with the community that participates in the forums (digital library program managers and developers) as well as with funders, industry, and library directors. Communication skills will be critical as this person conveys the message of DLF's mission and the critical role the organization now provides. At least as important is the need for someone who will listen to the DLF community. This was an incredibly clear message that came through during the discussion sessions and in the hallway conversations. The Fall 2009 forum was a model event for both informing and learning from each other. People listened to one another and the facilitation of the discussion clearly demonstrated that people's voices were being heard.

The new program officer should be adept at understanding work underway, both in the academic and the commercial sectors, so that they can help DLF members partner with each other for more effective projects. They should also have a good understanding of the funding opportunities available for the community.

Though the international membership was not a topic of great discussion at the forum, that will clearly need to be considered in looking for the right leadership of DLF. Awareness of international digital library accomplishments, partnership opportunities, and related events is important in moving the field ahead. Growing the international membership will be an important consideration and having the right leadership that is both comfortable and adept with conversing with an international community will be key.

Thanks

This was not the Forum anyone envisioned for Fall 2009, but it ended up being exactly the Forum DLF needed at this juncture. The participants we talked with all thought it was a great meeting. The attendance, though low by historical standards, was higher than we had anticipated. The meeting demonstrated the DLF community is strong and eager for the Forum to continue. Special thanks should go to Sayeed Choudhury for his extraordinary efforts in pulling off a meeting that strayed far from his initial vision. The forum planning group (Charles Blair, Tom Cramer, Adam Farquhar, Melanie Feltner-Reichert, Kat Hagedorn, Charles Henry, Delphine Khanna, Patricia Martin, Bethany Nowviskie, Jonathan Rochkind, Dorothea Salo, Sarah Shreeves, Jon Stroop, Roy Tennant, Jennifer Vinopal) worked hard on a task that started late and appeared unlikely to succeed. Finally CLIR staff pitched in to pull off a meeting they had never attended, and Leslie and Amy did a great job of making sure the planners and participants had everything they needed on site. Finally, the DLF Fall Forum 2009 was a much better meeting than we dared hope largely due to the participation of the attendees. We had some great conversations.