Where’s Your Next Great Idea Coming From? Interdisciplinarity, Innovation and InfoCamp

by Cortney Leach

Autumn: time to head back to campus, to enjoy the finest weather the Pacific Northwest has to offer and to rev up for InfoCamp, Seattle’s favorite unconference for the information community. Okay, it’s not only Seattle’s favorite unconference; it’s my favorite unconference. Allow me to explain.

As a student, it’s my job to be a sponge. A contributing sponge, but a sponge nonetheless. And in my pursuit of sponging up good and useful insights I’ve found nothing has been more good or useful than casting a wide net. Because where do ideas come from? The answer: everywhere but you. At least that’s what one wise professor has told me, and I’m convinced of its validity. Where’s your next great idea coming from? Probably from someone or something you have yet to consider.

As a student, following this edict means constantly finding new ways to feel uncomfortable. It means taking an HCI seminar when you have a background in comparative literature; it means taking advanced classification theory and programming if you want to be a stellar public librarian. It means getting outside of your comfort zone when while you simultaneously try to gain expertise in a particular academic niche.

This isn’t easy. It’s time consuming. And it requires playing the role of the neophyte over… and over, which isn’t necessarily fun. And this effort is only in the context of graduate school – the pressures that prevent us from exploring the rich and confusing landscape in which our concerns play out only increase in the professional world. But pushing at the borders of our subject niche will not only stave off dreaded mental decline; it makes us better at what we do. I recently read that adaptive challenges as simple as brushing our teeth with the non-dominant hand help mental acuity.

Most of the problems we confront as students and professionals are diffuse, messy and occasionally wicked. Of course they are! Otherwise we’d have them in check by now, presumably. So if we choose to tackle global warming with multidisciplinary teams, why not do the same when it comes to choosing an ILS, developing metadata schemas or discerning how best to serve stakeholders? Maybe these potential teams are not in your office with you, but valuable outsiders are out there. And interacting with them may help, nay force, you to frame your questions differently. Voltaire asked us to judge a man by the content of his questions rather than his answers – and if there’s a way to form better questions it’s by sifting them through the mental filters of folks who are not the usual suspects.

It has been proven that having a diverse workforce isn’t just the right thing to do; breadth of background and perspective is associated with increased profits. We know open source systems are deeply valuable because they facilitate exposure to the multi-faceted hive mind, leading to advances such as those we’ve seen recently in Alzheimer’s research [1]. So it follows that we, as individuals, would benefit from living (within reason – don’t stop using those Facebook filters!) a bit like an open source system.

And that brings me one prime example of how we can set the stage for innovation: the InfoCamp phenomenon. I choose to call it a phenomenon because I think InfoCamp isn’t only an exhilarating event, but a framework for thinking about how innovation happens that we can carry beyond the conference walls. As you may know, InfoCamp is an unconference for the...
information community, featuring an egalitarian, community-driven format in which most presentations are designed and delivered by participants. Starting in Seattle, it has spread to Berlin and Berkeley with Boise and Portland currently in the works. And there’s a reason folks get InfoCamp fever – the format and community-driven nature promotes a rare level of cross-pollination and sector-bridging collaboration.

A sample of InfoCamp Seattle session topics since its inception in 2007:

- WTF is Content Strategy?
- Reality for the Library: What High Tech Looks Like in Public Library Practice
- How to Incentivize Knowledge Sharing when Culture Benefits Aren’t Clear
- Geoinformatics: Why You Need the Science, Why the Scientists Need You
- Web of the Physical World: Impact of Worldwide Instrumentation of Devices in Everyday Life
- WikiLeaks: Information Between Legal Borders
- iPhone Dev and Design for Non-programmers
- Applying Permaculture Garden Design Principles to Social Applications & Interactive Sites
- Data as Journalism

Compelling, yes? The best part: these topics were discussed in rooms containing the active brains of folks from all corners of the information world: academics and practitioners, programmers and public librarians, private sector UX designers and public sector managers. I’m not sure if this mix happens anywhere else.

I know that dabbling in HCI design theory has helped me come up with better public policy options; those ideating tools can be directly applied to the process of muddling through complex problems faced by governments and non-profit agencies. How will another sector’s practices help you to tackle your challenges?

Please, the world needs you to get uncomfortable, share, question presumptions and ask your neighbor how her group approaches their top challenges. Go InfoCamping. And encourage your students and colleagues to do the same. You might just come up with your next great idea. You’ll have to excuse me now – I need to get back to using behavioral science research techniques to communicate the value of public library story times.

Editor’s Note: Cortney Leach was the 2010 Student Member of the Bulletin Advisory Board. The chapter (or chapters) of the Student Chapter-of-the-Year award winner(s) selects a student to serve on the board.

Resources Mentioned in the Column