Professional Learning Opportunities: Conferences, Meetings, and Mindsets

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The role of information management (IM) covers a broad range of elements including work with data and technology, classification and programming, semantics and standards, as well as design and articulation. This work is at times called data management, information management, informatics and/or 'the glue' that holds together an LTER site. As schools of informatics, information management, and information science begin to emerge at major universities, there is also a broad but uncoordinated range of activities available to inform a professional about the work of information management. Though database and system administration classes abound in the form of evening or extension classes, targeted technical classes do not address the multiple interdependent facets of IM work in a scientifically situated, scholarly, or timely manner.

The LTER Information Manager Committee (IMC) is recognized as valuable for fostering social and communicative ties that enhance exchange of conceptual and technical information. The annual meeting creates a highly effective informal learning opportunity. Indeed this year's meeting emphasized professional development by arranging four working groups, two poster & demonstration sessions, and a panel presentation. Rather than focusing solely on reports or services, these presented a mix of practical experience and theory as well as the technical. The IMC meeting is made valuable by our shared theme, an interest in the data ecology of a site biome. This provides a common frame for participant interests in terms of size and types of data as well as in terms of location in the dataset flow. Conferences are a complementary venue for information exchange and professional development. They nurture and spur the multiple mindsets - reflective, analytical, cross-project, collaborative, and action-oriented - required for IM work. Over the years, a great variety of conferences relevant to the work of IM have developed and continue to develop. To help sort through the abundance of over-lapping interests, three annual conferences that emphasize interdisciplinarity and work with digital artifacts are summarized below. The 3rd annual Digital Curation Conference (DCC) this year joins established conferences such as the 41st annual Hawaii International Conference for System Science (HICSS) and the more than 60-year-old American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) annual meetings. These conferences are similar in that they do not focus on a particular discipline or technical application but on a broad theme such as work with data (DCC), information (ASIST), and systems (HICSS). Indeed, these meetings complement the IMC meeting by exposing us to new sizes and types of data as well as to activity at other locations in the dataset flow.

Conference forums provide unique opportunities for listening to panels, attending seminars and workshops, and for synthesizing as well as identifying and reflecting upon our contributions in the realm of informatics. ASIST, HICSS and DCC also all have calls for papers, posters, and panel presentations the year before the conference. In the interim, submissions are reviewed and published so that upon arrival at a conference the proceedings volume is available. Such conferences may help us keep pace with rapidly unfolding dimensions of digital data and of technology development. The types of expertise and inspiration required for technical and liaison work with data today may often be found at such conferences.

Conferences may help insure that LTER IMC members remain proactive, informed, and interested.

Preparing a traditional paper (~10 pages) or a poster with an associated short paper (< 3 pages) is an important part of conceptual and synthetic work. As expressed earlier (Baker, Databits Fall 2006): "The LTER IMC has some flexibility - even somewhat of a mandate - to explore new approaches and types of venues for information exchange and professional growth." The IMC has explored and carried out a number of professional activities in past years: the Eco Informatics set of papers presented in 1996, the Data & IM in the Ecological Sciences Workshop in 1998 (DIMES; http://intranet.lternet.edu/archives/documents/reports/Data-and-information-management/DIMES/html/frame and the set of twelve papers written for the Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (SCI) conference in 2002 (http://intranet.lternet.edu/committees/information_management/sci_2002). The IMC is well situated to consider joining and creating special interest groups (SIG) or to present a panel on Long Term Informatics. Conferences are a community resource that bring with them themed networking and information exchange as well as organizational infrastructure. Such meetings enable scientific scholarship as well as professional development and validation.