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Where in the World Is Library Technical Services? Finding Ourselves in Fun, Learning, and Food

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Where in the World Is Library Technical Services? Finding Ourselves in Fun, Learning, and Food

Public libraries do it, historical societies are a natural, especially in Boston; media centers incorporate them into special events; the British started it. The “it” or “them” represents a tea party. But why in academic libraries? Why in Library Technical Services?

In doing a perfunctory literature search not much pops up on the topic of tea parties and library technical services, either from Googling or search strategies through traditional databases. The author was not surprised because the application in an academic setting, apart from a national recognition of library services or the launch of a new Harry Potter book by J. K. Rowling would probably be far-fetched, or innovative. One “hit” referenced the Bondigo Regional Institute in Australia. Narelle Stone, Library Manager in Technical Services briefly described a punk theme that launched Library and Information Week 2007. Librarians dressed in punk gear and caused quite a few second looks. This particular theme was part of their annual morning tea for staff and board members.

So what about academic library technical services and tea parties? Mundane, silly, fun, educational? Or does “Where in the World ?” signify an identity crisis, a marketing opportunity, or a fun opportunity to engage students, faculty and staff in the Department of Library Technical Services (DLTS) at Western Kentucky University. Consider that last option.

Since 2003, the department has hosted an annual tea in mid-October, with a theme usually chosen by the department head and invitations, decorations, door prizes, and spirited fun at the event. Also, the tea is a chance to welcome back retired personnel or introduce new ones. In one particular year, an international theme, bundled with student-based initiatives, led to an exemplary achievement award!

The early departmental teas featured traditional fare with everyone bringing a favorite tea cup, tea set, or tea pot. Prizes featured the most creative, most unusual, most traditional and the pieces served as a focal point of decorative art for the “party room,” which is a combination of department meeting space, bindery boxes, and break room.

Another year walls were decorated with book covers about “time” as we prepared for “Time for Tea” featuring an Alice-in-Wonderland theme with a customized dialog parodying lines from the story with people in the department. Part of that invitation gives readers the essence of the mimic:

It’s Tea Time Again!
(with apologies to Alice in Wonderland and all of her friends)

Connie: How about a nice cup of tea?

Paula: Have a cup of tea, indeed! Well, I’m sorry but I just haven’t the time—student payroll, you know.

Connie: No wonder you’re always late with student checks. This office clock is two days slow. Please set it ahead to **October 19 at 9:00 and let it run until 10:30**, in the morning, of course, and then you’ll be ready for Tea Time in DLTS.

“Is that why so many tea things are put out here?” Paula asked.

Connie: Yes, of course. Tea time does mean tea and tea cakes and tea sandwiches and tea with lemon and tea with cream and, we mustn’t forget the chocolate. So many dainties to indulge in. So little work to get done.

A bright idea then came into Connie's head.

Connie said: And please remember, bring a favorite time piece. We must have a contest. We must have prizes! Surely you have a watch, an egg timer, a rooster clock, a sun dial??????

Ann, Jeannie, Linda, and Doris wailed: "But we have books to catalog!"

Donna, John, Linda (W) and Dean bemoaned: "But we have orders to search and process!"

Jo Ann, Susan, Janice, and Brenda smiled and thought: "Ah, all that can wait."

Crystal, Raven, McKenzie, Rebecca, Michelle, Christina (P&R), Vijaya, and Taylor: "Yeah! It's party time again."

So, Rose, Jack, Deana, Uma, Nelda, Mak, Nancy, and Brent said with a huge sigh: `Yes, that does it.' `It's always tea-time, and we've no time to wash the things between whiles. Nothing to do but celebrate and eat and look at clocks. After all, we've never seen a White Rabbit checking a watch before" ... and burning with curiosity, they chased it, just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole dug in Cravens 303.

The invitation requested everyone to bring a special time piece (watch, clock, novelty clock, egg timer, hourglass) and, again, a contest determined a few winners, as we all enjoyed the display Winner categories were "utterly unusual," "first-class fun," and "totally traditional."

Hats off to DLTS was a tea party theme that naturally begged hat wearers or hats to bring – visors, caps, vintage hats, bandanas, etc. And hats there were, from large-brimmed to Greek fez to an olive green class of '67 hat, complete with matching gloves.

One year we tied in our theme with our college colors and the Big Red mascot's birthday bash, so the room was wall-to-wall red with college paraphernalia. Two tables were set like birthday parties with books, balloons, and a cake. Big Red did drop by and enjoyed the celebration.

The award-winning year we went global in celebration of United Nations Day, with "Where in the World Is DLTS? Invitations carried that phrase in numerous languages.

Inside was a passport and ticket for travel. People were encouraged to wear or bring something from a place different from their own home or to wear something international. The room contained two large maps, one of the world and one of the United States. Each person placed a pin on the city where s/he was born. How interesting to see the diversity among us from India to Texas and lots of places all around the world.

In 2008 we finally came around to the Boston Tea Party. Another opportunity to learn and share in fun and facts was the invitation requesting “a fact about the Boston Tea event or historical happening near that time” to have the opportunity to win a door prize. Wearing red, white, and blue was also part of the party as was the transformation of the break room/meeting room into a dock with tea crates, netting, and books about the tea party.

These annual teas serve to break our routines, have food and conversation with each other, while sipping tea, and, in the process, learn a few more things about the world and ourselves.

Technical service areas in libraries are too often perceived as an unidentified clump of people, dreary drones, or, increasingly, moving out of the main library altogether! We are comfortable with our identities and we recognize our individuality. Whether behind-the-scenes staff in open offices with no distinct elements of operation or located in a totally separate building, technical services operations and employees need to reward themselves occasionally and break out of the task-oriented routines we must engage in as the core of

the library information process. We enjoy this annual opportunity to showcase ourselves to ourselves, and occasionally we extend the invitation to others as time and funds permit. Even though we take our work seriously and like to maintain a steady flow of processing, acquiring, preserving, and accessing, every now and then you just gotta have fun! Hm, maybe next year we will be punkers?!

Stone, Narelle. "Linking...links...chains...punk," *inCite* vol. 28, iss.7 (July 2007): 16, <http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy/liw/LIW.wrap-up.2007.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2008)