This year's Dublin Core conference in Singapore [1] has just ended, and I find myself again considering the difficulties of training people around the issues of interest in Dublin Core at the moment, some of which are percolating into the larger library community. Finding useful ways to convey the right balance of information about how the metadata world is developing, and what metadata practitioners (particularly librarians) need to know to participate fully in the discussions is a continuing issue. Part of the problem is that, in the DC world in particular, much of the conversation happens at a level of abstraction not comfortable to most librarians (particularly catalogers), and technically adept presenters hovering at their 50,000 foot comfort level find it difficult to avoid losing them along the way.

For the past few years I've been Tutorial Chair of the conferences, presenting one of the tutorials myself (which one has varied). This year a comment by one member of the tutorial audience prompted the title of this column. He told me that after the fourth slide of one presentation, he felt as if he were “flying to Pluto.” Despite the possibly thrilling trip implied by that phrase in some another context, in fact he was conveying the feeling that he was indeed lost in a universe he didn't understand, and that's not a good thing. Despite an ongoing search for a good balance between the highly abstract technical work reflected in much of the interesting and valuable efforts emanating from the Dublin Core community (and the presentations at the conference), the struggle to convey this work to those largely unprepared to understand it any level continues with small evidence of success. And, because the conference moves each year to a new international venue, there is an endless supply of interested newbies attending some or all of the conferences, some with a less than optimal grasp of English, only partially solved by translated tutorial slides or even simultaneous translation of the speaker and discussion.

Part of the problem emanates from the structure of the conference
itself, and the differences in expectations for conferences in the varied places where Dublin Core meets. The options are to follow the typical technical conference model and provide tutorials at the beginning of most days (some conferences also schedule them against working sessions). The other option is to devote the first day of the conference to tutorials or training. Because of the disparities in expectation and preparation noted above, just moving the tutorials to the first day hasn’t been particularly effective either: the typical tutorial consists of one expert standing in front of a room full of people for an hour and a half or so, followed by another, and another and another. The independent development of the tutorials themselves ensures that there is little coordination between them, and no overall pedagogical perspective or indeed any diversion at all from the “talking heads” at one end of the room and the increasingly exhausted audience fighting sleep on the other end.

The elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about is that increasingly the talking heads are male (I have been the exception for the last year or so, but will likely not be doing a tutorial next year), while the audience is generally at least 50% female. This reflects the familiar demographic of librarianship, and the fact that so many librarians are interested in learning more about Dublin Core is the good news. The bad news is that it’s seems clear that our ability to meet their needs for information at their level is not improving at the same rate as their interest. The new work with RDA described in this space makes that need even more critical.

All of this feeds a perennial conversation within Dublin Core about how best to provide training materials, for use both at conferences and for others to replicate locally. I know, having had some experience with training within libraries and building curriculum materials for continuing education (within the ALCTS Continuing Education programs in concert with the Library of Congress [2]) that the issues of providing appropriate educational opportunities in the current rapidly changing environment are not limited to DC conferences but echo strongly in libraries around the world.

**What is it we’re trying to teach?**

What to teach is, of course, one of the major questions that must be addressed. Some aspects of the question are often discussed in the context of the teaching of cataloging and metadata in library and information schools, but in that case the balance sought most often is between the teaching of theory vs. teaching the practice, and whether the goal is enabling graduates to “hit the ground running” when they get a job. There is, though,
a strong thread running through those discussions about the need for everyone working in the information world to have a good basic background in information management.

In the context of Dublin Core, the issue is not so much whether those introduced to Dublin Core are prepared to use it in their job after their tutorial or workshop. For librarians in particular the issue is more whether they have been able to shift their thinking sufficiently to understand that DC does not inherit the assumptions of MARC. If the trainee leaves the room thinking that they’ve just been introduced to a much dumber version of what they’re already doing with MARC, then we’ve failed absolutely.

The fact is that we’ll never make much progress getting people to think about their descriptive problems and needs if all we do is teach the basics of Dublin Core. We come back, then to the same kinds of issues that LIS faculty debate endlessly: is it enough to talk about the “how to” without attempting to change old habits of thinking? It is, I suppose, partly a question of short term vs. long term goals. Short term, there must be information content presented, to provide the vocabulary, point out available resources, etc. Longer term, changes in thinking and approach are needed if librarians are to participate fully in the coming environmental shifts.

**Now, about that elephant ...**

Librarians have been part of Dublin Core since it’s beginnings—I know, because I was there. Stu Weibel talked in those days about the historic coming together in DC of the “geeks, freaks and people with sensible shoes.” Indeed he was correct in that there were few other venues at the time for those a part of the referenced cultural silos to work together in an area of mutual interest, and that was certainly one of the attractions for me. But, although it’s not difficult to trace how librarians and library thinking have been reflected in Dublin Core’s past, it’s much harder to see how that librarian footprint (in sensible shoes, of course) continues in its present and future.

Some of this has to do with the emphasis on technical progress in DC for the last few years, and the resulting primacy of those with solid technical backgrounds in the discussions moving those technical issues forward. It is certainly a struggle for someone like me, without a similar background, to continue to make sense of this, but with some help, I think I have managed (barely) to do so. But inevitably, this focus on the technical has left others behind, and many of these are librarians, with the usual demographic applying. The technical guys, are, well *guys*, and it’s impossible not to notice
the skewing of the gender balance that has resulted. In Singapore, we had the traditional dinner with the DC Usage Board and the Board of Trustees, and among perhaps 18 people, I was the only woman. Thankfully, I wasn't the only one who noticed, and I think that means there's hope of dealing with the issue. This is not to say that there are not other women (almost all librarians) involved with Dublin Core—there certainly are, and they are an interesting and wonderful group. But they have, for any number of reasons (including very challenging day jobs) been more involved in activities considered more “suitable” for women: the DC-Libraries and DC-Education Communities, and various documentation efforts. I include myself, here as well: I'm co-Moderator of DC-Education and manage the AskDCMI service as well as editing “Using Dublin Core.”

I have some hopes that the new cooperation between the RDA developers and Dublin Core might go a long way towards redressing this imbalance, but only if more librarians—more female librarians, to be specific—step up to the plate and agree to spend some time out of their comfort zones, engaging with some different ideas about how the resource description world might look without their MARC glasses. [I have an image flashing in my head of an audience from the 1950’s all wearing those 3-D glasses needed to view those few 3-D movies that were produced during that time—this image betrays my age, I’m afraid.] This necessity for training is something that has been discussed extensively within the RDA effort itself, but the same issues about ‘what to teach’ inevitably arise.

**Sensible shoes touring the world ...**

One of the important benefits I’ve garnered from my sojourn in Dublin Core is meeting librarians across the world and feeling that I’ve become to be something of a role model for them. This is heady stuff, aside from the purely terrifying responsibility of it all. If I’ve been able to convince them that this very real divide between the library world and the more technical world can be breached by regular practicing librarians, then I’ll be able to fade into retirement with a smile on my face (not yet though).

I especially enjoyed meeting the librarians and National Library Board staff in Singapore, where I stayed for some extra time and talked to them about Registries and RDA. They’re a very engaged group, eager to learn, and when they encountered some errant bugs in our registry software they figured out some very creative workarounds with no prompting from me whatsoever! I highly recommend them as beta-testers, in addition to being among the friendliest people I’ve ever met.
Next year’s Dublin Core conference will be in Berlin, and I hope to see some new female faces eager to get involved, and not just in the usual handmaiden-ly places. Please, come up and introduce yourselves, and let’s talk about where you can help change that usual demographic.
