



## A Brit abroad!

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I had heard good things about the Charleston Conference for a long time and when the opportunity arose for me to both present at and attend the conference in November 2017 it was something I was keen to exploit.

My first impressions were that the size and scale of the conference were unlike many conferences I had previously attended in the UK and Europe. The conference was located over 4 separate locations, albeit all within walking distance. In recent years the conference has really grown and in a small city like Charleston you really notice this expansion by the number of librarians and publishers wandering around the streets at all times of the day and night! What also struck me was how well organised everything was, with significant numbers of professional conference staff on hand at registration and at all venues with friendly and professional support for delegates and speakers. Given the logistical dimensions and the sheer number of sessions this made a real difference, especially to a first time visitor. Another eye-opener was how early the days started with keynote speakers often on stage at 8.30 am. The time for lunch breaks was also kept relatively short, especially when you had to factor in moving around venues and grabbing a bite to eat on the move. Preparation was vital for ensuring you got as much out of the conference as possible, also buying your lunch early as many venues around the conference were simply packed to the rafters at lunchtime!

Interestingly the exhibition, or vendor fare as our US colleagues like to call, was a much more defined and separate entity than I had previously experienced in the UK. Rather than a permanent exhibition running over the course of the conference, the vendor fare was restricted to one afternoon on a day before the actual conference proper started. There did not seem to be the integration with the main conference that I have experienced elsewhere.

On a personal note, given the US location, I did not have as many personal contacts amongst the publishers, which resulted in less actual interaction at the vendor fare. However the value of the personal relationship between the publisher and library communities did still result in some really useful and interesting meetings at other times for me.

I also noted that there was no official conference dinner as such. This is not a criticism, but more of an observation. Instead on the last night there was a 'dine-around' concept where you could choose a restaurant and would then be seated with up to 15 other delegates chosen totally at random. This seemed a great way to meet other delegates in an informal setting and really useful for non-US delegates, but unfortunately I had a prior appointment.

As to the sessions themselves these were varied with the intention obviously to provide a mix of speaker formats to keep things fresh and interesting.

From my perspective there were plenty of sessions to choose from and with the concurrent sessions it was sometimes difficult to pick just one. However I felt some of the sessions were overly focused on the detail, which whilst impressive in breadth, from my perspective lacked a focus on the 'customer', which for me means the students and academic faculty at our institutions. Many demonstrated impressive developments or enhancements, but sometimes they appeared to lack that crucial final step in how these would lead to demonstrable service improvements for those customers at the point of need.

I delivered my [own session](#) (in a fantastic ballroom setting) on the library supply of e-textbooks to students and this generated a number of stimulating questions and conversations following the session. What I felt I had to explain most was how this work was both important for the library not just in providing our students with what they want and need, but also how it encapsulates the library's goal of both being at the centre of and critical to the teaching and learning experience of the university. My own feeling was that whilst a number of fellow delegates understood the importance of this, for many others they were still on a journey to fully realise this important concept. Yes, libraries are really important in themselves, but this importance is only fully realised when they are closely allied to institutional goals and strategy.

What was apparent was that there was increasing interest in library involvement in textbook supply for students, whilst acknowledging that the US market place for textbooks is still adoption focused, whereby textbook provision is primarily driven by academics recommending the students to purchase the textbooks themselves. Hence libraries in the US have traditionally not really addressed issues of textbook provision for their students. This is slowly starting to change, much of it as a result of the growing recognition of all the benefits this can bring for their students, institutions and the libraries themselves.

My co-presenters Hilary Davis and Lynn Whittenberger of North Carolina State University Libraries were evidence of the willingness of libraries to embrace new solutions amidst a growing number of US academic libraries interested in this activity. Hopefully this will realise further activity on the part of academic libraries, publishers and third-party platform suppliers.

Finally I have some personal reflections on Charleston as a city. It is deeply interesting on so many levels as well as architecturally very appealing. Its history is rich and fascinating and as you may expect it has gone through some turbulent times. As a British visitor I was of course interested to see one of the pivotal locations of the American War of Independence and no visitor to Charleston can be unmoved by the history and stories of slavery which run right through this city and the wider region. Some of the issues facing modern day America were also brought home to me as the church which experienced a mass shooting in 2015 was literally only a few metres away from one of the main conference venues. Alongside all the other excellent content, for me, the most poignant and moving conference moment came on the first morning when there was the presentation of the [Cynthia Graham Hurd Memorial Scholarship Award](#). Cynthia Graham Hurd was a librarian for over 31 years in Charleston public and academic libraries and on 17 June 2015 her life ended when a lone gunman entered the historic Emanuel AME Church and killed nine people during a prayer meeting. Whilst this crime was particularly horrific, for me, the awarding of this award and the depth of feeling it evoked amongst conference delegates highlighted the positive and life-affirming nature of the library, publisher and wider scholarly communications communities.



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