

Brandon Locke

# Library publishing workflows

## Three big lessons learned from cohort-based documentation

Over the past three decades, library publishing has moved from a niche activity to a regular part of many academic and research libraries' services to their communities. Communities of practice have also grown up and matured around this work, including the Library Publishing Coalition. While the Library Publishing Forum, library publishing listservs, and other professional spaces are lively and active spaces for discussion, publishing workflows—depictions of all the functions performed by a library publisher as part of its regular operations—are generally undocumented. This makes cross-comparison across publishers difficult, leading to missed opportunities for peer learning and sharing of emerging good practices. It also makes it more challenging for individual publishers to evaluate their processes and identify crucial steps they may be omitting, such as contributing metadata to aggregators (essential for discovery and impact) and depositing content in preservation repositories (necessary for a stable scholarly record).

Running from 2019 to 2022 and supported by a National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (LG-36-19-0133-19), Library Publishing Workflows sought to fill the crucial gap in workflow documentation and knowledge exchange.<sup>1</sup> The project, a collaboration between Educopia Institute, the Library Publishing Coalition, and 12 partner libraries, sought to investigate and model a range of journal publishing workflows used by library publishers and foster greater conversation about workflows throughout the library publishing community.

### Project design

The Library Publishing Workflows project sought to capture as diverse a range of library publishers as possible. The cohort of 12 US and Canadian partner libraries included public research universities (Wayne State University, University of Michigan, University of Pittsburgh, and University of Alberta); private research and liberal arts universities of all sizes (Columbia University, Illinois Wesleyan University, Pacific University, and University of Redlands); consortia representing public research universities (California Digital Library) and private liberal arts colleges (Claremont Colleges); and historically black colleges (Atlanta University Center). These institutions included library publishing programs whose publications ranged from a few to several hundred. Some programs were among the first library publishers, and some were just getting started; some programs were heavily involved in the editing process, while others mainly provided resources and expertise.

To develop the workflow documentation, we asked each of our partner library publishers

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to describe the processes they took, starting from when the library first began working with an article or issue, when they stopped actively working with the article or issue, all the major phases, and the steps that made up each phase. We also asked them to describe their biggest pain points and gaps in the process that could be improved. Soon after, the project team wrote up draft documentation for each partner publisher, kicking off an intensive review and revision process that spanned much of the first two years of the project.

In addition to creating workflow documentation, we spent many of our monthly partner meetings digging deeper into topics like specific challenges, platforms, and types of journals, and the impact those had on workflows. We also disseminated a steady flow of information to the community, including blog posts,<sup>2</sup> community calls, and conference presentations. These conversations had a huge impact on our deliverables and helped everyone think more deeply about their own workflows and challenges.

## **Lessons learned**

### **Workflows are diverse, but share many of the same challenges**

Coming into the project, we knew there was a lot of variance in the workflows employed by library publishers, and we sought partners that were very different to try to capture as much of that variance as possible. Even so, we were surprised to see the level of variation between partners, and even variations between different journals published by the same program.

One of the major variations is in the role library publishers see themselves playing in their library, on their campus, and within the broader scholarly communications ecosystem. Some primarily see their roles as publishing scholarship that has been neglected by commercial publishers, and some as providing a space for new methods of review and publication, while others see themselves as providing a business model that counters commercial publishing and can “flip” journals to open. These bigger-picture differences filter down to ways they approach workflows, the services they provide, and the level of individual attention library staff can give a journal.

Within programs, we learned that most of our partners employed multiple workflows in their publishing programs, sometimes with stark differences and even different platforms. For the project, our partners often extrapolated a meta-workflow or model that is representative of several others, and half of our partners ended up documenting more than one workflow. Programs employed multiple workflows for a variety of reasons—different genres of journals (like undergraduate journals) or disciplines may have very different practices and needs; some journals required or preferred services not offered by the library, like proofreading of XML transformation; or historical practices and editor preferences.

While there was a great deal of diversity in the library publisher’s mission, roles librarians played in the process, staffing models, and software and publishing platforms employed; we found that nearly all the issues our partners described came back to one of a few primary sources. We noticed that many people discussed challenges around areas of the workflows that require detailed, manual work. These manual processes, like typesetting and layout, quality control (particularly when it comes to cleaning up automated processes), and downloading and emailing article drafts, make it difficult to scale up publishing programs or maintain regular publishing schedules. A closely related source of challenges was staffing, including inadequate number of staff, training of new personnel, and difficulties replacing or maintaining production when people leave. Inadequate staffing exacerbated the difficulties of

detailed manual work, limited the scale or level of service the library could provide, and made staff turnover especially difficult.

The final common source of frustration was the library's lack of control over the publishing process. Library publishing is a necessarily collaborative process that relies heavily on journal editors, authors, vendors, publishing platform(s), and library personnel. Because of shared responsibilities and a generally high level of journal autonomy, it can be difficult for library publishers to institute changes to workflows or normalize processes across their different journals. Many of our partners also noted that because articles often come in large batches (sometimes as issues, or sometimes because the academic calendar impacts editors' available time), it can be difficult to handle such irregular workloads.

### **The only constant is change**

Workflows are the product of countless moving parts, including editorial staff, publishing staff, libraries, authors and readers, and technological infrastructure. Each of these parts is subject to both expected and unexpected change—rotation of editorial and publishing staff, mission changes to library programs, evolving author and reader needs and expectations, and need for libraries to switch infrastructure. Workflow documentation is just a snapshot in time—in the nearly two years between the beginning of our interviews and our documentation release, we had to make several updates because our partners' workflows had changed. In one case, we repeated the interview and documentation process to capture a new workflow on a new publishing platform.

As we moved through the project and had more conversations between partners, we began to value the stories behind the workflows even more. The more we looked across the different workflows we collected, the more context we wanted to analyze and understand them. We also recognized the importance of sharing with the community the expectation that workflows can and will change. We followed our documentation release with a Workflow Evolution blog series—an opportunity for our partners to discuss how their workflows came to be or share more insights into challenges they've encountered along the way.<sup>3</sup>

But change is not the enemy of workflow documentation. Many people we've spoken with have been putting off creating documentation for years because they are always anticipating changes or feel like their process isn't quite refined yet. Stepping into the documentation process acknowledging its impermanence can be freeing, and it makes later updates far less daunting. We have also found that the process of creating documentation, critically reflecting on why the workflow exists the way it does, and discussing all these topics with the community can help programs work through the changes they need to make.

### **Documentation is meant to be used**

In one of our documentation review sessions, we asked our partners to look at another program's documentation and answer questions about what the workflow says about how the library sees its role in the publishing process, what impact the library is trying to have, and what the library is seen as being the source for. These conversations were incredibly fruitful, and helped everyone begin to think about the documentation not just as a factual account of how journals are published, but as a representation of how and where the program's values and priorities are carried out—which didn't always match expectations and stated values.

These conversations, along with some further conversations with partners about how they had been using their documentation, helped us think more deeply about the various uses workflow documentation could have. Can documentation be used to advocate for more resources for the publishing program? Could it be used to evaluate where resources are allocated? Could it help determine what the program's capacity is, or how they might be able to scale up or down?

We knew from the start of the project that we wanted to release documentation tools—resources to help other members of the community create their own documentation. But as the project went on, we realized that we also wanted to help people *use* their documentation. We spent considerable time with our partners brainstorming how documentation could be used and what resources we could release to help members of the community put their own documentation to work.

Our last major release for the project was a set of Documentation and Reflection Tools.<sup>4</sup> The Documentation Tools—Documenting Your Journal Publishing Workflow and Diagramming Your Journal Publishing Workflow—were the type of documentation creation resources we had imagined from the outset. The Reflection Tools are the result of these conversations about putting your documentation to productive use and include: *Are Our Values Reflected in Our Workflow?*, a tool for reflecting on your publishing program's values and how they are reflected in your publishing workflows; *Is Our Work Sustainable and Scalable?*, a tool for reflecting on capacity and costs; *What Standards and Policies Are We Using?*, a tool for identifying where standards and policies are enacted and where others could be added; and *What Other Documentation Do We Need?*, a tool for helping you identify where you may benefit from additional documentation.

## The value of a cohort

Documentation can be incredibly difficult to do in libraries because library workers have many responsibilities, and creating documentation is not always prioritized. The structure and expectations for the project helped our partners make time for documentation, and the cohort model provided the camaraderie and accountability of peers to help things along. But more importantly, our amazing group of partners and advisors played a huge role in shaping the project. The project benefited immensely from having so much time together to talk through these workflow topics. Our monthly meetings provided the time and space for everyone to reflect on the work and led to many of our biggest breakthroughs, including the lessons learned above. 🦋

## Notes

1. Read more about the project and view all the deliverables at <https://educopia.org/library-publishing-workflows/>.
2. *LPC Blog*, Workflows, Library Publishing Coalition, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://librarypublishing.org/category/blog/workflows/>.
3. All the Workflow Evolution blog posts can be found on the *LPC Blog* at <https://librarypublishing.org/category/blog/workflow-evolution/>.
4. These tools can be found at “Documentation and Reflection Tools,” Educopia, March 31, 2022, <https://educopia.org/documentation-and-reflection-tools/>.