

The truth is in the details: lessons from library collaboration

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THE TRUTH IS IN THE DETAILS, LESSONS IN INTER-UNIVERSITY LIBRARY COLLABORATION

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Inter-institutional collaboration on the scale of the TriUniversity Group of Libraries is a series of complex challenges. To bring together three different organisations with quite different histories and cultures, backgrounds and personalities, and to expect them to work effectively is naive, foolhardy, or visionary. It certainly requires the determination to plan and nurture. While it is important to understand the “why” and the “what” of collaboration, I commented on these last year; these comments can be found at <http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/info/IATUL/index.htm>. Today I hope to give you a sense of our “how”.

Effective collaboration is not accidental; there are processes that can be used to make collaboration more valuable and successful. Early on, we recognised the issue of “cultural transformation”. We allowed and encouraged a conscious and open examination of values, personal systems and attitudes. Our collaborative strategic agenda introduced organisational changes that penetrated each institution's inner structures. Over time, through many meetings, we gained the understanding that we needed to anticipate and prepare for the effects of change. We predicted that conflicts would result and should be prepared for. Preparation took the form of support for training in human relations and life skill as well as in technical abilities and computer skills. Our biggest investment has not been in hardware, which will wear out, or in software, which will be replaced, but in people, who will endure and leave a legacy. Knowing that collaboration will save time and money in the long term is not enough. A substantial investment in human resources is required.

Four areas of influence in creating a human climate for effective inter-institutional collaboration are critical:

- Building relationships,
- Learning,
- Leadership and
- Community building.

1. Building Relationships

The most important characteristic of successful collaboration is quality human relationships. Library leaders must recognise the need for certain life skills. These skills must be identified, developed, and sustained among the staff of the collaborating organisations. Partnerships must be sought out and established by getting to know each other, spending time together and working on events, projects or teams. Despite the geographic proximity of these three libraries, few of the staff knew each other or had worked together in other contexts. Library leaders created events that had a goal of bringing staff together. "Library Leaders" are not necessarily senior management or line managers although they certainly contributed. Anyone who led a team in the collaborative spirit is included in this term.

An example of relationship building occurred in the fall of 1995, the combined staff members of the three Circulation (Access, or Issue) Departments (approximately 80 people) spent a day together "work-shopping" ideas about collaboration and change. These were front-line staff, sometimes overlooked in the planning stage of co-operative ventures. Several interesting and important ideas emerged from these discussions. Since the time of this workshop the circulation team has worked towards TUG-wide circulation harmonisation practices. This harmonisation process required a level of team work and group process unprecedented in our organisations. Looking back we can see the importance of that initial workshop in creating the key relationships that would be critical in the development of other harmonised policies.

A similar focus can be seen in the complex organisation required to select and implement an integrated online system for TUG. The system selection process directly involved more than 30 people from all three institutions as key decision-makers and co-ordinators. Many more library staff members from the three universities and affiliated and federated colleges were involved in demonstrations, feedback sessions, planning and testing. This major task led to the first collaborative decision for TUG. It was critical that process build effective relationships. By establishing a good working procedures based on some key principles of collaboration (accepted criteria, shared understanding, empowerment, and accountability) the libraries were able to draw staff together around a critical decision and enable effective working relationships.

A critical component in building relationships is trust. Trust is the basic constituent, the "glue", necessary for effective collaboration and teamwork. Trust is earned over time in situations of mutual interest and need. Trust is gained by being trustworthy. Creating opportunities to allow trusting relationships to emerge is central to a collaborative strategy. It is necessary to acknowledge that conflict is a normal outcome of co-operation. Resolving conflict is a means of testing and forging even stronger bonds.

TUG collaboration did not happen "to" the libraries, it happened "with" them. It was by an inclusive process with emphasis on widespread participation and consultation that TUG moved forward. Staff members were entrusted with important work, important to them and important to the success of the enterprise. From the outset, the TriUniversity Group of Libraries sought the active involvement of library staff, the user communities and the university administration. We sought the advice of circulation clerks and presidents, part-time staff and business officers, librarians and faculty members. By involving as many individuals, as much as possible, TUG has

been able to build commitment and understanding. Commitment has shaped the initiative to meet the needs of the all users: students and library staff, learners and teachers, administrators and auditors. The "getting acquainted" stage was an opportunity to meet, build relationships, explore new ideas and express concerns. Staff members were provided with the opportunity to learn from each other and to gain self-confidence in their competence. The key outcome was trusting; the development of a level of trust that has become the foundation for all subsequent work, innovations and initiatives. Staff members have considerable freedom in choosing how they do the work. They know that it is important, because we listen and we are influenced. And we are having fun!

By investing in staff involvement, front-line staff, as well as librarians and administrators, at both the conceptual and the operational stages, TUG has nurtured a commitment from users, staff and senior administrators. Motivated staff in an empowering environment allows the collaboration to withstand difficult times and hard decisions.

2. Learning

Shoshana Zuboff, in *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, indicates that "learning is the new form of labor". Peter Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline*, speaks about "learning organizations". Zuboff and Senge highlight another lesson that we are learning about collaborative organisations: the importance of continuous learning; learning as the focus of work. The organisation that emerges from collaborative ventures is different from the sum of its parts. The emergent organisation learns about itself: how it views its world, its values, and its focus. How does the organisation respond to challenge? Learning becomes central to the development of alliances. Staff members must come to terms with ambiguity and uncertainty; there will be many more questions than answers. The importance of learning is demonstrated by learning behaviour. Senior management has been in learning situations with front-line staff; they modelled the attitude that learning is natural and essential for all staff. We have attended courses and seminars together with staff members. Learning is part of our jobs. It is what we do.

The TriUniversity Group of Libraries has made a sizeable investment in training and development as a means to enhance learning. In June 1995 Richard Dougherty lead a "Preferred Futures Workshop" involving diverse staff from the three libraries. It was from this workshop that the participants jointly evolved the idea of "one library service" that forms the metaphorical goal of harmonised services and resources.

At various stages of the collaboration TUG has employed external consultants to assist staff. There was initial scepticism to the need for consultants; some thought, "we can do it ourselves." In hindsight this involvement has been invaluable. Experts have provided a "reality check" to TUG plans and processes. Most importantly the involvement of consultants and others allowed TUG to open itself up for scrutiny. It allowed the consultants and the staff to critique the collaboration. Each time TUG not only received expert advice; the events allowed staff to articulate concerns and work through problems.

[A particularly important resource has been the continuing involvement of staff from the Association of Research Libraries, Office of Management and Leadership Services (OMLS). OMLS staff has lead various workshops and sessions for TUG professional staff focused on management practice and team building. Working with OMLS allowed the libraries to study and practice the same philosophy of library management and administration.] We grew together around common ideas and shared experiences; this was an important reinforcement of the strategic direction taken by the libraries.

In February 1998 a TriUniversity Group of Libraries Collections Workshop was held, bringing together, for the first time, approximately 30 librarians and staff involved in information resources management. This two-day event provided an opportunity to review this most difficult of all collaborative areas. While the focus was on collections management, the workshop also provided a chance to critique and re-commit to TUG initiatives. In this case involvement from the University Librarians was minimal; it was largely a staff directed initiative. It resulted in a renewal of the faith in the collaborative agenda and accelerated activity in TUG collections and information resource matters.

The learning will continue. TUG is constantly exploring new territory in the area of multi-institutional collaboration. More people throughout the organisations are creating opportunities for collaboration and for learning.

3. Leadership

Senior administrative commitment is fundamental; the University Librarians actively promoted and supported the collaborative strategy both within the libraries and within the academic and administrative groups on campus. The University Librarians modelled cultural expectations by working collaboratively as a team of three. The support of this group was visible, positive and frequent.

Team building in a collaboration environment is difficult; this is not the traditional work of administrators or leaders. It requires a commitment to a new approach and a new organisational focus. It is difficult for one organisation to make these adjustments and changes; it is even more difficult to orchestrate three organisations in making these transitions more or less in harmony.

It is imperative, however, that the University Librarians be committed to leadership and resist the temptation to control or manipulate. I have, like many of us, learned command and control management skills from some very accomplished mentors. This style is based on fundamental and honourable principles:

- Setting clear objectives,
- Delegating appropriately,
- Controlling a span of activity and
- Establishing and mutually agreeing on accountability.

It is a very effective management style. Nevertheless staff members want more from their jobs and their needs can be met by blending into this rational management style

a more natural approach. Leaders need to adopt equally effective and different philosophical assumptions.

- Sharing a clear commitment to client needs
- Modelling the benefits of risk-taking and rewarding initiative,
- Looking at the problems openly,
- Establishing self-confidence through success.

Having nurtured relationships among staff, staff must be given the responsibility and authority to make things happen, to shape the emerging nature of the consortium. In the library online automated system selection process, a heterogeneous staff group had considerable authority. These people, drawn from throughout the libraries, were responsible for the evaluation and selection phase. They managed this process with considerable independence from the University Librarians. This achieved an important objective, that leadership became a responsibility of all staff.

Leading by example has also meant dealing with disagreement and discord among the three University Librarians. The University Librarians do not always speak with one voice; they do not always agree on all issues. Working through our disagreements openly has helped to develop more than tolerance for diversity. It celebrates diversity. It shows an acceptance and encouragement of divergent thinking. It models the application of creative tension towards shared goals.

The empowerment invested in the teams that operate the TUG initiatives encouraged commitment and ownership. These teams demonstrate trust by senior management. A sense of stewardship is emerging in which the care of the whole is considered not the individual institution. When an issue arises, the first question should be "what does this mean for the collaboration?" not "what does this mean for my library?"

An important new element in TUG leadership has been the creation of the position, TUG Program Co-ordinator. The role is one of facilitating, co-ordinating and assisting the important communications processes that the TUG University Librarians were unable to continue to do effectively, as inter-institutional collaboration grew. He is an extension of the threesome, not an Executive Director, nor a fourth University Librarian.

It is interesting to consider how the library leadership affected and was affected by other sectors of the universities. There was little to prepare the university or the library for the consequences of the collaboration. The University Librarians were fortunate to discover, in the process, that those administrative units on which the libraries depend for services were willingly supportive.

4. Community Development

is perhaps the most important issue to be recognised. In the course of planning and implementing a team-based approach to managing library services, library leadership has consciously and deliberately enabled "the community" to focus on user needs. Community development has not only been about committee structures or supervisors' responsibilities, or terms of reference. Community development has been these all of these effectively working together. Our goal has been to enable a new

culture by establishing new methods, approaches, actions, interactions and other aspects of organisational behaviour. Designing community is not a typical management skill; understanding “community development” has not been easy. In inter-organisational collaboration local need is still real and immediate. We are not one organisation; we are three organisations linked together. There are still local identities and local cultures that are respected and enhanced. There is still concern among the staff members, librarians particularly about TUG as a shadow over their individuality. Maintaining a balance between consortium focus and local focus is a key aspect of developing a TUG culture that will be compatible with those of the three universities.

In this context one easily can underestimate the difficulty of making the transition to teams and to collaboration. During the change of perspective from “me” to “us”, from “I” to “we” from “them” to “us”, there are many opportunities to revert to the “old ways” or the “way we always did it.” Sustaining the culture of the collaboration requires attention and maintenance. Teams need to be re-energised and re-focused. Values clarification is an important element of this. Are the values guiding the teams the same or divergent? Surfacing these issues will require frank and open discussions about value, sometimes an arduous and inharmonious process. Developing a sense of community over time will be a prime objective.

These are some of the lessons we learned in the TriUniversity Group of Libraries collaboration.

A collaborative creation of:

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