Learning Communities:
A Fundamental shift in the Learning Process,
An Investigative Study into their Impact on Library Services

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In the 1980s and nineties, as employer dissatisfaction regarding college graduates' preparation grew, colleges and universities were forced to reconsider their curriculum not in theoretical matters or study of the classics, but in aspects of the curricula that related to the skills needed for today's work environment. This included, but was not limited to good oral and written communication skills; the ability to work in team settings; and the development of highly advanced analytical skills that span the whole business environment, not just the specific technical subjects. To comply with employers' requirements, many universities developed a variety of programs that incorporated aspects of real life workplace experience. Potential college students began to shop for the school that gave them a better opportunity in the work market and we began to see titles such as "learn the way you'll work" in universities recruitment brochures.

Universities began to establish learning communities and residence colleges. Learning communities are defined by most as a formal and cross-disciplinary approach, involving the restructuring of the curriculum to enhance active, collaborative learning. This typically means linking two or more classes, often across disciplines, so that the students enroll in the linked classes as a group or "cohort." Collaborative learning is another term used in the literature and it seems to conflate with learning communities. The National Learning Infrastructure Initiative defines a learning community as a community in which "people are joined together by mutual interest to intensively examine a particular theme, are able to learn together and exchange existing knowledge and work on aspects of problem solving together."

While the development of forming learning communities and residence programs were taking place on many college campuses, the web revolutionized campus computing. Before long, college students were among the largest user segment of this medium. The ease with which students use Internet chat rooms or e-mail to communicate with each other, with their teachers, and with experts in their fields has led to the emergence of new kinds of informal, exclusive learning communities based on broad collaboration. As in communities of practice for professional workers, student-led learning communities are developed around issues that matter to the community members.

Research conducted over the past decade leaves no doubt that the new information technologies have fundamentally changed the way students interact with each other, their professors, and information. Although research studies in education, psychology, librarianship, and technology have addressed different elements of student interaction with the above-mentioned entities, there is a knowledge void in the library literature. More information is needed on the impact information technology has had on the way these communities learn, the way they seek and communicate scientific and technical information, and how they use libraries to serve their purposes.

New learning communities can be easily observed at the library where students, through the dynamics of their community, are developing new approaches in the way they seek and communicate information. Based on a preliminary observation, the authors of this study suspected that students are bypassing traditional library services in favor of other avenues while still making use of the library's hardware and networked resources.

This study aimed at achieving a deeper understanding of students' needs in order to design services that help them succeed, examining the emerging patterns of collaborative work within these learning communities, and quantifying the groups' use of library and non-library resources. The study outcome should guide the library in enhancing service effectiveness and resource allocation.

The significance of this study goes to the very core of the library mission. As the mission of any library is to serve its user community, it is of vital importance to clearly identify the user community and how the shift from solitary learning to group learning will affect services. Continuing to offer the same services -- or applying a 21st century technological overlay to a 20th or even 19th century service model and calling it new -- will only alienate users and render the library irrelevant in a rapidly changing academic environment.

This study involved the use of questionnaires and surveys, observation of student volunteers, and interviews. It also included a thorough literature review. The study was conducted over the spring semester of 2003 and it involved eighty-one student volunteers.

The study examined the following hypothesis:

1.)   A high percentage of students are developing new study groups that are different in scope, purpose, and technique than the ones they are assigned to by their professors.

2.)   Students are bypassing library resources in favor of instantaneous answers to their queries regardless of the quality of information.

3.)   Students lack understanding of the differences between the many resources offered by the library and those found on the Internet, thus they seek information through easy to use and familiar web-based search engines.

All three hypotheses were confirmed. The authors of the study concluded that over 79% are involved in the new informal leaning communities. These communities were developed to enable the students to achieve their academic goals. Students reported greater satisfaction with the overall quality of group, and that they earned significantly higher GPAs, and help keep their grades high and scholarships intact. The study has also confirmed that students operate on principle of least effort and have zero tolerance for delay. It was also found that that students lack understanding of the differences among many research resources thus seek information through easy to use and familiar web-based search engines. Students who are doing research prefer to search non-authoritative sources for an immediate answer rather than use an intermediary source such as the library, or request an item that may or may not be available immediately.

The library's presence in supporting these groups was clearly absent. Libraries have always designed their services for the individual users. The library can and must devise new ways to support the new learning communities. The following is suggested:

1. Acknowledge the presence of Learning Communities.
2. To develop the potential for unofficial mentoring, assigning a librarian to be the primary contact to groups that emerge from certain academic departments.
3. Communicate library service in supporting groups by rewriting some of the library material with groups, not individuals, as the target audience.
4. Reconfigure the library's physical spaces to restore the "human moment" in education. The library should contain facilities that encourage small and large group communication and allow synchronous and/or asynchronous communication to occur naturally.
5. Reexamine the use of collections and adjust services accordingly. For example:
    a. As the use of full-text electronic resources increases and as we add additional resources in this venue, federated search engines should be seriously examined and made available.
    b. Offer better availability of "gray literature" in technical fields. More technical reports, standards, specifications, design manuals, etc. Students are bypassing the library in part because we don't have the materials they require
    c. Reorganization of information literacy instruction with faculty "buy-in" as a vital component for its success.
    d. Instruction needs to be related to coursework – current instructional models do not tie library instruction to class projects. Many classes involve a major project or paper. This is where information literacy instruction should be applied.

5. Additional studies should be conducted to support these findings.