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Institution-Wide Collaboration: How Learning Communities Can Help

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The Libraries Thriving Learning Community is an ongoing educational project that began in early 2011. With the purpose of engaging on key current issues, solutions and responses that demonstrate the effectiveness of individual library professionals as well as libraries' effectiveness within the institutions of which they are a part, the learning community worked together actively for three months. Primarily online, community participants engaged in a variety of interactions to explore and experiment with the kinds of individual and institutional actions needed for libraries to thrive. Sharing a vision for collaborative, creative, and positively-focused libraries and library professionals, Credo Reference and LYRASIS are provided facilitation and technical support for this unique community.

Each learning community member had two core responsibilities: 1. To undertake an ambitious library initiative that involves technology; 2. To work collaboratively with other community members on their initiatives. To accomplish these goals, the Libraries Thriving Learning Community included an online space to explore common interests and address shared issues or problems. This online space also included: information resources and best practices/strategies; knowledge bases to which members can contribute their work and findings; a forum for research and implementation questions; colleagues engaged in similar work and tackling similar challenges; experts who may be able to clarify issues and provide references, and colleagues who might be interested in collaborating on a project. Shared activities were a large part of the community experience. Members engaged in two online meetings or events per month, some featuring speakers from the library, business, and higher education fields; participated in discussions focused on short readings during these meetings; shared their proposed project and project progress with other members of the community; worked with fellow librarians, faculty and students to address the needs of their project; had fun while learning and collaborating within the small group;

attended occasional in-person meetings regionally and at conferences; and presented project results to their campus and to fellow library professionals at national conferences.

Why Learning Communities?

The work of Alexander Meiklejohn (1932) and John Dewey (1933) in the 1920s and '30s gave rise to the concept of a student learning community. (Lombardi, 2007) Increasing specialization and fragmentation in higher education caused Meiklejohn to call for a community of study and a unity and coherence of curriculum across disciplines. Dewey advocated learning that was active, student centered, and involved shared inquiry. A combination of these approaches in the late 1970s and '80s produced a pedagogy and structure that has led, among other things, to students' increased grade point averages, retention, and intellectual development. The term *learning community* has traditionally been applied to programs that involve first- and second-year undergraduates, along with faculty who design the curriculum and teach the courses.

A faculty learning community is a group of about 8-12 librarians, faculty and/or professional staff engaging in an active, collaborative program to accomplish personal and shared goals. A participant in a learning community may select an outreach effort, course or problem to try out innovations, assess resulting student learning/information literacy, and prepare a plan to address the challenge and then assess the outcome.

The Need for Collaboration in Libraries

The type of collaboration possible through Learning Communities meets several important needs. Library organizations typically have commitment to the continued growth and development of their staff. Even in the most supportive of environments however, due often to practical concerns of time, money, and staff resources, organizations may face limits on the amount of time and energy colleagues

can devote to supporting another colleague's research interest or innovative idea. Learning Communities are an excellent response to this dilemma as they create a supportive, synergistic environment drawing from the good intentions and talents of individuals across multiple organizations in a way that benefits all, including organizations at which Learning Community members are employed.

Other needs met by this type of collaboration include extending the human resources (especially the "brain power") to analyze and meet complex needs, and solve complex problems creatively. Learning Community members bring different strengths to the table, allowing all to advance their respective skills. Finally, effective Learning Communities demonstrate the vitality of the library profession. Two projects from the Spring 2011 Learning Community described here are evidence of all of these Learning Community benefits.

Learning communities at the American University of Paris (AUP)

"Learning communities" are a given concept in today's teaching landscape and integrated in many university curriculums (Reigeluth, 2009). The American University of Paris has integrated the idea of 'learning communities' into its 'First Bridge' program which is mandatory for Freshman students (The American University of Paris 2011) It is designed to bridge not only the transition between high school and university but also to create links between "students and students" as well as "professors and students". It is believed that these bonds acquired in the learning community help to integrate students into their academic environment and to inspire more interest in learning. A librarian is embedded into this program, meeting with students three to four times per semester.

Hence, my interest in participating in "Libraries Thriving Learning Community" was to experience a learning community at first hand. I was interested in taking the role of the student in order to better understand the dynamics, pragmatics and problems raised over the course of these kinds of learning communities. An overall bonus of the "Libraries Thriving Learning Community" was that it was an online learning community, since eLearning projects

have been highly popular since the development of adequate technologies.

The project

The AUP Library signed up with a library project called "student-to-student research help" aiming to improve its existing reference services at AUP at a first entry level for students (ORE Ohio Reference Excellence 2008, Senior 2010). This program trains experienced students to conduct advanced research by using the OPAC, databases, reference resources and AUP's e-book collection. In addition, the students would get an overall training on how to conduct a reference interview (Vidmar 2010). These projects are very common in the North-American university landscape (Senior 2010) but less developed in France. The benefit of such a program is to improve reference services by increasing the visibility and availability of research help points. Besides, it would free up work time of existing library staff from basic reference duties, allowing them to focus on advanced reference questions and/or other library tasks. From a student perspective, this new service would lower the oft-mentioned fear of students to talk to librarians (Booth, 2009) and to be closer to the student body.

The "Libraries Thriving Learning Community" was intended to start as a pilot project by the end of the Spring semester 2011. Four experienced students would assure four hours of research help from Monday to Friday from 4 pm to 8pm - the peak time of library use. It was intended to be expanded to other university buildings, opening hours on Saturdays, and to use new communication channels as well (i.e. online chat, Facebook).

Where are we today?

Today, the "student-to-student research help"-project has not started yet. It is on hold as questions of student worker's labor law status arose during the implementation of the project in Spring 2011. In a nutshell, the work-study status as it exists in the United States of America does not exist in France. Therefore, these questions had to be tackled first in order to properly set up the legal framework of the project. As legal aspects demand more time aspect, these questions are still not resolved entirely, although the AUP library director is working on it. Besides these legal issues, other problems

were encountered such as librarian related issues (i.e. getting the support of all librarians) and pragmatic problems (how to market the project, setting up the training for the students, placement of 'student-to-student' research desk).

Learning community benefits

The problems outlined above were addressed and discussed during the several meetings of the "Libraries Thriving Learning Community". It was striking during these meetings to see how much easier it was to spell out these problems. It appeared that there were not only one problem at the beginning but many problems linked to the project proposal that all had to be resolved at once (Murray 2009, pp. 31-46).

In addition, the discussions with external professionals in the field were especially helpful as they gave advice and different perspectives on the project while lacking the bias of internal discussions. The exchange of different views on the project was facilitated not only by not only the "Libraries Thriving Learning Community" participants but also by the guest speakers (Polanka 2011, Hay and Richardson, 2011) and the moderators. Hence, the project was seen from a more objective point of view, helping to take different perspectives into account and to overcome problems.

Further on, the guest speakers, moderators and participants shared information that allowed us to connect with other professionals working on similar projects (such as Linda Bills at the Allegheny College, USA), enabling us to share training materials and discuss problems and the project set-up. It turned out that the learning community 'secret of success' was finally not the well planned organization of the meetings, but the discussions that were triggered during these regular online meetings. It was by describing, discussing, and debating that the project would take on more and more form.

Finally, it was also the motivation of the participants that enhanced the learning experience in the learning community. Without motivated and interested participants, the discussions would not have been as lively and encouraging. This is an aspect to reflect upon, since it is evident that students often do not show interest in academic projects. It may be that students have different priorities when entering

university life, but at the same time, it has often been demonstrated that once discussions are triggered well, students tend to engage in academic project with high interest and innovation (Carnes 2011). It seems then that it is up to the professionals to trigger these kinds of discussions.

The Marshall University and the Libraries Thriving Learning Community Experience

The Marshall University Libraries worked closely with the Marshall University Center for Teaching Excellence throughout the Learning Community Project. The goal of our project was to address concerns and confusion related to the First Year Seminar.

The Challenge

The Center for Teaching Excellence coordinated training for faculty who would teach the first year seminar. The first year seminar was part of an initiative to introduce freshmen to critical thinking in seven core domains. There were also as many as 18 critical thinking outcomes related to the core domains. In addition to this the possible domains and outcomes there was also the overriding theme of "integrative thinking" where students would be challenged to think about more than one domain at a time. For example, students might (and the faculty who taught the first year seminar) consider the overlap of scientific and aesthetic thinking or mathematical and ethical thinking.

Librarians played a significant role in the first year seminar and the critical thinking initiative at Marshall. Information Literacy was identified as a critical thinking core domain and also as an outcome. Librarians were assigned to each first year seminar class and were required to meet with each class four times to provide instruction and experiences related to information literacy.

After the initial year of this new critical thinking/first year seminar initiative feedback from the faculty and students was less than positive. Faculty perceived that they were being asked to teach out of their fields "I teach science, not art," or "I am an English professor; why do I have to teach math?" Students admitted to being confused about the class. Overall, there were many complaints and concerns. Faculty were asking for guidance and suggestions on content that would allow them to in-

roduce critical thinking concepts in areas where they might lack expertise.

Tools for First Year Seminar

The Marshall team for the Learning Community consisted of two librarians and the directory of the MU Center for Teaching Excellence. We shared an image of a Swiss Army knife: one with many tools joined into one unit. We wanted to offer something that was both simple and complex. We wanted to offer options and not tell our colleagues what to teach or how to teach. We wanted to offer resources and ideas that would start conversations about scientific or historical or artistic or mathematical thinking. We also wanted a tool that would appeal to students. Whatever solutions we offered, we also knew that there should be easy access (no special login or password), avenues for feedback, and ways that our MU segment of the Learning Community could easily edit or modify the tool we developed.

The Solution

The Library currently uses Lib Guides for subject specific research guides. The guides have been well received by both faculty and students and we decided to present our first year seminar solutions through a Lib Guide. This Lib Guide can be viewed here: <http://libguides.marshall.edu/coredomains>. We identified resources that corresponded to each domain as well as to integrative thinking. Each critical thinking domain has a separate page with these elements:

- Current news feeds. Examples include current news about science or math. We wanted students to be able to see that math or science is relevant even for English majors.
- Videos. Often, we selected TED videos which are readily available for public use. We tried to select videos that corresponded or related to the each core domain.
- Library resources. We tried to select a few key items related to each domain rather than overwhelm with an inclusive list. We hope to encourage enough interest that students would search for additional related resources.
- Cool web links. We tried to identify web sites that faculty and students might find useful and thought provoking. We especial-

ly liked some of the sites reviewed and recommended by *Choice*.

- Library chat tool. We wanted to be able to respond quickly to questions so we included this link.

In addition to the Lib Guide we worked with Peter Ciuffetti from Credo Reference who was able to develop a tool for integrative thinking. It is a cube that moves and will generate alternate search terms that correspond to each domain. It provides confirmation that students can think about a topic in more than one way.

The Future

We plan to evaluate if our Lib Guide was useful to first year seminar faculty and students. Surveys are planned. We will analyze results, plan for adjustments, and make updates as indicated.

Connecting Marshall and the Libraries Thriving Learning Community

By being a part of this Learning Community we were motivated to identify a project that demanded a solution. At the beginning we were unsure but as we met with our Marshall group and then with the greater Learning Community group, solutions to the first year seminar puzzle started to emerge. Meetings were online (with audio) and while our projects were very different there was also a common experience that we all shared. This was important and it set an atmosphere where sharing information about our projects and offering feedback to others was also valued. The common experiences included assigned readings and guest speakers. I believe that we were all able to find value in the readings about project management as well as through the interactions with guest speakers. There was also the value of having feedback from people who were not personally involved in or project. They could ask questions and notice things that we otherwise would have overlooked.

The Libraries Thriving Learning Community proved to be a very useful and practical way to make connections and work on a project from an initial idea through a solution. The Learning Community kept us accountable to each other; we always knew that we needed to be prepared for our meetings and in the end we accomplished more by working together.

Tips From the Libraries Thriving Spring 2011 Learning Community Experience

A number of ideas for effective Learning Community experiences emerged from the Spring 2011 experience. It helps to continually orient participants to think in longer time frames. Certainly the projects described had immediate goals and needs to fulfill, but as circumstances change contingencies arise, and thinking beyond the immediate time frame of any project not only helps think projects through to more advanced stages and levels of evaluation but can help to surface alternatives should obstacles arise. Additionally, engaging widely and beyond the immediate audience served increases the likelihood of positive influence over time as problems are defined and solutions developed.

In a Learning Community environment, open, non-judgmental dialog is a core value. Conversation should be valued over presentation, and iteration over perfection. If ideas or dialog stagnate, look to the "edges" of the problems to be solved (the problems that arise as a result of brainstormed solutions to other problems) as well as the core problem. Trust is essentially. Conveners of Learning Communities should seek always to keep the pressure on participants low, as low-pressure situations lead to better listening, dialog, and ultimately greater value for the participants.

Further experimentation and use of Learning Communities as libraries continue to grow their role throughout the entire academic institution is crucial to formalize collaboration and innovation.

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