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From A University Press — Slowing Down, or the Benefits of Process-Oriented Collaboration

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“Humans are natural storytellers,” declared **Melanie Hawks**, Learning and Development Manager at **University of Utah**. She continued, “This can be our greatest strength and our greatest weakness. If we see something and we don’t know the meaning, we create a story.”

Thus began the workshop for Publishing Open and Affordable Textbooks that launched this year’s **AAUP** meeting in New Orleans. The workshop aimed to bring publishers and librarians together around a common hypothetical scenario to openly discuss the similarities and differences these two organizations share, and to look closely at the stories we construct about each other. Participants were split into groups composed of at least one representative each from a university press and library, and were given the following scenario:

“The Provost has approached the libraries and press on campus with an offer of \$100,000 in support if they can create a pilot program to help faculty develop open/affordable alternatives to traditional (expensive) textbooks. Your group will need to lead a meeting to bring staff and decisions makers from the press and library together to envision how they will collaborate on creating this pilot program.”

Groups were directed to focus on the process rather than the specifics; that is, how to conduct productive conversations across two different cultures through a series of steps leading to better mutual understanding and shared leadership. This four-step process began with individual reflection: What would you like to accomplish? What are anticipated benefits and drawbacks of this collaboration? What strengths and skills do you bring to the table? What strengths and skills do you think the other group will bring to the table?

As an acquisitions editor at **Indiana University Press** who has already participated in cross-collaborative projects with our library and who anticipates many more opportunities through the development of **IU’s Office of Scholarly Publishing**, I approached these questions from the press perspective. Given the scenario above and the fact that **IU Press** continues to rely on product revenue to sustain operations, I would hope to accomplish a new product model that could be utilized across subject areas and monetized on a larger level to create new revenue streams. Perhaps more realistically, this scenario could be perceived as a learning experience, providing an excellent opportunity to evaluate what’s working and what’s not working as we embrace more flexible content formats and profit models. The press could provide quality control through the

form of peer review, copyright and permissions expertise, and a professional network to recruit authors and editors; while the library could bring technological expertise, digital preservation capabilities, and a deeper knowledge of user trends that could be implemented in product development.

Next, groups were asked to engage in skillful discussion in order to locate points of convergence and divergence between our two cultures. In this step, we largely focused on our assumptions of each other, sometimes debunking them and sometimes corroborating them, in order to discover a common ground. Two primary areas of difference are time and money. Because presses are market-driven, and therefore bound by various seasonal deadlines, they tend to work on accelerated timelines — always looking ahead to the next season. Libraries, on the other hand, function at a slower pace and can think through the various complexities of a given project before allocating necessary resources. Similarly, because libraries are considered added value by most university administrators, enjoying a security in the institutional landscape that is not often shared by most university presses, they have the ability to take more risks. Presses, on the other hand, often do not have the financial latitude or the flexibility to be innovative. Indeed, too often, presses must either think conservatively in order to keep the lights on or make hasty decisions in order to meet deadlines governed by the market or by the end of the fiscal year. Despite these deep differences, both libraries and presses strive to disseminate knowledge widely and to provide quality content to as many users as possible.

Step 3 involved developing a shared understanding of expectations, assigned tasks and responsibilities, limitations, and possible outcomes. Here, groups spoke of the importance of establishing common definitions in order to build transparency and trust across cultures. The results of these discussions would then be applied in step 4, where collaboration is actualized in the form of assembling key players, conducting meetings, and fostering shared ownership.

A common refrain heard across the morning’s conversations and from both sides of the aisle was a concern about time; that is, a

tendency in both cultures to rely heavily on meetings without designating the time needed to operationalize action points, all while trying to carry on business as usual. A major challenge, then, is to convince colleagues from two time-strapped organizations to come together and invest their time in a new initiative that will yield uncertain results.

Workshop participants concluded that the most effective way to create buy-in was to develop common goals and to focus on mutual interests. These might include creating a good quality product and new product models, bolstering institutional alignment and the university brand, building new revenue streams, and of course, opening up new lines for collaboration.

While the workshop was not detail-oriented — we did not walk away with a better understanding of various platforms or workflows, for example — it was a lesson on the benefits of slowing down. To avoid

making split-second decisions, jumping to conclusions, or making choices governed by emotions, it is advantageous to develop a process — a road map of sorts — that will allow an organization to evaluate and benchmark both failures and successes. Moreover, it allows space for communication and that ubiquitous term, collaboration.

The **AAUP’s** conference theme, Open to Debate, signals a willingness, indeed an eagerness, to build a publishing community that is inclusive of other entities and cross-collaborative in nature: “We seek to continue the ongoing, evolving dialogue about scholarly publishing by engaging in a vigorous discussion about our future, not only with other university presses but also with libraries, campus administrators, and media outlets.” With seismic shifts occurring not just in the publishing world, but also at the institutional level, the necessity to share best practices, maximize skill sets, and build on common ground is imperative.

Collaboration does not always come easily — it means working across cultures, after all. Indeed, the roadmap for library/press collaboration is still very much in flux. While the story remains inconclusive, the writing of it has just begun. 🍄

