

Working Together: Effective Collaboration in a Consortium Environment

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SUMMARY. This paper describes innovative library services to distance students negotiated through a geographically dispersed consortium, the Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries (COPPUL). The Distance Education Forum (DE Forum) is one of the most active member groups within COPPUL, and has had a number of successes in collaborative services over the years. This paper provides an overview of how the DE Forum works, its Web site, and its ways of working through small sub-teams coordinated via an annual meeting. We describe a number of projects, looking both at what was successful and what didn't work as well, and discuss what we learned.

KEYWORDS. Collaboration, Internet, library services, distance learners

INTRODUCTION

Several recent papers have discussed the accomplishments of consortia in assisting distance education students (Subramanian, Brunvand et al.), but for

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the most part these articles focus on the end result, and not the process that lead to that result. In this paper we will document how the Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries (COPPUL) Distance Education Forum was successful in reaching a number of its goals. While not necessarily revolutionary, we feel our approach is a solid one, and one that other consortia may wish to emulate.

Thomas Peters, Dean of University Libraries at Western Illinois University, writes, "I firmly believe that collaboration involving libraries is crucial to the continued success of libraries. This is not a bold prediction, because libraries have been collaborating successfully for decades. Perhaps the question is not whether or not to collaborate, but how to collaborate and with whom" (Peters, 2003). This paper will describe the successful collaboration of a large number of academic libraries in planning distance services in Western Canada, and will discuss both how we've collaborated, and why this collaboration has lead to success for our group.

The Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries is currently comprised of 22 university libraries located in the four western provinces of Canada—Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, a geographic area roughly equivalent to one third of the continental United States. The institutions range in size from very small (FTE < 500) to very large (FTE > 30,000). Member libraries cooperate to enhance information services and reduce costs through resource sharing, collective purchasing of online resources, document delivery, and many other similar activities. Many of COPPUL's activities are of direct benefit to distance students.

COPPUL AND THE DISTANCE EDUCATION FORUM

COPPUL has established a number of Working Groups to help it accomplish its goals. Currently there are Working Groups for collections, data resources, public services, systems, interlibrary loan, digitization, the Virtual Western Canadian University Library, and our group, the Distance Education Forum. The DE Forum is one of the most active of these working groups. It was established in 1989 as a means for COPPUL members to share information about the provision of services to off-campus and distance education students and faculty. From 1989 to 1995, the Forum held a number of meetings. During that time, COPPUL Directors revised COPPUL's strategic plan and gave the Forum a more specific mandate: to bring greater consistency to the services offered by each member Library to its distance students, and to pursue the endorsement of the Canadian Library Association Guidelines for Library Support of Distance Learning in Canada. There was a sense that greater equity

needed to be established, not only between on- and off-campus students but also in the level of service that COPPUL's members offered to their distance students. For several reasons however, one being the lack of a Chair, the Forum went on hiatus from 1995 to 1998. Since distance learning and on-line instruction seemed to be expanding rapidly at that time, a proposal was submitted to COPPUL Directors to reactivate the Forum. The proposal was supported by all attending the October 1998 Directors' meeting.

The Forum reconvened in 1999 under new leadership and met in Vancouver, British Columbia in May of that year. Each institution in COPPUL with a distance education program (19 out of 22) appointed a representative to the Forum. At this first meeting of the reactivated group, members agreed that in addition to exchanging information, the Forum needed to be more of a working group that would undertake specific projects on a cooperative basis. The overall aim was to carry out projects that would enhance the level of service provided to distance students by all COPPUL libraries—not just by member libraries to their own students, for which they have primary responsibility, but also to distance students from other COPPUL institutions who were located near enough to their library to use it in person. Thus, distance students would benefit from a wider range of services from their home institution, and from access to specified services from COPPUL libraries that were physically accessible to them. The overall result would be a higher level of service for all students in the consortium, regardless of home institution, or to which library they happened to be closest. To this end, the members developed new goals and objectives, which were subsequently approved by COPPUL Directors.

As stated on the Forum's homepage, our goals are as follows: The Forum will promote, within the context of COPPUL's mission and strategic plan, the development of cost-effective library services that support the distance and distributed learning activities of COPPUL institutions. In doing so, the Forum will emphasize (1) cooperative service development and resource sharing among COPPUL libraries, as well as among other types of libraries, and (2) real-time information accessibility and materials availability, regardless of the origin of the information, or the location of the library user.

We have the following objectives:

Share Information

To enable COPPUL distance education librarians to collaborate by sharing information about issues and problems relating to distance delivery of library service, and to promote a cooperative resolution of procedural and practical issues, including that of staff development.

Promote Service Development

To promote the development by COPPUL libraries of services to distance learners that are consistent with (1) CLA's current Guidelines for Library Support of Distance and Distributed Learning in Canada, and (2) collaborative endeavours which lend themselves to the "sharing of staff expertise"; as identified by the COPPUL Board of Directors in their 1999-2001 Strategic Plan.

Promote Equity of Access

To promote equity of access for all COPPUL distance education students by working to ensure that they are able to take advantage of the total information resources of COPPUL in a timely fashion.

Facilitate Advocacy

To assist COPPUL distance education librarians in advocating for effective library support for distant and distributed learning among their library and institutional colleagues, and among external partners from the wider distance education community.

Assist and Advise COPPUL Directors

To proactively assist COPPUL Directors and Institutional Administrators by informing and advising them about issues and problems associated with library service for distance learners.

To accomplish these objectives, the Forum holds an annual meeting in the spring of each year. At this meeting we develop an action plan for the upcoming year based on discussion over the Forum's mailing list and at the annual meeting, and establish small teams to work on individual projects during the upcoming year. We should note here that Directors of COPPUL libraries have established some criteria to help ensure that the projects undertaken will be successful and contribute positively to COPPUL as a whole. These criteria deal with questions such as: How does the project contribute to COPPUL's overall vision? Will the project result in cost savings? What is the long-term viability of the new or enhanced service, and what would be the implications if the service were to be discontinued? What impact would the service have on existing agreements or technical operations within COPPUL?

FRUITFUL DE FORUM PROJECTS

On the following pages we will describe some of the bigger and more successful projects worked on by the DE Forum. For each project we will provide background information, and discuss the role of the DE Forum in that project, in particular how it helped promote a consortium-based approach to developing and implementing new distance services. It is this final aspect where we feel the DE Forum truly shines.

Examination of Commercial Library Alternatives (e.g., Questia, netLibrary, etc.)

When commercial services like netLibrary and Questia began appearing in the late 1990s, they made claims that they were much faster and easier to use than traditional bricks and mortar libraries, and that they contained all the material a student would need, so they could actually replace a student's traditional library. For a subscription cost. Since we want to offer our distance students as many academic full text articles as possible, Forum members felt that they needed to know more about these products—what they actually contained, how they worked, what they cost—and what role resources of this nature could play in distance service. Much of the focus on e-resources development had been on journal articles. These new services were focused on books and thus represented a new area that needed investigation for its potential impact on DE service. The more we knew about them, the better we could respond to questions from students or administrators.

This project illustrates one of the advantages of working together in a consortium—that in the larger group, there is a greater likelihood that one of the members will have interest and expertise in the project area, and be willing to take leadership of the project team. This was indeed the case with this project, and one member agreed to lead the Work Team. Several others volunteered for the Team, each one to investigate a separate product. The products examined were netLibrary, Questia, ebrary, XanEdu, and Jones e-global library.

The Team Lead developed a set of questions that each member asked the publisher when researching their respective product, including:

- What are the key subject content areas of the product?
- How does the student and/or Library obtain access to it?
- How do the key functions work (e.g., searching, printing, downloading)?
- What is the product's business plan, and how are costs determined?
- Is the product easy to use?
- What is the overall quality of the product?
- How does the product contribute to distance library support?

With representatives from several member libraries, we had the staff to divide the work so that each member of the Team could concentrate on a single product and do a more detailed assessment of it, resulting in a better understanding of the product. As members of a consortium, Team members were seen to represent potentially substantial purchases of a product, either institutionally, perhaps even consortium-wide, or from students directly, so publishers were helpful in providing the information we were seeking. This project gave us all a better understanding of the e-book side of distance service, to complement our understanding of e-journal resources.

The full report was presented at the Forum's 2002 annual meeting and served as a valuable source of information not only for Forum members, but also for others in our respective libraries, for example those with collection development responsibilities.

Reciprocal Borrowing

A reciprocal borrowing agreement had existed in COPPUL for many years, allowing faculty and graduate students to borrow materials directly from other COPPUL libraries when they were away from their home libraries, for example on sabbatical or doing thesis research. It had become an important element in service to individuals who were temporarily at a distance from their home institutions. With distance learning moving more strongly into undergraduate curricula, a majority of COPPUL Directors felt that the time had come to look at expanding the agreement to include undergraduate students. However, certain members had long-standing concerns that this expansion would "unleash the hordes" and create uneven and/or unsustainable demand. Thus, while there was a strong feeling that something needed to be done, expanding the project to include undergraduates was seen as a sort of Pandora's Box that some were afraid to open.

When the DE Forum was reconvened in 1999, the Directors asked the Forum to take the lead on this project, knowing that the reciprocal borrowing service was becoming an increasingly important element of distance service, and that the Forum would have the interest needed to move it forward. Thus, the DE Forum took the lead on a service development that, if implemented, would benefit all undergraduate students in COPPUL institutions. The Directors also saw the Forum as having sufficient members and representation from each institution, two elements that would enable us to conduct a pilot project, to gather data on actual usage and address any other issues that arose.

The Forum established a Reciprocal Borrowing Work Team at its annual meeting of May 1999 consisting of 4 members, one representing each province. This Work Team developed a proposal for a pilot project for undergradu-

ate reciprocal borrowing, and obtained approval from the other members of the Forum. The Forum Chair presented the proposal to the Directors for consideration, and the Directors gave approval for a one-year pilot, to run from September 2000 to August 2001. They did ask that a specific implementation plan be developed, and this was done prior to the implementation of the pilot. The plan proved to be a very useful tool as there were many logistical details to work out. The plan was posted on the Forum's Web site so that it could be checked anytime clarification was needed.

The decision was made to include a local contact at each Library from front-line staff, e.g., Circulation Supervisor. This helped to get buy-in at local level and address issues quickly. Local contacts and DE Forum representatives also kept their individual Directors informed of progress, so the Director was prepared in case any problems arose. The Directors were provided with a six-month progress report, and were so assured of the results that they approved the service on an ongoing basis after the first six months. The success of this local expansion eventually led to the expansion of the reciprocal borrowing service for all levels of students among all the other consortia across Canada, making this a nation-wide service. With a few exceptions, undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty at Canadian universities can now borrow in person from other Canadian university libraries coast-to-coast.

This project helped show that concerns among different sized libraries within a consortium—in this case, concern about the uneven impact of a new service—could be addressed by means of a clear process that generated clear data. The data gathered showed that while there were some differences, they were not significant enough to merit pulling out. This project also showed that proactive communication could help ensure the success of a project by addressing concerns before they had a chance to escalate and undermine the project.

Information Literacy Web Site

When the Forum met in 1999, members indicated strong interest in providing users with a fuller range of online instruction tools, to promote more effective library research from a distance, but also to help distance students gain access to the collective resources of COPPUL libraries, either from their home library or from COPPUL libraries they could use in person. As there were a number of issues to consider, it was decided that some background exploration of possible options was needed before a decision could be made, in order to be sure that we developed something we could all use.

As a result, we established an Electronic Instruction Team to investigate options and report back to members. The Team developed some questions for

each Forum member to answer, e.g., what kind of instruction tools they were currently using; whether any of these tools could be adapted for use beyond their institution; what they felt were the top three kinds of tools needed; and whether they felt it was possible to develop shared tools that would still be effective for local needs. Responses to these questions indicated that an online tutorial in basic research skills was something everyone could use effectively as a shared resource.

During this fact-finding phase, the Team discovered that the Coalition of Atlantic University Libraries (CAUL), another Canadian consortium, had already developed a tutorial of this nature, which, given that it had been developed for a consortium, had some of the structure and features we wanted, for example Web links to each member's distance service pages, online reference assistance, and other resources to complement the instructional content. At the Forum's meeting the following year, 2000, the Team's proposal to adopt the CAUL tutorial and adapt it for COPPUL use was accepted. One of the members offered to host it at her Library and do the development work needed. The tutorial went live in the fall of 2001. This project illustrates some of the benefits of the consortium approach: pooling feedback to identify the most useful product to develop; the likelihood that at least one of the members will be in a position to host the site; all members making sure their respective links are kept up-to-date.

Virtual Western Canadian University Library (VWCUL)

The VWCUL project grew from a joint meeting in January 2001 in Victoria, BC between the Directors and Systems groups. The outcome of that meeting led to the formation of the VWCUL Steering Committee in March 2001. The VWCUL project originally consisted of six steps resulting in a virtual "Research Assistant." These steps are:

1. develop tools that will allow users to select an appropriate starting point;
2. develop authentication mechanisms that will ensure that users gain access to resources;
3. develop tools that will allow effective subject or known item searches;
4. develop better mechanisms to check availability of items online or in print;
5. develop better mechanisms to get items remotely if not available locally; and
6. develop tools to incorporate citations and/or articles into personalized library services.

All of these steps are currently commercially available individually, but no package seemed to contain the entire research process as envisioned for this project. In addition, utilizing local programming expertise throughout the consortium would allow this product to be made available in an affordable package to COPPUL members, a very real concern when Canadian dollars are used to purchase commercial services from the U.S. The success of this project would be of obvious benefit to students studying at a distance.

Shortly after the VWCUL Steering Committee was formed, a member of the DE Forum was asked to participate to ensure that the interests of distance students were addressed in the planning and implementation of this project. This DE representative attended all Steering Committee meetings and participated in the listserv discussion of the project, informing and consulting with DE Forum members when necessary and appropriate. One of the biggest areas of concern for distance students is to ensure that step 5, mechanisms to get items remotely if not available locally, takes into account the unique situation of the distance student. As we know, distance students often request items held by the home library, and we needed to ensure that distance students wouldn't be barred from requesting items the system thought they could obtain for themselves. This project is still underway, and has evolved to some extent based on feedback from the various stakeholders.

The existence of the DE Forum gave us a group from which a member could be drawn to represent the needs of distance students on the VWCUL Steering Committee. Early on it seemed apparent to the Steering Committee that what would make a successful product for distance students (remote access, full text, ease of use w/o guided instruction) would also make a good product overall.

The consortium approach of this project has been particularly interesting because over the course of the project (now approaching three years), several commercial products have matured, and several members of COPPUL have essentially purchased components of the VWCUL to serve their own students, but not those of the rest of the consortium. It remains to be seen just what the final product, now known as reSearcher, will mean to COPPUL distance students.

MISSES

The Forum has not been successful in every attempted project. The following are three examples of areas where the Forum faced challenges and did not enjoy as much success as we would have hoped.

DE Survey

During the early 1990s, the Forum carried out a survey of its students that gathered data on a number of different issues, e.g., other kinds of libraries the respondents had used, difficulties they had encountered in obtaining materials or service, how often respondents had used the catalogues of other COPPUL libraries, etc. When the Forum was reactivated in 1999, it was proposed that another survey be conducted. A proposal was developed and taken to the Directors but was not approved, and the survey did not go ahead. Looking back on why this happened, there appear to be several reasons. The original survey had been a useful scan of a number of issues and had helped us understand the nature of library use by distance students at that time. With the reconstituted group, however, there was a sense that a new survey should facilitate our focus on specific projects, by gathering data that would help identify specific needs or issues as well as the kind of project that would be best suited to addressing them. A survey of this nature was more complex than the previous one, particularly with new issues to address such as electronic access, Web-based delivery, and inter-institutional course delivery. Unfortunately, in this case the Forum's structure of a one-day meeting plus discussion via our list for the rest of the year did not allow sufficient time for the in-depth discussion needed to resolve these and other questions, and develop an appropriate design. Thus, when questions arose about sample size, ethics reviews, as well as overall purpose, it became apparent that more work was needed. While the consortium environment certainly offers fertile ground for surveys, there needs to be a structure that can adequately support the design and implementation process, and give sufficient time to deal with the diversity of opinions that will inevitably arise in a project of this nature.

Direct-to-Student Document Delivery

One of the biggest problems faced by distance students is the time it takes to receive hard copy materials. The Forum wanted to explore methods of reducing this time, and a suggestion was made that if we could cut out the "middle man" library and have books shipped directly from the lending library to the distance student, regardless of home institution, this transaction would be greatly sped up.

This project was an example of a synergistic opportunity presented by a joint meeting of the DE Forum and the COPPUL ILL Forum in May 2002. Because members of the ILL Forum were present at the DE Forum's annual meeting, they were able to provide insight into what would be necessary to make this initiative work with the various ILL systems found throughout the

COPPUL consortium. A joint subcommittee was established with members from both the DE and ILL forums to further examine the feasibility of this initiative.

A pilot project was begun to test whether a “flag” could be set in the various ILL systems to notify ILL staff that they were receiving a distance education request. This flag would include the patron’s mailing address, and would need to be obvious enough to catch the eye of staff processing a large number of requests. Participating libraries would also need to ensure that materials were delivered via comparable means, i.e., one library couldn’t ship via express post while another shipped via parcel post, as this would mean disparate service to students based on the sending institution.

The pilot was run but quickly showed that the various automated ILL systems used by COPPUL member libraries were not up to the task of thinking outside the box. The members of the pilot team determined that there is no simple or effective way of flagging requests to be routed directly to distance students, and thus this pilot has been terminated. We do hope to revisit the project and discuss the results at the next annual meeting in the hopes that member libraries might try to work outside the automated ILL systems to make this project a reality.

Resources

The Forum has also faced some resourcing issues. The COPPUL consortium has an Executive Director, who himself has a part-time staff assisting him and an office at one of the member libraries, but there are no other staff dedicated to the work of the consortium. COPPUL is essentially a grass roots approach where staff of the member libraries do most of the work involved in carrying activities forward. While this is to be expected to some extent, local priorities often supersede consortium projects, which can result in a loss of momentum on a project. As well, because we are working cooperatively in a consortium environment, members must consult with and involve each other as much as possible, yet inevitably, some members contribute more than others, so it can sometimes be difficult maintaining a balance and moving forward.

WHAT MAKES THE DE FORUM WORK?

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the success of the DE Forum, as marked by the implementation of a number of initiatives that have increased service to our students.

First and foremost is the spirit of collegiality. We serve on this committee to improve service to our primary clientele, and to make our jobs easier and more efficient, if at all possible. Forum members share ideas freely, both through the online discussion list, and in person at the annual meeting. This annual meeting provides an important connection for us, as we suffer the same problem we do when dealing with our faceless students trying to put a face to the name.

We have been fortunate to have good leadership in the forum, and in recent years a DE Librarian has filled the position of Executive Director of COPPUL, which makes it easy to keep our cause visible.

We also feel it is vitally important that we have the trust and ears of the institutional Directors. Little of what we have accomplished could have been done without their support, both philosophically and in many cases financially. Directors' support also makes it easier for members of the Forum to have their project work recognized formally in their position objectives, which helps ensure they have the time needed to keep projects moving forward, and thus helps address the resourcing issues noted above.

CONCLUSIONS

COPPUL and the DE Forum together have proven to be an effective mechanism for cooperative projects. DE librarians from several institutions are working together on various projects in small sub teams that set specific objectives, work together during the year communicating via a listserv, then come together for work meetings and decision-making at an annual meeting each May. One of the more interesting results of working within a consortium environment is the synergy between the DE Forum and other COPPUL groups. We hope this paper has illustrated the benefits and power of working as a group, rather than in isolation, as is so often the case with the typical distance education librarian.

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