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Utah Accessible Tutorials: Creating a Collaborative Project between a Public and Academic Library

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Abstract

This article describes collaboration between a research librarian and application developer at the University of Utah with a teen services librarian at Salt Lake County Libraries. Our group came together as part of the Innovative Librarians Explore, Apply, and Discover-Utah (ILEAD Utah) program. We discuss how we worked together to create and develop a project, the opportunities and difficulties we faced, and offer suggestions for how to build similar partnerships successfully.

Keywords: public libraries; academic libraries; school libraries; accessibility; collaboration

Introduction

Innovative Librarians Explore, Apply, and Discover (ILEAD) is a leadership institute that allows librarians and information professionals to work together on multi-institution projects that use participatory technology. The program is an extension of the Illinois Librarians, Explore, Apply, and Discover, a program funded in 2010 by a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services with the goal of helping librarians learn leadership and technology skills in order to enable them to better support their communities and patrons.

In 2012, the Utah State Library opened applications for the first Utah cohort. Teams were initially expected to have at least five members from at least three different kinds of libraries (e.g. school, special, academic, public) and to submit a team application describing a project that would benefit their communities or solve a problem using technology. Teams who were accepted participated in three multi-day workshops designed to teach leadership and technology skills and to give them time to work on their projects.

Our project, Accessible Tutorials Utah, initially started with an idea from Lorelei and Jacob to create tutorials to help librarians and information professionals understand available accessible technologies and how to use them so that they could provide better service to patrons who use these tools. At this point, we tried cold calling a variety of libraries, none of whom were interested. Jacob reached out to his mother, Rhonda, a school media specialist at the Ogden School District who was interested in learning about accessible technologies that might help students with disabilities at her school. After sharing our project idea with Matt McLain, the organizer for ILEAD Utah at the time, he gave us Carrie's contact information. She was interested in creating programming for youth with autism and educating other public librarians on this subject.

Unfortunately, later on Rhonda had to leave the project. She was let go from the school district when they laid off a number of their media specialist staff. Another team member from University of Utah also left when taking on a new position at another library.



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After initially connecting, we had to get buy-in from our institutions. Our supervisors and library heads signed paperwork stating that we could leave work to attend the three workshops, and that we would be given time during the course of the grant to work on our project. We also all got letters of support, including letters from community members interested in the project.

During the course of the project, we worked together to create tutorials demonstrating appropriate ways to interact with patrons with disabilities. Although we initially planned to create more tutorials about how to use accessible tools and technologies, the loss of two of our team members early in the process, due to job change and retirement, meant that we had to rethink the scope of our project.

When we concluded the project, we had created three tutorials, along with an online website to share them. One of us, Carrie, had done a presentation related to our work to staff at a local library system. We shared our work at our own campuses and at the Utah Library Association as well. Currently, we are still adding content. The success of our project would not have been possible without the opportunity and commitment to collaborate on this project.

Literature Review

General Collaboration

Several authors have discussed the circumstances and attitudes that allow collaborative ventures to flourish. Olson and Singer define collaboration as “creating a shared understanding and interdependency among people who come together to solve a problem,”¹ while Thompson defines it as “the art and science of combining people’s talents, skills, and knowledge to achieve a common goal.”² Both of these definitions highlight the interdependent nature of collaboration, which allows us to solve problems and invest in projects that no single individual or institution could do alone. Likewise, collaboration can encourage new ideas and strategies for problem-solving.

However making collaboration work also requires overcoming challenges. Kezar and Lester note that collaboration in higher education can be especially difficult because of the challenge of navigating multiple institutional bureaucracies and the focus in higher education on individual achievement.³ This project had two bureaucracies, public and academic libraries, each with their own rules and idiosyncrasies to decipher and work through.

Teams can also face challenges like “dependence on one another for success, frustration, lack of clarity, time pressure, and ambiguity.”⁴ Thus, teams must overcome institutional barriers, build strong relationships, manage time and resource restraints, and successfully manage and complete goals to collaborate successfully. Kouzes and Posner argue that key elements for building collaborative relationships are building trust in other team members, developing mutual goals, and working toward outcomes that meet each institution’s needs.⁵

Collaboration in Libraries

Collaboration is becoming even more essential in all kinds of libraries as budget and resource constraints demand shared programming. Lawton and Lawton, librarians at the John R. Borchert Map Library of the University of Minnesota Libraries and the Hennepin County Library’s James K. Hosmer Special Collections Library, describe how they worked together to create a workshop and instructional materials about researching Minneapolis’ historical buildings. They note that, “the changing climate in the archives and library professions will necessitate public-academic collaborative outreach efforts in the future. Institutions faced with the realities of limited numbers of employees, staff who lack specific subject knowledge, and a chronic shortage of monetary resources may seek partnerships with other institutions to deliver information more effectively than would be possible on their own.”⁶

Other scholars have written about the benefits of collaborative programming in strengthening community ties and building strong community events. Bahr and Bolton explain the



collaboration between multiple libraries in Mobile, Alabama to create *Mobile's Book: Share the Experience*, a joint library and community project designed as part of Mobile's tricentennial celebration to get everyone in the community to read the same book.⁷ Cisse highlights the community building benefits of a resume writing service sponsored by the Research and Information Technology Center and Public Library Services departments at Nova Southeastern University's Alvin Sherman Library, a joint-use public and university library.⁸ Several other authors have described similar successful partnerships, including collaboration between public and private libraries to build a sustainability team and promote sustainability initiatives,⁹ and creating a web portal to distribute information about healthy lifestyles to children.¹⁰

Several others describe collaborations between schools and universities designed to help students with school projects and introduce them to university and college libraries.¹¹ Angel and Tewell describe a collaboration between librarians at Sarah Lawrence College, Yonkers Public Library, and Yonkers High School. Students in the Yonkers High School International Baccalaureate receive orientations and research help at both the Yonkers Public Library and the Sarah Lawrence College Library. This program helps all of the libraries involved build community relationships and also helps the students involved become comfortable using a college library. The librarians involved, however, also described some of the challenges they face in undertaking this programming, including committing a lot of staff time, struggling to coordinate between the people involved, difficulty assessing the success of the program, and fears of taking resources away from each institutions primary constituents. They recommend that libraries considering involvement make sure that they have resources, community support, and audience engagement before undertaking this kind of project, and that they consider running a pilot first.¹²

Description of our project

Barriers

As both personal experience and research show, collaboration can be difficult. In our case, time pressure was our biggest struggle. All of us have full-time positions with many competing demands; finding time to work together on our project was difficult. Carrie in particular struggled to get time away from her service desk to have meetings. As a result, some meetings happened during the weekend or during Carrie's time off. Likewise, although her administration initially offered support for the project, Rhonda often had to leave our workshops early because the school district would not provide her with a substitute, meaning the school library was closed when she wasn't there. She could also almost never meet for even a phone conversation during the day, which meant we had to get creative with scheduling our meetings.

We did also face task ambiguity, which led to some struggles. We spent longer than desired creating goals and a timeline for the project. The open-ended nature of the project was a benefit in that we could truly choose what we were most interested in, but it also a barrier with a lack of goals and project deadlines.

Technology was both a barrier and a help on this project. We initially hoped to use the grant money we received to purchase a screen capture software for Carrie to use to make tutorials at her library. Unfortunately, however, her library refused to allow her to purchase it or use it on her work machine. Our employers had two different IT departments with different hardware and security policies. This made purchasing software to use as a team difficult. We had to rethink our original goals due to that technological barrier. Even freeware sharing programs like Dropbox, were a barrier due to public library computers being more locked down. This hampered communication on the joint project with a lack of a collaborative virtual space.

Likewise, we planned to create many more tutorials than we did and to do several on-site trainings, but we had to rethink what was doable given the loss of team members and our time constraints.



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Benefits

However, there were several benefits that made our work ideally suited to collaborative efforts. Olson and Singer explain that “As a general rule, collaboration works best when members come together for a project or initiative that is new and has a certain level of complexity.”¹³ Our project, we knew, required time and skills that no single member of the team possessed; instead, the complexity required us to rely on each other’s talents and skills to get things done, while at the same time pushing ourselves to learn new things. Also, because none of us had experience with this kind of project, we were able to approach it with a fresh set of eyes.

In addition, we had the benefit of a strong sense of shared purpose. Kezar and Lester note that a shared mission “helps people reflect on values, develop a shared vision and sense of purpose around why collaboration is a good idea, create a sense of priority around that good idea, and provide specific direction and logic for undertaking the work of collaboration.”¹⁴ We knew what we wanted to accomplish, and were united in meeting that goal

Conclusions

Our project was a successful opportunity to share resources about working with patrons with disabilities in libraries. Much of what we learned could benefit other people considering similar collaborations, even without the help of ILEAD.

For instance, we learned early on that having institutional buy-in is absolutely necessary. In addition, buy-in is not just important from supervisors, but staff in more support functions such as: IT and fiscal. Even though those staff members are not on the committee, their buy-in and help makes the project run smoother.

Make sure that all of team members will have adequate time away from their primary duties to meet and work on the project. Even if the same person cannot attend every meeting, it would be helpful to have at least one person from each institution attend meetings. Clarifying what tools the team will have access to, such as server space, technical help with websites, lap-

tops, specific programs and other necessary items is also an essential element of planning before beginning a collaborative project.

The most important advice we have for any group is to develop a feasible working plan ahead of time. In addition to just setting goals, we suggest setting tiered goals. Start with outlining the bare minimum criteria that you will use to judge a successful outcome. Then, develop a second set of goals that you will pursue once you meet your basic goals, and then a set of stretch goals that you will pursue if your project goes especially well.

Creating a plan for regular communication is also essential. For instance, tools like Skype and Adobe Connect can enable real time meetings, while other tools like Dropbox can enable easy document sharing. Scheduling occasional in-person meetings, if feasible, can also help. We also suggest making assignments in between meetings with firm deadlines; collaboration is most successful if all of the individual work is completed ahead of time, leaving meetings to refine and strategize on the pieces of the project that require joint input.

Our other recommendation is to share project progress with multiple interested parties, like mentors our interested patrons. Their ideas can enable the group to notice any opportunities to course correct plans, and can help community members feel engaged in the process.

Overall, participating in this project was a great experience. We both learned more about other library institutions, their structure, and made relationships in those institutions that will carry on through our careers.

Endnotes

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¹² Katelyn Angell and Eamon Tewell. "Collaborating for Academic Success: A Tri-Institutional Information Literacy Program for High School Students," *Public Services Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (2013): 1-19.

¹³ Olson and Singer, 73.

¹⁴ Kezar and Lester, 61.

