Serendipity, Symbiosis, Synergy: Finding and Cultivating Collaborative Opportunities
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Who are we and how did we get here? - Serendipity

Presenters, a librarian (Pamela Hayes-Bohanan) and a Psychologist (Elizabeth Spievak), both of Bridgewater State University (BSU) have been collaborating for fifteen years. As most faculty/librarian research collaborations do, ours started with a teaching collaboration.

In a bit of serendipity we met when Elizabeth asked for library instruction for her Psychology class in the early 2000s. Pam was the librarian who happened to teach it.

Our next serendipitous meeting was during a university-wide conference on Undergraduate Research on campus. Bridgewater State University had funding for undergraduate research projects. The University was also changing its Core Curriculum and was seeking professors to start teaching First Year Seminar (FYS) courses, and so course development grant money was available as well. We connected at the meeting and wrote a grant proposal for an FYS that would incorporate information literacy skills throughout. Our course was called *The Psychology of Academic Success*.

Based on our work co-teaching we wrote our first collaborative article "You Can Lead Students to Sources…But Can you Make them Think?" which was published in the journal *College and Undergraduate Libraries.*

Collaborative Research - Synergy

There is a lot of focus on teaching and service collaborations, and the program for the 2019 ACRL NEC conference has many, but there is less of a spotlight on *interdisciplinary research* in which librarians are integral to the research team. Even the ACRL's own publication on *Interdisciplinarity and Academic Libraries* emphasizes how librarians can *serve* interdisciplinary teams on their campus by "acting as negotiator among the multiple vocabularies, literatures, methods, and paradigms encountered throughout the curriculum" (p.4) without suggesting that librarians might contribute by conducting research themselves.

We can change the culture by fighting stereotypes of librarians as only service providers

At BSU we are evaluated on Teaching, Service, and Scholarship – all three are important and we should be engaging in all three.

A funny thing happened (actually two funny things) - Serendipity

After our abstract was accepted for presentation, Elizabeth received a Special Issue of *American Psychologist* which focused on interdisciplinary research teams. The introductory article highlighted lessons learned which provided a good outline for our presentation.

At about the same time Pam attended ACRL's National Conference in Cleveland and was pleased to discover Kwanna Bright's presentation on librarian faculty research collaborations: "Developing "Fabulations": Factors that influence the development of successful research collaborations between liaison librarians and faculty members"

We serendipitously discovered that that much of what we learned about successful collaboration through our own work is demonstrated in the research presented in the *American Psychologist* issue and in Bright's work.

We also discovered practical implications for our collaborative and individual work, as interdisciplinary research can lead to "novel solutions and new discoveries" (Proctor, Vu & Klonoff, 2019, p.271).

Lesson 1

It is essential for team members to maintain their disciplinary identity and activity - Symbiosis

Example: Elizabeth is using her expertise in decision-making and experimental design; Pam is using her expertise in information literacy

Team members have better opportunities for grants, publications, etc. and collaborations reminded us that we "don't know it all". New audiences bring a new vulnerability to the collaborators, but they also reveal shared frameworks and common conceptual terrain (Jung, et al. 2019).

Boundary objects, introduced by Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer (1989), are defined as abstract or concrete materials that are flexible in use; well-defined in specific applications, but with a common structure that allows for cross disciplinary understanding. Boundary objects "inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the information requirements of each of them" (p. 393).

Pam and Elizabeth like to think that they used boundary objects to reach a broader audience. They have returned to shared frameworks and common conceptual terrain to connect during a project or to re-connect in the design of a new one.

Librarians are exceptional at understanding other perspectives, which makes us excellent collaborators. We also have a strong desire to learn, and to understand alternate perspectives without getting defensive. Boundary objects are our specialty.

Lesson 2

A key component of a multidisciplinary team is that the researchers work together at different levels of analysis that are appropriate to their disciplines, and this work is coordinated to contribute to the larger team goals.

Each person works at their own level. They need only to *understand the contributions* of the other disciplines.

This was also a finding in Bright's research – researchers are looking for collaborators with complementary skills. – **Symbiosis**

Example: Elizabeth takes the lead on experimental design and statistical analysis; Pam takes the lead on writing the literature review and discussion piece.

We also listen to each other. Pam knew the term heuristic would not necessarily be readily understood by librarians, although Elizabeth couldn't imagine *not* knowing it, as everyone in her field does. When presenting to librarians a definition of heuristic is indicated, but not so for Psychologists.

Equity vs. Equality

Equal divisions make things less equitable

Project should be of "equal interest" to collaborators say Diaz & Mandernach (2017, p. 277) and should be "mutually beneficial" - **Symbiosis**

Bright noted that "being seen and treated as an equal within the relationship was highlighted most often by liaisons in the study" (p. 550). Not surprising that this more important for librarians than for faculty collaborators. Faculty members were more likely to mention "how important it was that they treated their liaison as equal" (p. 551).

We discussed this finding. At first Elizabeth dismissed it as an anomaly ("Who would not see librarians as equals?"). However, Pam found it quite important. The issue of equality can be even more of a problem when there are differing statuses. At BSU librarians and faculty are sort of equal, but not really, which segues well into Bright's next point – stereotypes. It matters not what librarians statuses are if faculty see them as service providers.

Some faculty will never see us as peers, even though at BSU we serve on Governance, and Tenure and Promotion committees.

Diaz and Mandernach also found that a faculty member's "willingness to see them [librarians] as colleagues made for good relationships" (p. 278).

Transactive Memory – Symbiosis & Synergy

Transactive memory is an example of the old adage "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." According to the theory, people can distribute memory task in a way that makes it easier to fill in gaps in each other's recall (Hollingshead & Brandon, 2003).

At least three communication processes are important to transactive memory: learning what your collaborator knows, forwarding relevant questions and material to the expert, and retrieving information from the expert. The idea is that complementary knowledge can lead to a more complete utilization of collaborators' knowledge and improve the level of group performance (Littlepage, et al. 2008).

We respect each other's expertise and rely on transactive memory every time we meet and produce a document. While intradisciplinary collaborations might produce competition and disagreements about expertise, librarian interdisciplinary collaborations, and libraries, are fertile ground for transactive memory.

Propinquity Effect - Synergy

The mere exposure effect is one of the most robust findings in psychology. Human and non-human animals like objects and people more as they become more familiar. Two environmental factors impact exposure: physical distance and functional distance. Functional proximity is created by an environment that facilitates physical proximity. Common areas in which people are likely to see each other more often, produce opportunities to know each other and increase the likelihood of relationships (Festinger et al., 1950; Goodfriend, 2009).

Librarians have the real power to take advantage of this – we know everybody and what they're working on. Library meeting rooms, reference desks and common areas, and librarian instruction visits are spaces where functional proximity favors librarians.

Time and Interest are also devices of functional proximity – Elizabeth remembers Pam asking about what type of research she does. When Pam came to Elizabeth's class for a library instruction, she made an effort to use terms and ideas that would be familiar to Elizabeth. It was a way for Pam to become familiar with Elizabeth's work, and for Elizabeth to feel seen and heard.

Lesson 3

Motivation can be Intrinsic/Extrinsic or a combination

Example: Extrinsic motivation for us included larger campus-wide initiatives in undergraduate research, and course development grants.

Sometimes you have to allow the extrinsic to motivate you, and sometimes you have to let the intrinsic to lead you

It was **Serendipity** that we were at the same meeting and our mutual intrinsic interests created **Synergy.**

Lesson 4

Successful Teams Persist across time

It is important to create a sense of safety so that disparate opinions are allowed. A healthy skepticism makes for better products and should be accepted from all parties.

Building relational mentorships (knowing each other beyond the professional) has demonstrated benefits (Ragins, 2016), including the courage and resiliency required for professional and personal growth.

Also in Bright – prior relationship helped form collaborations (often starts in the classroom before moving to research).

And from Diaz and Mandernach, "According to some faculty members, relationships are strengthened when librarians push boundaries and go beyond the expectation of suggesting services and sources. Asking probing questions, adding new insights, and pushing the faculty member's research in new and unexpected directions show both thoughtful enthusiasm and personal commitment to the success of the faculty member and his or her project" (p. 277).

Also in Diaz and Mandernach – additional projects when collaborations are successful – either with same faculty, or with others if referred to others.

Example: co-teaching lead to article writing which lead to idea for research project – initiated by Elizabeth, which lead to two more articles, which lead to more ideas for research project – initiated by Pam (**Synergy**).

Lesson 5

Opportunities for Multi-Disciplinary Training

Example: Undergraduate research **Synergy**

As discussed in Breland, et al. (2019), having undergraduate students added energy, synergy, and productivity. Our collaborations have allowed undergraduate student researchers to expand their understanding of collaborative work and to value interdisciplinary perspectives. They learned that librarians are accessible and enhance research, not just by providing a service, but by being integral to the design, execution and interpretation of the work. Elizabeth also inspired Pam to do more undergraduate research mentorship.

The perception of Busy-ness can be an obstacle for collaborations

From Bright: Perceptions of librarian workload were an issue with collaborating faculty, potentially negatively impacting librarians' opportunities.

Times of busyness are different for Elizabeth and Pam.

This workload perception may be working against both of us. And it is important to note that a culture of "busy-ness" pervades BSU. You just better answer "busy" when someone asks how you are. Requests for favors are almost always prefaced with "I know you're busy but…"

It's on us

Elizabeth's first impression of the librarian research on collaboration (Bright; Diaz & Mandernach) was that it focused on the collaboration; whereas the Psychology article focused on the research itself, and what problems could be solved.

Librarians are problem solvers, too. We need to sell ourselves as such on interdisciplinary teams.

Librarians need to advocate for ourselves. We can start with introducing ourselves and explaining and providing library services, but we need to move beyond that. Teaching is a natural connection, but for those who aren't instruction librarians "schmoozing" and networking at university functions is essential. Get on committees, and attend other events. These provide opportunities to find out what faculty are working on and letting them know that you are interested. Ask other librarians or faculty to introduce you to people who may have interests that intersect with yours. Check out the course catalog to find out what classes are being taught and which ones might lend themselves to a research opportunity. Introduce yourself to the Chairs of your liaison departments.

Create propinquitous opportunities for yourselves – bring everyone to the library to meet the librarians and show them what we can do.

We have to advocate for ourselves if we want to be seen as equals.

"Predictably, members of the faculty play a more passive role in relationship building" (Diaz & Mandernach, p. 279).

"Mostly this means that what liaisons need to do is make sure that faculty are aware of them and their skills. This awareness may go beyond the general outreach that liaisons often do to inform faculty about the services and resources provided by the library. Instead, the focus is on the liaisons themselves and what they can bring to a research collaboration" (Bright, p. 551).

While this wasn't necessarily true for us - we both see our collaboration as mutual - we must all keep it in mind.

Say a final word of advice to librarians – Just say "Yes", and worry about how to do it later.

Librarians as "hub" of interdisciplinarity

So, one thing we agreed with in the Mack article is that the library ought to be in the "center", the hub of interdisciplinarity. Libraries *are* the hub of the university (and btw, let's just stop it with the "heart and soul" language). And *librarians* are not only inherently interdisciplinary, we know how to help other disciplines connect.

The Rewards are Great

We have both experienced the benefits of

- Gaining new knowledge
- Publications
- Stereotype Busting
- Friendship

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