Bridging the Gap: Building a Community College—LIS School Partnership

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Introduction

Many community college students begin their studies with the intention of ultimately continuing their education at a four-year school, so a partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions would seem to be a natural kind of collaboration. This paper describes the Attaining Information Literacy Project, a three-year collaborative research project funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services that involves academic librarians at two community colleges and faculty from an ALA-accredited LIS school working together to develop effective information literacy instruction for community college students with below-proficient information literacy skills. The project itself will be briefly described, but the primary focus will be on the role of collaboration in the project. The collaborative nature of this project can serve as a model for collaboration between academic libraries and LIS schools, as well as between community colleges and research universities.

The importance of information literacy skills for both K-12 and college students has been emphasized for more than a decade now, as is evidenced by the American Association of School Librarians' *Information Power* (AASL/AECT, 1998) and, more recently, *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (AASL, 2008) and the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2000). In addition, information literacy is explicitly addressed in the standards of a number of higher education accrediting bodies (Foster, 2007; Saunders, 2007). Nevertheless, research indicates that many students still enter college without having attained proficiency in information literacy skills (Foster, 2006; Gross, 2005; Gross & Latham, 2007; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2005). Identifying students with below-proficient information literacy skill levels and providing effective instruction to address their needs is a special challenge faced by instruction librarians in academic libraries. The issue is especially acute for community college librarians, given that community college students come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of academic preparation. Almost all community colleges have open admissions policies, in keeping with their mandate to make educational opportunities available to a wide range of people. A number of these students, however, are underprepared for academic success (Boswell & Wilson, 2004). Approximately 50% of community college students are the first in their families to attend college, and over 40% of community college students enroll in remedial education courses (Boswell & Wilson, 2004). Not surprisingly, many community colleges struggle with low rates of retention and transfer (Jacobson, 2005).

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Attaining Information Literacy Project

Being able to successfully identify students with below-proficient information literacy skill levels and respond to the instructional needs of these students might be a step toward improving their chances for academic success. With that goal in mind, the researchers began exploring the possibilities of collaborating with community colleges in order to better understand and address the needs of such students. The project was conceived as a three-year research study involving a partnership between the researchers, who are faculty at an ALA-accredited LIS school, and community college librarians. It was subsequently funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and is currently in its second year.

In order to identify students with below-proficient information literacy skill levels, participants were given the Information Literacy Test (ILT), a sixty-item, multiple-choice test developed at James Madison University (JMU, n.d.). In spring 2009, 191 students at two community colleges were tested, and from those who scored as below proficient (i.e., less than 65% correct (Wise, Cameron, Yang & Davis. n.d.)), 57 students were recruited for semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes each. In the interviews, students were asked to describe a recent information-seeking experience related to school and a recent information-seeking experience related to their personal lives. They were also asked how they learned what they know about finding, evaluating, and using information; how they would prefer to learn new information skills; how they would rate their own information skills as well as those of their peers; and how they might go about assessing the information skills of a class of students. In fall 2009, 196 students were tested at the two community colleges, and from those who scored as below proficient, 64 students were recruited to participate in six focus groups. In the focus groups, students were again asked to describe a school-related information-seeking experience and a personal information-seeking experience. They were also asked to describe what constitutes effective instruction, what would motivate them to attend an instructional session on developing information skills, and what would be the most effective way(s) of advertising such instruction.

Based on the data from the interviews and the focus groups, criteria for an intervention have been developed and an instructional session is being designed. The instructional session will be piloted in summer 2010 and then delivered to several groups of students in spring 2011.

Collaboration

From its inception, this project has involved collaboration between researchers and practitioners and between faculty from different institutional cultures: a research university, on the one hand, and community colleges, on the other. Michael Schrage, in *No More Teams! Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration* (1995), defines collaboration as "the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own" (p. 33). Schrage goes on to identify thirteen characteristics of successful collaborations (pp. 154-165):

1. Competence
2. A shared, understood goal
3. Mutual respect, tolerance and trust
4. Creation and manipulation of shared spaces
5. Multiple roles of representation
6. Play with the representations
7. Continuous, but not continual, communications
8. Formal and informal environments
9. Clear lines of responsibility, but no restrictive boundaries
10. Decisions do not have to be made by consensus
11. Physical presence is not necessary
12. Selective use of outsiders
13. Collaborations end

These characteristics provide a useful framework for exploring the role of collaboration in the Attaining Information Literacy Project. Let us consider each one in turn.

1. Competence. The researchers brought the experience of having participated in a series of research projects related to information literacy among first-year college students. Along with this, came an understanding of selecting appropriate methodologies, interfacing with human subjects review boards, and negotiating with both university research officers and external funding agencies. The librarians brought a wealth of experience in working on the front lines with students, serving as a liaison between instructors and the library, and interfacing with the college administrators. In addition, they had an understanding of the applicability of research to the day-to-day services offered in academic libraries.

2. A shared, understood goal. Both groups are interested in developing effective instructional strategies for enhancing first-year college students' information skills. In previous projects, the researchers had experienced difficulties in getting high levels of participation from below-proficient students. It was felt that the community college environment, with its open-admissions policy, might provide more opportunities for recruiting such students. As for the librarians, they see helping students, especially below-proficient students, improve their information skills as part of their overall mission within their college communities. Ultimately, both parties hope to better prepare students for academic, professional, and personal success.

3. Mutual respect, tolerance and trust. The researchers and the librarians come from different institutional cultures. The researchers are at a Research I university, and they as well as their institution have experience conducting funded research projects. They are, however, removed from practice, and they have little control over the community college environments. The librarians, in contrast, are in institutions where the primary emphasis is on teaching. One of the community colleges has had some experience with funded projects while the other has had very limited experience. Yet the librarians are very much attuned to the realities of practice as well as the potential negative impact of a research project on their students and coworkers. The key to success is that collaborators recognize the competencies and the strengths that each person brings to the project, and they trust one another to do what each does best.

4. Creation and manipulation of shared spaces. Our

project has made extensive use of both physical and virtual space. The physical space, i.e., where the data collection has taken place, has been at the community colleges and has been coordinated by the librarians. The virtual space—a secure project Blackboard site and a public project website—has been used for posting key documents (such as data collection instruments, research articles, etc.), for asynchronous discussions, and for synchronous chat sessions.

5. Multiple forms of representation. This project has made use of various means of representation. In literal terms, we have made use of textual documents, tables, graphs, charts and other graphics, which have provided multiple ways of viewing, and thus of thinking about, the data. In more conceptual terms, we have gathered multiple types of data, both quantitative (ILT scores) and qualitative (interviews and focus groups), in order to gain a richer understanding of the phenomena of information seeking and information literacy among below-proficient students. These multiple representations are proving to be useful as we develop the instructional intervention.

6. Play with the representations. If we define "play" as "[t]o move or operate freely within a bounded space" or "[t] o use or manipulate" (*American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3rd ed., 1993), then the use of theory might be seen as a way of "playing" with the representations. Two theories, in particular, have proven central to this project. Competency theory (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) suggests that individuals with low skills in a given domain are unlikely to have the ability to recognize their deficiencies. Thus, they are likely to describe their skills as "better than average." Previous research (Gross & Latham, 2007), has shown that competency theory seems to pertain in the domain of information literacy. The other theory that has provided a unique framework within which to examine our findings is Gross's imposed query model (1995). This model suggests that there are significant differences between the way people experience and execute externally imposed information-seeking tasks versus self-generated information-seeking tasks. Heretofore, most information literacy research has focused exclusively on imposed information-seeking tasks, such as school assignments. Our project is studying both types of information seeking among students with below-proficient information literacy skill levels.

7. Continuous, but not continual, communications. Communication among the project collaborators occurs via face-to-face meetings, email, phone conversations, synchronous chat sessions, and asynchronous discussion board postings. A detailed work completion schedule was developed prior to the start of the project and made available to all collaborators. This schedule has reduced the amount of communication that might otherwise have had to occur. Most communication occurs around the times of data collection activities, but also during regularly scheduled meetings.

8. Formal and informal environments. Most interaction has occurred either in the community college libraries or on the secure Blackboard website. However, there have been opportunities to meet informally with advisory board members at national conferences (such as ALA).

9. Clear lines of responsibility, but no restrictive boundaries. A detailed work schedule, established at the outset of the project, describes the roles and responsibilities of each individual. The researchers are responsible for designing and managing the study, conducting the interviews and focus groups, analyzing the data, leading the development of the intervention, conducting the project evaluation, and disseminating project findings. The librarians are responsible for recruiting students, administering the ILT, scheduling the various project activities with students, securing space for the project activities, and interfacing with college instructors and administration. While it is important for each individual to have clearly defined responsibilities, a certain degree of flexibility is also necessary. So far, one of the library directors (not directly involved in the project, but a supporter) and a research administrator have retired, there has been a turnover at the level of president at two of the institutions, two colleges at the research university have merged, and internal procedures have changed. In addition to dealing with unexpected changes, it can also be challenging to maintain interest and support over the course of an extended project. Having clear lines of responsibility, a detailed work schedule, and continual communication can help meet that challenge.

10. Decisions do not have to be made by consensus. We have encouraged the free expression of multiple viewpoints and taken the attitude that disagreements are not to be avoided, but rather should be seen as having the potential to lead to vigorous, productive discussions. At the end of the day, however, decisions must be made in order to move the project forward. We have tried to maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect and clear channels of communication to insure that everyone's point of view is heard and honored.

11. Physical presence is not necessary. As stated previously, the work of this project has been conducted both face to face and virtually. There are now so many ways of communicating, such as Skype, chat, virtual conference software, etc., that the opportunities for collaboration are practically limitless.

12. Selective use of outsiders. Our project includes an advisory board consisting of one community college librarian (not from one of the participating community colleges) and three university librarians. Two of these individuals are located in the state of Florida, and two are in other states. Advisory board members participate approximately four times a year, largely through chat sessions and discussion board postings and occasionally informal face-to-face meetings at national conferences. The advisory board provides regular feedback on project activities, data collection instruments, intervention design, and evaluation.

13. Collaborations end. As with any project, ours has a finite lifespan, and it will conclude in December 2011. We will, of course, continue to disseminate results from the project beyond that date, and we hope that the intervention we develop will prove useful not just to our partners, but to other commu-

nity colleges as well. We also hope to continue our information literacy research in other areas, such as exploring the information literacy needs of students as they make the transition from high school to college.

Lessons Learned

In summary, as researchers, we have experienced an exciting synergy in collaborating with practitioners, and we have also learned some lessons about collaborating across institutional cultures:

- It takes longer to establish partnerships than you might think, especially in the early stages of putting a grant proposal together.
- Do not expect collaborators to have the same kinds of expertise that you have (and recognize that you do not have the same kind of expertise they have).
- Select collaborators whose expertise and abilities complement yours and will help to achieve the common goal.
- Be prepared to orient one another to research procedures, on the one hand, and to the realities and constraints of practice on the other.
- Expect the unexpected—because it will happen.
- Be flexible!

Understanding the dynamics of collaboration can help both when selecting potential collaborators and when working together on the project. As we have experienced with our project, successful collaborations can lead to exciting results that could not have been achieved individually.

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