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### Recommended Citation

Dunbar, H. M., Edwards, V., and Stemler, S. (2001). Students as co-partners for information literacy and instruction: A modest proposal. *ACRL Tenth National Conference*, pp. 175-180, Denver, Colorado.

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# ***Students as Co-partners for Information Literacy and Instruction: A Modest Proposal***

*H. Minnie King Dunbar, Valerie Edwards, and Suzanne Stemler*

The fervent call for collaboration in higher education urges a view of partners in a framework for useful interpretation, rationalization, and analysis. To rationalize partnerships, we must be able to substantiate its role and function in the context in which it is embedded. To interpret partnerships we must be able to understand and articulate its implications for the core goals and objectives of our intensions. To analyze partnership, we must be able to decipher its components, examine their applicability, and reassemble them. That is to say, when we can consider partnering and all of its ramifications, we can then know that we cannot advocate partnerships and omit factions critical to the partnership - factions that give the resulting collaboration meaning, life, and substance. Rather, we must advocate a frame of reference that considers all pertinent human elements critical to the success of the partnership.

Anent this perspective, campus partners include (1) the learning community, that is, the cadre of administrators, librarians, professors, institutional leaders, and indeed learners, all of whom set the tone by championing the cause; (2)

the librarianship profession, which advocates partnerships, instruction, and literacy; (3) the librarian, who manipulates the tools and processes of library instruction; (4) the professor, who recognizes the learning needs and preferences of students, and (5) the student - learner, whose unique needs, attributes, and dispositions affect efforts of the other partners.

The ALA-delineated mission, roles, and duties of those responsible for information literacy and library instruction (IL/LI) require strong collaboration. In higher education institutions, the mission of information literacy is addressed by librarians and professors, who have specific functions. Ideally, librarians have primary responsibility for library instruction. Faculty members are charged with identifying the skills and competencies students need to fulfill course requirements. Thus, the librarian-faculty partnership is important to the success of IL/LI objectives relevant to acquiring the necessary skills and competencies. Together, the librarian and professor make appropriate learning happen in the information literacy-library instruction class-

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room, the product of which is seen in the quality of completed assignments.

Identifying and attending to the contributions of these elements (the learning community, the librarianship profession, the librarian, the professor, and the student) help the profession generate organizing principles for guiding its ambitious efforts. By encompassing input and participation of all factions concerned, the elements account for most of what happens in library instruction; hence, they bear critically on the effectiveness of information literacy endeavors. Resulting programs, practices, and strategies help librarians enhance student competence and achievements under conducive circumstances. Assessments of these programs enable librarians to uncover the major antecedents and/or impediments to success and to specify what must be done to bring about appreciable accomplishments in information literacy and library instruction.

Learning communities foster strong personal connections among partners—connections that encourage collaborators to make decisions and to work together in positive, supportive ways. The ensuing interactions enable all partners to work cooperatively to benefit and nurture the venture. Characterized as ambiguous, flexible, and interactive, the learning community forges links among all parties<sup>1</sup> for the benefit of meeting the goals of information literacy. The key components of the community—librarians, professors, institutional leaders, and learners—serve as networked agents in supporting library instruction and information literacy efforts. As a network, the community labels, shares, and discusses the needs of its members. The community tries to be flexible in embracing novel patterns of learning and instruction. Members operate as a group of engaged individuals in the challenging endeavor to help themselves and each other acquire and use the necessary competencies.<sup>2</sup>

Learning communities bridge diverse groups (librarians, students, faculty, administrators, etc.) and promote academic, intellectual, and social success by emphasizing fervent interactions: student–student, faculty–student, faculty–librarian, student–librarian, student–faculty–librarian, and so on. Learning communities smooth communication asymmetries and link library instruction to the greater community in efforts to create a community of learners. The resultant network fosters a culture of continuous inquiry typified by involvement, participation, and engagement. Learners routinely engage in problem posing, sharing, and solving; discussions that feature events, activities, and outcomes that encourage aspirations for life long learning and for professional and social competence.<sup>3</sup>

The institution, through its faculty, students, and administration, will be expected to support the LI/BI efforts. Professors must be willing to give up class time for instruction; they must envision the benefit of the instruction. They must be in tune with student needs. Interactions that reflect students' needs are critical, as these needs go far beyond what takes place in the restrictive environs of the classrooms. Students must see the relevance of instruction to their routine activities and their life-long endeavors—careers, educational, professional, familial, and so on. They must be willing and able to communicate their needs and desires to professors, librarians, and other members of the university community, who will help them reach their information literacy goals. In short, students must be willing to see and consider themselves “learners”—a concept with much wider implications for information literacy than the concept of “student”.

Library instructors must be able and willing to teach and learn about literacy, its methodology, and its ramifications. They must be able to take into account critical aspects of knowledge creation, dissemination, and utilization. Instructors cannot be narrowly focused and stress technology as an outcome, but as a tool that leads to an outcome. In this view, imparting critical thinking skills and competencies may be more teachable and useful than imparting knowledge and database organization and/or configurations. No doubt, in the absence of large electronic or print data or knowledge bases, competent individuals may rely on critical thinking skills to solve most, if not all, information problems. Here, creativity, problem posing, and problem solving come into play and are probably more productive and efficient than knowledge of learning organization and retrieval. In this scenario, creating knowledge, knowing of existing information, and knowing where to obtain knowledge may comprise information literacy. Thus, the freshman student who creates an annotated list of databases covering a particular topical area for classmates is information literate in the sense that she is able to conceive, create, and disseminate the document. She need not know how knowledge is organized to be information literate. She knows of, and has demonstrated, her ability to create new knowledge (i.e., the list of useful databases).

Professors as well as librarians must solicit students' expertise in developing the attitudes, expectations, instructional practices, disciplinary policies and practices, and classroom climate that promote independent, continuous learning for regularly scheduled classes as well as for one shot or irregularly scheduled classes. Librarians and professors must

help students master basic research skills by embedding these skills in personally meaningful (e.g., job-related or course-related) contexts. No doubt, librarians will be pleasantly surprised by the extent to which students' suggestions add to class and instructional repertoire. Students can save the day with the ability to point out—to peers, faculty, and librarians—justifications and goals for library instruction. Some students are sufficiently insightful to identify assignments in the syllabus for which library instruction would be at least useful, if not mandatory. Besides, in the absence of the professor, whose instructions may not be specific, clear, or even library-relevant, students may be able to pique classmates' interest in library instruction through insightful articulations.

Current calls for partnerships take into account all components of the partnership except the student component. This paper focuses on the oft-omitted element—the student-learner. To begin, the role of students must be re-conceptualized; students must be recast as learners. The concept “learner” leads to more robust interpretations of students as partners, because it encompasses the positive, favorable attributes of collaborating and sharing, while the word “students” conjures up negative, subordinating roles and aspects of teaching and learning. Picture the adult returning student, whose vast experience and expertise in another area are not tapped because she is a mere “student”. How about the education major, already familiar with the concepts and practices of learning styles and teaching styles, who has no voice in a class in which the librarian-instructor is violating a major teaching principle by talking condescendingly to students. Considering students as partners in learning gives them a forum for presenting their faces and voices—a position that elevates their status through their own efforts, in their own right.

Student partnerships are crucial in the age of continuous learning, where learners must assume a large responsibility for their own learning, for they, more than anyone else, can identify the multiple contexts in which what is learned is applicable. The monumental task for librarians and professors is helping them learn how to identify those contexts and how to engage in the logic and reasoning that facilitate transfer of learning. Making students independent learners equips them for continuous learning. Engaging them in their own learning is an important step toward independence in that personal engagement demands critical thinking, reflection, creativity, self-discovery, and self-reliance. The interactive nature of partnerships with students allows them to contribute to self-

learning and to the learning of others including peers, librarians, and professors.

By exploring the concept of co-partnering with students within the context of current trends of collaboration and partnerships in academia, this paper reveals how library instruction efforts can be driven by “instructees”, i.e., the objects of instruction. Certainly, librarians and professors can use ideas generated from student partners to improve delivery, content, classroom management, and other facets of instructional programs. These ideas add user-specified values to the venture, thereby supporting the forward thinking viewpoint that collaboration and partnership encompass all parties to the collaborative effort.

The idea for partnerships with learners was borne out of efforts to motivate students in one-shot classes. Additionally, personal experience with unorganized professors, disruptive students, as well as with students anxious to assist in library instruction classes, willing to suggest topics for class exercises, and able to interpret library assignments in the absence of the professor suggested students as significant sources of input for class content, activity, and management. Both positive and negative classroom attitudes and behaviors revealed the capabilities of those students, who, given the opportunity, would add a critical and welcomed dimension to instruction - one that enlivens the class with sustained interest and motivation whether or not the professor is present. These students were often able to specify goals and clarify class assignments.

Following some antecedents to co-partnering with students, this section addresses a few pertinent issues: (1) justification for student partners, (2) levels and types of partnerships, (3) the role of information technology in the partnership (technology, learning, and teaching), (4) critical success factors of the partnership, and (5) benefits of the partnership.

Justification for student partners: First and foremost, as the preceding arguments indicate, students' role as an integral human element in the partnership justifies their inclusion. There are additional reasons. (1) Inclusion is the next logical step, if alliances already exist with faculty, academic units, and /or academic departments; (2) inclusion is the natural move, if librarians subscribe to the true meaning of partnership - that is, truly engaging all parties; (3) students are critical to creating the community of learners and the learning community for which higher education strives; (4) students' views add value to library instruction and information literacy efforts; they can and should help select services, products, programs, learning activities, learning exercises; (5) inclusion fosters adherence to the critical thrust

of engaging students in information literacy efforts; (6) students can help empirically test, validate, and/or refute routine theories about instruction, literacy, and learning. Libraries provide a fertile field for strong research in all aspects of classroom inquiries—cognition, information processing, social learning, and many more. Librarians and instructors can develop and test various philosophies of learning and teaching.

Consider the overriding reason to partner with students—their role as an integral entity. The learning community vociferously calls for partnering and collaborating with all its stakeholders. The librarianship profession sponsors numerous conferences, seminars, and professional development programs in which collaboration continues to be the major theme. Librarians vehemently seek partnerships with departments, faculty, fellow librarians, and so on. Professors are urged to liaise with libraries and librarians in efforts to improve library instruction and literacy. To succeed at these relationships, librarians seek to answer the question “instruction for whom, for what, towards what end?”—a question that gets to the core of teaching and learning: Who are the focus of learning? What should they be learning? How should they be taught? Getting students to help address these core issues is a major challenge—a challenge with far reaching benefits. Getting them involved can and will augment motivation by inspiring deliberate engagement.

Research shows that engagement requires personal interest, personal voice, commitment, trust, comfort, and identity.<sup>4</sup> Motivation, which does not guarantee learning, may be attained by promise of desired artifacts (e.g., good grades) or a desirable situation (e.g., early dismissal from class). However, engaging students guarantees active and enthusiastic participation, with intrinsic value. Students’ say in the features and structures of the classroom and in learning and classroom activities inspires engagement. Engagement, in turn, leads to commitment when learners have a voice in learning activities, when they are performing with intrinsic interest, when they have self-generated purposes, and when they use their own language, words, conversations, and ideas in the learning process.

Active personal engagement helps students make conscious decisions about the many substantive as well as superficial options they encounter in the quest for information literacy. It helps them own their own learning, care about it, and use their emerging insights to partake in continual automatic learning, knowledge transfer, and self-assessment. They learn to reflect on their own work, thus producing the

kind of long-term, active commitment to their own learning that cannot be achieved by simply telling them the “right” method. The social activities involved in learning and teaching library research methods and inculcating information literacy make profound commitment, engagement, learning, and teaching happen. Individuals in the university—i.e., the learning community—will interact with one another, formally and informally, to work on important issues. Such engagement results in dynamics which extend and augment information literacy and library instruction endeavors. Such engagement leads to institutionalization of those endeavors.

Such sharing in the learning process may lead to certain positive individual outcomes, learner-directed outcomes, achievement outcomes, and classroom or institutional outcomes. Individual outcomes may include self-efficacy, improved self-esteem, improved academic or social knowledge and skills, acceptance of others, decreased in social or psychological distance. Learner-directed outcomes may include interpersonal skills, respect for others, developing a voice in the learning community, and understanding the role of the faculty and the librarian. Classroom or institutional outcomes may include a widespread use of some techniques and strategies for promoting engagement, for inspiring learning, for incorporating partnerships with students. Some achievement outcomes include learning to learn, learning to be problem solvers, learning to be problem posers, acquiring critical thinking skills, and loving to learn.<sup>5</sup>

These and other outcomes for the library instruction or the information literacy efforts result from the dynamics of teaching, learning, and socializing. “Dynamics” refers to the direction of change in the relationship or partnership and the way the partnership grows, matures, and works. Motives and components of information literacy and library instruction are not static; they evolve over time. Partners’ motives for being involved in the collaboration may also change, leading them to aspire to results other than those that were initially desired. They may feel more or less satisfied with the partnership and the outcome of the partnership; their commitment level may increase or decrease.

Positive partnership dynamics lead to collaboration that supports better, stronger relationships by creating trust, commitment, identity, rapport, and other pro-social and psycho-social aspects critical to developing and nurturing partnerships. Given strong ties, students comfortably impart their contribution without feeling subordinated to the professor’s and the librarian’s will; instead, they feel they

are truly contributing to the endeavors and to their own learning.

Outcomes and consequences of the dynamics may be manifested in the attitudes and behaviors of the participants. For instance, a professor who is satisfied with student participation gets more input from all students and uses that input to create assignments. Students may experience increases in achievement gains and research motivation, and improvement in personal and interpersonal attributes. The librarian may notice a change in the learning behavior and attitude of students and identify patterns, types, and levels of instruction. These results can have profound impact on certain aspects of the partnership, aspects such as level and types of collaborative efforts and levels and types of instruction.

**Types and levels of partnerships:** Integrating student input in the levels and types of collaborative efforts should be seamless if the collaboration is well grounded. Levels and types may be characterized by degree of formality or informality, scholarship, instructional/research readiness, academic level, type of assignments, type of service, and student population. Formal and informal relationships may be established with schools, colleges, departments, professors, students, and auxiliary service areas. Academic levels include undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, certificate programs. Sublevels may include undergraduate scholars, Seniors College, Honors College, senior seminars, cohort seminars, and so on. Levels of scholarship could be synonymous with intellectual levels or levels of familiarity with the communication, publication, and research convention of the field. Instructional/research readiness may include levels of difficulty or preparedness, such as pre-research, basic, intermediate, and advanced stages of research.

Corresponding types of instructional services or offerings include general orientation, open classes, walk-in classes, specialized workshops, and classes for special student populations. Instruction may be offered to club members, international students, transfer students, returning students, doctoral students, honors college, seniors college, and more. Instruction may also be geared to faculty in areas such as course-specific assistance with developing and evaluating library assignments.

Issues of levels and types have important implications for the curriculum and the syllabus. The curriculum outlines areas of learning, while the syllabus lists the goals and objectives of specific courses. Providing library instruction and information literacy a place in the curriculum demonstrates that the library component of information literacy is critical to the functioning of the student in fulfilling as-

signments and in learning. Library instruction merits a place in the syllabus because it tells the individual student how important library skills are in fulfilling a specific class assignment and how relevant they are to locating, evaluating, and/or utilizing information. More importantly, focused library instruction represents the most straightforward mechanism for teaching students library research methods and for examining student performance in library research methods. Many student assignments require some research competence; consequently, the ability to uncover and use information logically remains a key to research success. Providing information literacy a place in the curriculum and the syllabus reflects the significance of information literacy to student academic achievement.

**Attributes and role of technology:** In a very significant sense, information technology (IT) can help moderate individual or interactional consequences. Information technology, as facilitator of collaboration, relies on attributes such as interactivity, availability, accessibility, user friendliness, flexibility, reliability, input quality, and continuous monitoring to deliver its potential benefits. Most specifically, it represents the optimum medium of communication, which allows around the clock, seamless relationships. When members can remain in contact all of the time, they are apt to keep informed about what is happening, and to keep the partnership vibrant and dynamic. Technology, may be characterized by such features as timeliness, currency of information, varied content coverage, simultaneous applications, consistency in program, logic, and instructions; high quality packages, multiple packages; consistency in effectiveness, efficiency of systems and commands, quality menu, user friendliness, and so on. The extent to which these attributes are present determines the impact of the IT system.<sup>6</sup>

Attributes of information technology, fostered by leading edge systems, enable learning and draw impetus for enriched benefits from client-directed, IT-based knowledge leveraging affiliations. "Knowledge leveraging" means sharing and integrating expertise in mutually enriching ways; "adding value" is defined as deliberately furthering client-specified services. Knowledge leveraging supports affiliations that add value to instruction and complement a critical function of higher education - creating and delivering knowledge. The resultant synergies and services, enabled by IT, produce higher levels of satisfaction, effectiveness, and performance in all members of the partnership.<sup>7</sup>

Information technology profoundly affects the success factors or success indicators of the partnership—the task,

structure, technology, and the partnership itself. *Task* refers to the duty each partner must perform to advance the purposes of the partnership; *structure* refers to the arrangements of the partnership and the organization that sustains the partnership. *Technology* refers to the tools and methods employed to conduct the functions of the partnership. Finally, attributes of the *partnership* reflect the skills, abilities, attitudes, perceptions, and dispositions of the partners and what these attributes bring to bear on the affiliation.

**Benefits:** The partnership accrues significant benefits to students, librarians, and faculty. Students experience reduced frustration as well as improved learning, success, retention, and motivation. Librarians experience improved quality of teaching and student involvement, as well as increased job satisfaction, visibility, knowledge, and experience. Faculty experience improved interactions, relationships, and classroom management; expert research assistance, and enhanced knowledge.

In sum, working together:

- equalizes the learning zone so that participants gain invaluable insight and knowledge from each other;
- encourages team-based learning and teaching;
- demonstrates that no constituent has all the answers. Librarians need input from professors and students in order to provide enlightening solutions.
- engages library instructor in conversation within a community of learners, thereby inspiring questions about the discipline, students, and teaching and/or learning behavior;
- establishes a personal, active voice—a voice through which the library instructor can address students and professors with greater confidence about the course and the subject matter;
- enhances the dynamic nature of teaching and learning, and extends or augments each collaborator's interests, abilities, and role;
- engages students (as well as professor and instructor) in self discovery; and

- reveals diverse ways to get desired results.

To conclude, as libraries embrace collaborative measures to address instructional issues, they must consider the potential contributions of student partners. Student input helps librarians and professors meet the challenge of invigorating instruction to inspire active, sustained student involvement in acquiring critical thinking and problem solving skills. Students' own perspectives on critical aspects of instruction—delivery, learning style, learning source, teaching style, activities, and assignments—foster knowledge leveraging and enhance value addedness. As co-producers, students can be invaluable assets to information literacy endeavors, and libraries that embrace them in relationships with faculty and academic units are likely to invigorate instructional efforts.

### Notes

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