

Case Study

Promoting eLiteracy: An Open, Blended Approach in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Developing collaborative partnerships is an effective way to promote eLiteracy in higher education. Collaboration helps break new ground and create richer projects while it prevents duplication of efforts and promotes more effective use of resources. It is frequently noted that collaboration between librarians and faculty is beneficial and essential; however, another collaborative partnership--one between the library and faculty development center--may prove to be even more beneficial. Both share similar missions and are responsible for serving a wide variety of audiences. In this paper, the authors detail a collaboration between the library and faculty development center as well as provide information about the rich learning environment they are able to create because of their shared teaching and learning philosophy. The authors consider a rich learning environment to be one that promotes the development of transferable skills. That is, instructors concentrate on developing high-level cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and team building; and avoid low-level or “how to” instruction. Additionally, the authors believe that an open, blended approach to teaching and learning allows them to have a greater impact on student learning and success. They conclude by encouraging librarians and faculty development staff to seek out collaborative partnerships.

Keywords:

information literacy, IT literacy, collaboration, faculty development, libraries

1. Libraries and Faculty Development Centers: A Logical Partnership

The benefits of collaboration are widely recognized. Collaboration helps people and organizations break new ground and create richer projects while it prevents duplication of efforts and promotes more efficient use of resources. With that in mind, in January of 2001, we --a librarian and faculty member-- began to collaborate on a project to teach other faculty how to integrate information literacy into their courses and curricula at our institution, Bowling Green State University (BGSU). Collaboration between librarians and faculty regarding the issue of information literacy is not unusual. Librarians have often relied on collaboration with faculty members to integrate information literacy skills into courses and research projects. Over the past few years, the importance of this partnership has been widely recognized. In a simple search in the database *Library*

Literature, more than thirty citations regarding faculty and librarian collaboration are retrieved. In a pioneering monograph on this topic, *The Collaborative Imperative: Librarians and Faculty Working Together in the Information Universe*, the co-authors contend that “. . . collaboration between librarians and instructional faculty will be commonplace. Our work will include more partnerships and teams, each of us with a specialty, each blending individual work with that of others” (Raspa & Ward, 2000: 2). Our partnership at BGSU, along with others that we have observed nationally and internationally, is evidence that this trend is indeed becoming common practice.

However, what is unusual about our particular collaboration at BGSU is that the “faculty” member represents the faculty development center of the university. A relatively new phenomenon, collaboration between libraries and faculty development centers (FDC’s) has the potential to promote significant change in the way faculty view information literacy and integrate it into coursework. Since the early 1970’s, FDC’s in the U.S. at research and at four-year institutions have grown significantly. Although they vary in size and responsibilities, FDC’s have two common missions: to support professional development activities for faculty and sometimes graduate teaching instructors and to promote teaching excellence and undergraduate learning. In her article “Faculty Development and Information Literacy,” Patricia Iannuzzi, writing about her experiences as a teaching librarian at Florida International University (FIU), advocates an important collaborative strategy to promote information literacy: the partnership of libraries and faculty development departments. “The centrality of teaching critical thinking skills as a part of information literacy . . . underscored the need to partner with the unit responsible for this activity. The mission of the Academy for the Art of Teaching [the faculty development department at FIU], with its focus on helping faculty bring critical thinking into the classroom, made it the best choice for collaboration” (Iannuzzi, 1998: 101). Our collaboration, based on the work at FIU, has served both areas well, perhaps because of our similarities. Not only do we share the similar goal of promoting critical thinking, but we share similar work environments. Relatively small, both units are responsible for serving a wide variety of audiences, which include faculty and graduate students. Though we understand the importance of this partnership and have benefited greatly from it as we work to contribute to student learning and to develop two grant projects associated with information and technology literacy, the library/faculty development connection has not been widely recognized even at most U.S. colleges and universities where FDC’s are firmly established. In fact, Iannuzzi’s article is the only one promoting this strategy in library instruction literature. It is clear, based on our experience, that partnerships between librarians and faculty development staff are important and need to be pursued and documented much more than they are.

2. Grant Projects: Tangible Results of Partnership

To preface the conceptual nature of our collaboration as it has evolved and to provide a framework for how we have leveraged our collaborative efforts, we want to share information about two state-funded grants that have been recognized for their uniqueness and creativity. While the grant funding is a consequence of our successful partnering and has allowed us to extend the reach of our work, it is not the major focus of this paper. Our

references to the grants serve to illustrate aspects of our shared teaching and learning philosophy and the rich teaching, learning, and working environments we strive to create. Brief descriptions of the grants follow:

□ **Ohio Board of Regents (OBOR) Grant**

Funded for \$343,000, this grant project entitled “Improving Student Learning through Faculty Development: A Plan for Information Literacy” is a collaborative effort between BGSU and Kent State University. Its purpose is to promote the collaboration between FDC’s and libraries as well as collaboration between teaching faculty and librarians in the state of Ohio. A product of this grant will be a website of sharable discipline-specific, problem-based learning activities designed to help faculty integrate information literacy content and skills into curricula across the state.

□ **Ohio Learning Network (OLN) Grant**

Funded for \$30,000 this grant project combines the topics of IT literacy and information literacy within a conceptual framework for the purpose of developing an online course of eLiteracy competencies for graduate students. All of our modules for the competencies have been developed in an open source XML and are portable, scalable and shareable. This collaborative grant project involves faculty and staff from a variety of areas across campus who have developed the content for the modules and who will participate in the teaching and assessment of learning related to these modules. In total, there will be four areas that will be covered in this course: Basic IT literacy; Document Design; Information Literacy/Architecture; and Delivery Mechanisms.

3. A Shared Teaching, Learning and eLiteracy Philosophy

3.1 Resource- and Problem-based

As we began to work with one another in the area of information literacy and information technology, we noticed a remarkable similarity in our philosophies about teaching and learning. In the early stages of our partnership we learned that the faculty development staff and librarians make for a dynamic and necessary collaborative team as the focus in our university was shifting from a teacher-centered model of learning to a student and learner-centered model of teaching (Bransford, et al., 2001). For example, the teaching librarians had been heavily involved in embedding notions of critical thinking, active learning and resource-based learning into their one-on-one consulting with faculty and their information literacy workshops. And, the faculty development staff had worked both individually with faculty and graduate student teachers, and in groups to promote alternative methods of teaching based on a learner-centered model that emphasized problem-based learning in course curricula. In addition, each of these units promoted resource-based learning environments as a model for learning about information literacy and information technology. Resource-based learning--students actively engaged in research incorporating a wide variety of resources--makes sense in today’s information world. “If students are to continue learning throughout their lives, they must be able to

access, evaluate, organize, and present information from all the real-world sources existing in today's information society. Such sources include books, journals, television, online databases.... As a result, all the sources become learning tools" (Breivik, 1998: 25).

We have discovered in our collaborative work over the past several years that this learner-centered approach has allowed us to create for our students what we call a rich learning environment. We define a rich learning environment as one that focuses on higher-order skills, that embeds but does not simply focus on "how-to" instruction, that appeals to a variety of learning styles, and that encourages team building and interactive activities. This rich learning environment is evident, for example, in the OBOR grant, which aims to incorporate information literacy skills in the curriculum through discipline-specific, problem-based learning activities. The benefit of this approach is two-fold. First, it helps students learn to solve problems from a disciplinary perspective. In other words, it introduces them to thinking like a professional in a given field. While information literacy has a general set of skills associated with it, information literacy will take on different look depending on a given discipline. For instance, an information literate biologist may need to hone a different set of skills than an information literate journalist. Second, by focusing on problem-based learning and not "how-to" instruction, students understand the principles behind information seeking and are not paralyzed when faced with a different operating system or when a vendor redesigns its search interface. Huba and Freed underscore the need for ill-defined problems in their work *Learner Centered Assessment on College Campuses*: "Solving ill-defined problems requires judgment, planning, the use of strategies, and the implementation of previously learned skills repertoires. Addressing ill-defined problems helps develop inquiry skills as students become researchers, seeking out and evaluating new information in their discipline, integrating it with what is known, organizing it for presentation, and having the opportunity to talk about it with others" (Huba and Freed, 2000: 203).

An example of a discipline-specific, problem-based learning assignment developed as an example for the OBOR librarian/faculty fellowship projects is included in Appendix A. Librarians will note that involvement in such problem-based, student-centered learning activities will extend beyond a simple one-shot class session during which a librarian presents a laundry list of resources for a given project; the librarian is working behind the scenes and sometimes in the classroom with the course instructor to be an influential contributor to student learning.

3.2 Blended

Our collaboration became even more effective as we realized that we had a common interest in a blended approach to teaching and learning. "Blended" can mean many different things in the academic milieu. For example, a blended IT environment might mean using technology platforms and project strategies from a variety of sources. In terms of faculty development and teaching in the instructional technology environment, "the thrust of faculty workshops should now be on the effective integration of multiple teaching and learning strategies" (Poindexter, 2003: 29). When referring to a blended

teaching approach, the definition might mean the use of a variety of pedagogical methods for teaching to meet the growing needs of a diverse group of learners. At the administrative level, “blended” might mean making sure that librarians and faculty development staff are represented on deans councils and other university committees that make decisions and provide directions on academic and student learning issues. For us, “blended” means all of the above and more. We also take the word “blended” to mean that our development of content for both of our shared projects would be created to accommodate a variety of learning styles, needs, teaching approaches and available technology tools. Finally, we have adopted the blended metaphor to describe the unique relationship between information literacy and information technology within the academic learning community. Most notably, it is important to think of these two areas in combination when discussing and implementing programs related to student learning.

3.3 Open

Libraries and FDC’s have long been noted for their commitment to sharing information and assets within an open environment and with the whole university community. So it was natural for our library and FDC to develop our two grant projects based on an open standards philosophy. In general and in technology circles, open standards means sharing source code. The author of the article “Sharing the Code,” contends that “one attractive feature of noncommercial software is that it usually costs nothing to license, and it comes with source code. With the source code, a programmer can look under the program’s hood and see how the software works, and even make changes in it” (Olsen, 2001: A31). For our grant projects, it was important that the source code for our project’s assets or learning objects is fully documented so that others interested in developing similar projects could adapt our model in ways that are compatible with their visions. Additionally, the XML used to develop the modules and interactive environments for our grant projects as an open source can be used with a “translation” language such as XSL to create different file formats such as HTML, RTF, PDF and course management software such as Blackboard (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. XLS Translation

For our own purposes, open source means that we will not have to deal with proprietary issues in the future when we want to make changes or when we want to modify files for use in other online environments. For our colleagues worldwide, we chose an open format so that they can modify and use our IT and information literacy resources to suit their needs in an ever-changing technological environment.

In a similar way, open standards has become a metaphor for this project that describes how faculty and staff involved in this collaboration feel free to share information about what they have learned, and to take that information and adapt it to new learning environments. Like the open standards concept that has propelled new development in such areas as the Internet, software and hardware, our open standards metaphor encourages others to adapt our ideas to new learning environments that reflect the way IT and information literacy are intertwined and inseparable in the academic world.

3.4 Community Centered

Our belief in the benefits of collaboration does not end with our own partnership; it extends to the type of working environment we are creating for content developers in the OBOR and OLN grant projects. For example, one of the elements of the OBOR grant project was to offer competitive information literacy fellowship grants for faculty-librarian teams who would develop discipline-specific information literacy content. A clearly defined expectation of successful grant fellowship teams is that members participate in a faculty learning community. In the OBOR grant proposal, we included this explicit statement: “For the purpose of this grant, a faculty learning community is a group of individuals engaged in a common project of mutual benefit. . . . The key factors in learning communities are *learning* and *community*; learning from individual and common experiences and making the most of talents of all the members to make the project a success.” The OBOR fellows participating in the learning community are currently engaged in discussions of how to develop information literate students in their various disciplines, how to increase interactivity using courseware like Blackboard, and how to target students’ information literacy skills at specific points in their studies. Many have indicated that their ideas are richer because of these cross-disciplinary discussions. The work of Milt Cox, a scholar at Miami University (Ohio) who has written extensively about the theory and practice of faculty learning communities, informs our vision and implementation of faculty learning communities. More information about Cox’s work can be found at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/celt/communities.shtml>.

4. Conclusion

“Ultimately, collaboration is a quality of interaction rather than a quantity of production, and can be identified more by the nature of the relationship than by the shape of the organization” (Raspa & Ward, 2000: 3). Our librarian/faculty development partnership has been enriched not just by our interaction but also by our shared philosophies and missions. Because of our collaboration, we have been able to develop a rich teaching, learning, and working environment that would not have otherwise been possible. We encourage others to identify potential collaborative partnerships between librarians and

faculty development personnel and to adapt our ideas, to expand them, to incorporate them into new learning environments, and finally, to continue this open dialogue, sharing discoveries with diverse audiences in higher education and beyond.

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Appendix A. Example of Discipline-specific Problem-based Learning Activity

Fellows working on this grant are two education faculty members; additionally, a subject liaison librarian for this area has agreed to act as a consultant. The content for this fellowship grant will include several "real-world" problems for students to solve. A few problems could be explored and solved in a couple of class periods; at least one problem would require extensive exploration. An instructor using the material could choose among several short-term problems (i.e., problems that could be solved in a few class periods) or choose the long-term project (i.e., a problem that could take most of the semester to investigate and solve).

- Sample problem (short-term project)
You are a new first-year teacher in a high school, and you have just collected your first batch of student papers. You think one of your students plagiarized, but you're not sure. What's your next step? How do you resolve the situation so that you make sure the student is following academic honesty policies and so that you

respect the student's rights? Propose appropriate ways to resolve the situation in a professional way.

□ Sample problem (long-term project)

Suppose you are an assessment expert and have been asked to make a statewide presentation on the current state of proficiency testing in Ohio. The conference coordinators have asked that you make an impartial presentation that provides a review of the current proficiency testing literature as well as a history of proficiency testing in Ohio, its current status as well as future trends. This conference will be attended by legislators, school administrators, and teachers. It will be essential to gather and summarize student/parent/teacher attitudes toward proficiency testing.

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