

The Content of Collaboration

In the column that inaugurated this department five years ago, Deanna Marcum turned our attention to the “payload” that technology delivers—that is, to the e-content created, organized, used, studied, and evaluated by scholars, students, and teachers. The goal of the new E-Content department, for which she served as editor for two years, was to “encourage and enhance collaboration in e-content development among librarians, IT staff, teaching faculty, and others with roles in making scholarly resources available to campus communities.” The department was intended for anyone with “a stake in digital resource development,” and the content was planned to “illuminate the challenges faced by all who are trying to use electronic technology effectively to serve teaching and research.”¹

In the past five years, E-Content topics have included institutional repositories, “place as library,” digital preservation, course management systems, online education, e-scholarship, digital library collections, and much more. Contributors have hailed from the worlds of information technology, libraries, academe, law, and even middle school. Each column has recognized and supported the point that Marcum made in that first contribution: “From the individual aspirations and capacities of those involved in creating e-content, a common vision of digital resource development must be forged.” This collective vision is being shaped and reshaped on a regular basis through the collaborative efforts of those dedicated to the goals and needs of higher education in the digital age.

Collaboration is, without doubt, the keyword that summarizes recent trends

in libraries and information technology, especially in the world of academe. Whether describing the learning patterns of Millennials, inter-institutional funding opportunities, or initiatives in digital resource management, the terms *collaboration* and *collaborative* are pervasive. Sometimes they seem to be used as legitimizing buzzwords: “Our proposed project is worth funding because we promise to collaborate!” And sometimes they seem to be used as shortcuts around detailed project organization: “Our proposed project will be a collaborative effort between interested departments, with collaborative cost-sharing and staff allocation.”

Despite the ubiquity of the terms, several examples of collaboration prove the value of the approach. Some of the best and best-known examples of library-scholar-IT collaboration have emerged from the world of humanities computing and digital humanities. Projects and centers such as the University of Virginia’s Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH), the William Blake Archive, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) Consortium, and the Decameron Web openly encourage and rely on collaboration among librarians, archivists, scholars, teaching faculty, systems and software designers, and information technologists. Other collaborative initiatives dedicated to the needs of undergraduates have emerged on campuses across the country,

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including but not limited to projects on information literacy, the use of digital archives, the teaching of advanced research skills in the digital age, and even content-driven gaming.

The successes of such endeavors notwithstanding, there is still a bias in higher education against the collaborative work required for the development, dissemination, use, and preservation of pedagogically sound e-content. This is especially so in the humanities, for which the lone scholar, researching and writing on a single

topic for years at a time, and the sage-on-the-stage are still preferred models. Whereas co-authorship and co-teaching in the sciences are so common as to be unremarkable, the same in the humanities still raises eyebrows. One need only consider recent conversations about the value of collaborative, multi-authored endeavors in the humanities and about the difficulties of measuring these contributions for tenure review to see how deeply entrenched the model of “one scholar/one monograph” really is.²

It is becoming clear, however, that in today’s college and university, any white-knuckled hold on strict professional roles is doomed to fail. We in higher education cannot create lifelong learners with a passion for knowledge without being fluid in our professional self-identity. In the digital era, it is no longer possible for a single person or profession to master all

the levels, types, implications, and applications of the production of knowledge. To pretend otherwise does a disservice to the students who come to campuses to learn how to be in the world we have created for them. Professional boundaries must be porous, and those willing to cross the divisions between professions and departments should be rewarded. Collaboration is not only the word of the moment—it is the word of the age.

Part of the difficulty in promoting collaboration is that different groups too often misunderstand the types of work performed by their colleagues across the campus. Faculty scholars do not understand the “real work” performed by librarians. Librarians chafe at being relegated to a “service” position and resent the attention given to technology. Technologists feel limited by the perception that they are capable only of contributing to conversations about databases and design. A remarkable analysis of the many disconnects preventing more fruitful collaboration is given in an anthropologist’s summary of a Mellon-funded workshop that brought together professors, librarians, information technologists, students, and other participants involved in the teaching and learning efforts of a college. The report, titled “Reimagining Professional Identities: A Reflection on Collaboration and Techno-Pedagogy,” highlights how simple misunderstandings about the “role” of a particular profession and how one’s own professional territoriality can compromise most collaborative initiatives.³

Although there are few formal vehicles in place to promote and foster precisely the type of exchange and role-crossing that this report encourages, one that does exist and is proving highly successful is the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Fellowship in Scholarly Information Resources.⁴ In attracting recent Ph.D.s who believe that there are opportunities to develop meaningful linkages between disciplinary scholarship, libraries, archives, and evolving digital tools, the program brings scholars with both teaching and digital experience into the academic library so that they may serve as a bridge between librarians, faculty, and IT professionals. As post-doctoral fellows, these scholars are in a

unique position to bring these groups together to discuss ways in which to develop successful collaborations that benefit the undergraduate population. The fellowship program includes an intensive seminar that challenges participants to think broadly about the changes under way in research methodologies, the creation of new scholarly resources, and the demands these changes place on critical academic institutions such as colleges/universities, libraries, and archives.

Now accepting applications for its fourth round of fellowships, the CLIR program has some impressive proof of the success of its approach:

- Amanda French, CLIR Fellow at North Carolina State University, 2004–6, was Project Manager of the North Carolina Sociolinguistic Archive and Analysis Project (<http://ncslaap.lib.ncsu.edu/>), dedicated to digitizing sociolinguistic audio recordings, making them available online, and developing an innovative software application for sociolinguistic analysis. Currently a visiting assistant professor at NCSU, French also co-taught an undergraduate honors seminar on academic research issues and skills during her CLIR tenure.
- Dawn Schmitz, a CLIR Fellow at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, since 2004, has, among other projects, developed a course-integrated digital instruction module and online tutorial (<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/village/globalnews/index.htm>) for students enrolled in courses in UIUC’s Global Studies Initiative (<http://www.globalstudies.uiuc.edu/>). She is also collaborating with the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, as well as Wichita State University Library, the University of Southern California Library, and the California State Library to preserve rare theater journals and is working with faculty and graduate students in the Department of Theatre to further collection development in the theater arts.
- Danielle Culpepper, a CLIR Fellow at Johns Hopkins University, 2006–7, works with rare books in the George Peabody Library, planning and teach-

ing student visits to Special Collections in collaboration with faculty. She also co-taught a Palinet course, “Rare Books for Dummies,” using her library’s special collections to teach the social impact of early print, and has contributed to the development of exhibitions.

Unfortunately, the CLIR fellowship program has met with some resistance in the library profession, mostly because its goals are misunderstood. Some worry that it will devalue the MLIS degree and the profession itself. Thankfully, as more institutions sponsor fellows, and as more fellows go out “into the world” and prove themselves, the initial negative response is turning into a more positive embrace of the collaborative energies that the program seeks to harness. Those of us who are librarians, scholar-teachers, archivists, technologists, and college/university administrators are all equally invested in and committed to education, scholarship, research, and innovation; we are all in the business of producing, preserving, and disseminating knowledge. We must welcome and embrace those community members who seek to bridge professional differences and create new forms of intellectual engagement, because only in doing so will we have met the challenge of this inspiring and exciting new era in the life of the university.

Notes

1. Deanna Marcum, “Technology’s Payload,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 37, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 10–11, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0229.pdf>>.
2. See Scott Jaschik, “Radical Change for Tenure,” *Inside Higher Ed*, December 30, 2005, <<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/12/30/tenure>>, for a summary of the debate.
3. Jonathan T. Church, “Reimagining Professional Identities: A Reflection on Collaboration and Techno-Pedagogy,” June 16, 2000, available on the “Talking toward Techno-Pedagogy” Web site: <<http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/talking/>>.
4. For more information about the CLIR Fellowship Program, the fellows and their projects, and the application process, please see <<http://www.clir.org/fellowships/postdoc/postdoc.html>>.

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