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Developing Collaborative Relationships: Librarians, Students, and Faculty Creating Learning Communities

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Becoming involved in learning communities can provide librarians with a deeper understanding of the information needs of students and faculty and establish librarians as partners in the learning enterprise in new and important ways. The term “learning community” is currently used in at least two contexts. First, the movement that began in the 1960s connotes a distinct program within a higher education institution that develops an interrelated common curriculum that enables students and faculty to build connections between disciplines, and also enrolls a cohort of students that go through the program together. The rationale of these programs is that students will be able to experience deeper learning when their courses are coordinated and linked in a coherent program, and that learning with a common group of students with a faculty devoted to the program will enhance the ability for a sense of community to develop. The learning community concept stresses both the academic and social contexts of learning.¹ In addition, a set of pedagogical approaches are often associated with learning communities, including “collaborative and cooperative learning, peer teaching, discussion groups and seminars, experiential learning, labs and field trips, problem-based learning, lectures and demonstrations, writing and speaking across-the-curriculum, and ongoing reflection, metacognitive activities, and self-evaluation.”² This type of learning community may or may not involve technology based teaching and learning.

Technology and learning communities

More recently, educators have used the term “learning community” to describe the combined social and learning dimensions of some types of technology-based teaching and learning. In these courses and programs, a stated goal of the use of technology is to encourage an increased sense of interconnection between and among faculty and students through a variety of technology-based activities. Students participate in online bulletin boards and chats, they e-mail their professors, and they post drafts of their papers or other class assignments on websites to encourage sharing of ideas. While many faculty were initially concerned that use of technology would make education more impersonal, in fact many have discovered that online components increased the amount and level of social interaction in classes. The goals of virtual learning communities are to achieve deeper understanding of content, to exchange experience, to support a socialization process through community activities, to promote the development of formal and informal learning, and to achieve higher student motivation.³

Most learning community environments emphasize an active learning, problem based approach which emphasizes the need for students to find information and make arguments. Librarians can offer these groups expertise on locating, evaluating, and organizing information for their activities.

CNI's New Learning Communities Program

The Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) became involved in learning communities through the insight of two Working Group leaders – Philip Tompkins, then at Estrella Community College and later at Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis (IUPUI), and Susan Perry, then at Stanford and later at Mt. Holyoke College. We worked together to develop a program that highlighted innovative programs in higher education that involved networking and networked information and collaborative teaching and learning; the program was called New Learning Communities. ACRL, Educom, and the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) became co-sponsors with CNI of the first New Learning Communities workshop. An open call was posted on the Internet and ten pioneering institutional teams were selected to attend a workshop in Phoenix in the summer of 1994. One of the discoveries of the participating teams was that while their project consciously involved collaborative *development* by a team comprised of faculty, librarians, information technologists, instructional technologists, and students, they had not anticipated the collaborative *learning* that emerged as the class was taught in a technology-enabled environment.

By the time the second workshop was offered in 1995 in Indianapolis, a major sea change was evident, due to the widespread adoption of web browsers and the WorldWide Web. Use of the web increased the flexibility of applications available on the net and prompted enthusiasm for incorporating technology into course offerings.

CNI worked to disseminate the results of the workshop and to promote the models that these pioneering institutions had established through professional development workshops (some co-sponsored by ACRL), a handbook for campuses, and publications.⁴

Librarian involvement in learning communities

Many of the lessons learned from the twenty institutions that participated in New Learning Communities in 1994 and 1995 are true today. The librarians involved in the learning communities in the CNI project generally had a qualitatively and quantitatively different role than the typical librarian involved in information literacy or library instruction initiatives. These differences can be characterized by time, depth, scope, and roles (Table 1). In a typical course-related instruction session, the librarian meets with a class in a one hour session and may have some informal interaction with the students at the reference desk following the class. While librarians try to schedule the in-class instruction at an opportune time in the course, it may or may not actually be timed at the point that most students will begin to search for information resources for the class assignment. This highly structured time constraint is in contrast with the learning community mode in which the librarian is a joint instructor for the duration of the course and can interject content and information, both to the class and to individual students as needed. In a learning community, the librarian has a role in the course from the initial planning of the curriculum and then throughout the duration of the course. Typically, in course-related library instruction, the librarian has no role or a limited role in the development of the course syllabus and assignments. Perhaps the most important difference is in the nature of interaction with both the faculty member and the students.

The librarian is a part of the community, not an adjunct expert or guest lecturer. She is part of the give and take of the class and becomes a learner as well as a teacher. She can shift the focus from explaining library resources to meeting the ongoing information needs of the students in the broad information environment.

Table 1.
Library Instruction and Learning Communities Contrasted

Library Instruction	Learning Communities
Highly structured	Opportunistic
Limited duration	Throughout course
Librarian is guest lecturer	Librarian is a faculty partner
Librarian is expert	Librarian learns and teaches
Focus on the library	Focus on information environment

Opportunities for an expanded teaching and learning role

Involvement in learning communities can provide academic librarians with a window into the thinking of students who have grown up with technology and who regularly use the web to locate all kinds of information, from registration information to airline schedules to recently issued government reports. Many librarians are aware that this new generation of students prefers using technology in a multi-tasking mode, listening to music via their computer while instant messaging friends as they write a course paper, but those realizations have not had much impact on the way that academic libraries structure their information or services for students. We need to learn from students as well as have them learn from us, and the learning community concept fosters collaborative teaching and learning, where the faculty member can learn from the students as well as the students learning from faculty. We can also discover a whole range of information needs in a course and opportunistically introduce students to new sources, new search techniques, and critical ways to evaluate information.

While the time commitment that involvement in a learning community requires limits the number of such courses that librarians can participate in, librarians who have had the experience feel empowered and connected to the educational process in new ways and discover new understandings about students, faculty, and the use of information.

¹ Barbara Leigh Smith, "The Challenge of Learning Communities as a Growing National Movement," *Peer Review* 3, no. 3, 4, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 2001); <http://www.aacu-edu.org/peerreview/pr-fa01feature1.cfm>

² Learning Community Commons: Sustaining Learning Communities Work. <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/> and Kris Bosworth, and Sharon J. Hamilton, *Collaborative Learning: Underlying Processes and Effective Techniques*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning No. 59. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

³ Sabine Seufert, "Virtual Communities," EDUCAUSE NLII Annual Meeting, January 27-29, 2002.

⁴ For more information on CNI's New Learning Communities project see <http://www.cni.org/projects/nlc/> and Philip Tompkins, Susan Perry, and Joan K. Lippincott, "New Learning Communities: Collaboration, Networking, and Information Literacy," *Information Technology and Libraries* 17, no. 2 (1998): 100-106.