

Paper

Win-win: the benefits of successful collaboration for information professionals, teaching staff and students

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Abstract:

This paper weaves together issues of collaboration among staff and collaboration among students. It builds on experience at two very different British universities and it fits with one of the conference themes of ‘collaborative action in and beyond the campus’.

One connection between these is that by practising effective collaboration, staff can contribute to a climate where collaborative information and technology skills are perceived by students to be valuable.

Among staff the paper focuses particularly on collaboration between academic and information staff. Information professionals have an important, and often undervalued, role, in knowing where expertise is situated within a university; this is particularly valuable where electronic resources are used widely to support teaching. In the authors’ institutions there is a considerable variation in approaches to electronic support for teaching and learning, and one barrier to wider use is often the lack of a ‘comfort factor’. It is suggested that effective collaboration across roles within a university can help to build greater comfort with the use of electronic resources.

Among students the paper discusses information skills, notably those relevant to effective group work. Even students who perceive themselves to be highly information literate on arrival at university, have demonstrated scope for improvement, often in the light of reflection about their requirements. From the students’ viewpoint, evidence of effective and visible collaboration among staff, especially those in various roles, can promote the benefits of collaborative work.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on collaboration, within a university, between academic staff and information professionals (library and information technology staff, and increasingly staff with a specific task of supporting the delivery of learning materials using information and communication technology). A particular question is whether fostering this sort of collaboration can contribute to the creation of a climate where collaborative work is seen to be beneficial, and whether this can enhance students' ability to use information effectively. The paper draws on the authors' experiences, partly in both roles (one author is an academic and the other is an information professional) and partly in two different UK universities. These examples relate to undergraduate business and management students, and can be read as case studies of how academics and information professionals can work together effectively. However, the literature on which the paper draws is not specific to business or management, and the cases discussed should be useful to those working at different levels and in different disciplines.

The two authors' institutions are somewhat different from each other. City University is an 'old' (pre-1992) university, based in a central area of London. It includes Cass Business School, based in a new building opened in 2003, although the majority of undergraduate teaching takes place at the university's main site about a mile away. The University of Plymouth is one of the institutions that attained university status in 1992, based in a large provincial city. At present it is based on four sites within the city, but the plan is to concentrate on a single site within the next few years. However, both universities share an emphasis on employability, and both have thriving undergraduate business studies programmes.

In the sections that follow, there is a brief review of some key literature about collaboration in this context. This is followed by accounts of the experiences of collaboration at the authors' institutions, together with a discussion of the lessons learnt, of how these relate to the theory and of some pointers for further work.

2. Literature review

Meads and Ashcroft (2005: 15-16) noted that

'At its simplest collaboration is about working together. It therefore implies both difference... and commonality... Collaboration is also about relationships – working together and not just alongside. It implies more than activities which overlap or interact in some way and would normally include some conscious interaction between the parties to achieve a common goal.'

This is a useful working definition for this paper, recognising as it does both differences (in this paper between information professionals and academics), and common goals (in this case building information literacy). Henneman, Lee and Cohen (1995), who studied collaboration in a hospital setting, noted that collaboration is 'frequently equated with a bond, union or partnership, characterised by mutual goals and commitments'. The connection between collaboration and information literacy has been drawn, notably, by Mackey and Jacobson (2005) who see collaboration among faculty and librarians as a prerequisite for information literacy initiatives. However, they place more importance on collaboration *within* each of these groups than on collaboration *between* the groups. Ahtola (2004: 58-59) observes that 'collaboration has

intrinsic value in library activities and is regarded as an underlying prerequisite for success', and that there is 'a natural connection between members of academic faculties and staff in research libraries'.

An important part of the present context for collaboration within universities is the increasing adoption of electronic tools for learning. This is also central to information literacy, because students' readiness to engage with such electronic tools is related to their level of information literacy. Both of the authors' institutions are characterised by the inclusion of an element of e-learning, notably as an adjunct to traditional, face-to-face learning, within established courses. Hunter, Clarke and Shoebriidge (2005: 76) acknowledge the importance of using communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), to promote changes within an institution, as a consequence of the adoption of e-learning. The underlying concept here is that one can be a member of several, overlapping and informal, groups, each defined by some shared purpose. Wenger's own guidelines suggest that such communities need to be informal, and bound together by common aims and interests. The growth in the use of the Internet for communication has facilitated the emergence of large, geographically diverse, communities of practice. For example a community concerned with the implementation of a virtual learning environment, used by a university to publish course materials on the Internet, would typically include hundreds of staff, across several sites and a variety of functions. Crucially, communities of practice are typically defined by shared knowledge – which might be relevant to a whole gamut of tasks – rather than by a specific task.

Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) take the concept of community of practice and discuss its use in higher education, here favouring the term *community of inquiry*. They suggest that an educational experience is created through three types of presence: social, cognitive, and teaching. Significantly, their model identifies the overlap of teaching and social presence as being where the *climate* of a community can be set: for instance the climate of a community might be one where collaborative work is seen as constructive and valuable. 'Encouraging collaboration' is given as an example of an indicator of success in building a social presence.

Pilerot (2006) draws on the concept of community of inquiry, and also on the work of Wilson (1983), who introduces the concept of *cognitive authority*. Wilson is troubled by the difficulty in establishing whether information is accurate and authoritative – an issue which has been given greater urgency since he wrote, by the proliferation of information on the Internet and by the comparative ease of publishing information on the web. He notes the difference between this and other types of authority, observing that 'the world's leading authority on butterflies, say, has no power to command' (Wilson, 1983: 14). However, somebody with cognitive authority is able to influence others' thinking, and Wilson discusses how factors such as a person's reputation, their formal qualifications, and the styles that they choose when disseminating knowledge, contribute to their ability to influence thoughts.

In the context of the Internet, particularly, there is a tendency for information – and cognitive authority – to reside within a group, more than within an individual. Tools such as blogs and wikis encourage this tendency: even though blogs were conceived as individual web diaries, they allow for discussion and collaboration among readers.

Pilerot makes an interesting connection between cognitive authority and collaboration – based on his observations of students enhancing their information literacy through

informal learning in a Swedish university. Pilerot, incidentally, is very critical of approaches to teaching information literacy that assume all students to have the same requirements, and advocates collaborative work as a way of adapting to different students' needs. He argues that information professionals can gain cognitive authority through working alongside academics: they are more influential when seen to be collaborating with academics, and when their contribution is visibly endorsed by academics, than when they appear to work in isolation. In practice, as McGuinness (2003) notes, a more typical relationship is that of librarians acting as service providers to academics. An implication of this is that one prerequisite for effective collaboration *between* information professionals and academics, is a mutual understanding of what each group can offer.

3. Collaboration at the authors' institutions

How can collaboration offer benefits to both staff and students? Information literacy is particularly susceptible to learning through a collaborative process, because it is a fast changing field and because there is particular scope for groups of students to build their collective knowledge by sharing their own ideas and experiences. A similar effect applies to university staff; given that there is a considerable variation among staff in their facility with information, and there is a lot to be gained by sharing good practice. As discussed in the previous section, Pilerot (2006) offers a framework for collaboration based on communities of practice. Both authors of this paper identified collaboration across roles within a university as a potential enabler for reaping broader benefits of collaborative work. As a result both authors are interested in whether Pilerot's framework provides an insight into work at their own institutions.

Tangible benefits of collaboration among *students* – particularly business and management undergraduates – that were identified by the authors include:

- An opportunity to practise team working skills that should prove useful for students in their later careers
- Engagement in a genuinely reflective dialogue, as different members of a group can offer different perspectives on an issue
- Share ideas relevant to information literacy; given that typical undergraduates now arrive at university with a very high level of competence in using the Internet, one way for them to improve their skills is to share ideas with one another. However there is a concern that students' perceptions of their competence can be higher than their actual abilities
- Provide a forum for evaluating students' skills, encouraging effective searching and critical analysis of sources, and discouraging the spread of bad practices

Reflection is important here because introducing new, and unexpected, ideas can be a catalyst for learning. Schön (1983: 23), in discussing reflection-in-action, writes that 'sometimes our spontaneous knowing-in-action yields unexpected outcomes and we react to the surprise by a kind of thinking what we are doing while we are doing it'. A danger for students who are confident in handling electronic information is that they become over-reliant on certain familiar search strategies. For example they rely on general-purpose search tools, and are reluctant to use specialised resources provided by the university, or place excessive reliance on Internet resources and can be reluctant to consult a library. Also, even when they are adept at seeking out information, they often lack the skill to evaluate whether this information is accurate or useful. Continuing the

idea of cognitive authority mentioned earlier, students often have difficulty assessing the level of cognitive authority associated with a particular source. By sharing ideas and experiences, they can explore new, authoritative, and often unexpected, sources of information.

Tangible benefits among university *staff* include:

- Expand staff members' own knowledge, by picking up ideas from others, particularly by sharing best practice and by contributing to individuals' continuing professional development
- Reduce the possibility of parochialism, where staff only interact with their immediate colleagues and have little awareness of what happens elsewhere in the institution
- Foster 'joined-up thinking' where problems are not seen in isolation, and where solutions are sought for underlying causes as well as for immediate problems
- Provide opportunities to build larger networks of people, along the lines of communities of practice, within an institution and possibly outside it
- Encourage the inclusion of people in other roles in collaboration, notably educational developers
- Validate the information professionals' contribution to learning, because being seen to collaborate actively with others enhances their cognitive authority.

At the University of Plymouth students were required to work in teams, on an information literacy exercise which also constituted part of their formative assessment. This exercise was run jointly by academics and by learning support staff within the library. It was structured using the principles of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle: starting with experience (immersing oneself in the task), followed by reflection (what did you notice while performing the task), conceptualisation (understanding the underlying meaning) and planning (what will happen next, and what would you change were you to perform the same task again). An assumption behind the learning cycle is that the more often we can reflect on a task, the more we have the opportunity to modify and refine our efforts.

At Plymouth, the foundations for the pockets of collaborative work that exist between information professionals and faculties were established several years ago with the faculty team structure, and have continued to develop with the reorganisation into a unified Academic Support Team. Clearly articulated objectives with specific timescales exist as part of an overall strategy to embed information and e-literacy as part of a sustained collaborative effort between librarians and academic staff. Working closely together frequently leads to further synergies in other areas of teaching and learning – for example, information professionals working closely with faculty staff on CETL (Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) projects, e-learning and distance learning. A collaborative exercise using e-resources with Plymouth Business School exists (Smart, 2005) involving the joint assessment of stage one undergraduate business students whereby librarians and lecturers work closely together to ensure information skills are embedded across the programmes. The fact that the exercise is actively promoted and jointly assessed within mainstream modules bestows a 'street credibility' that does not exist with 'bolted on' information literacy exercises which appear to students as devoid of context and relevance. Similarly, in the Faculty of Arts, great emphasis is placed on the librarian establishing first-hand from lecturers clear objectives and learning outcomes; it is then possible to ensure that the information

literacy sessions are conducted to dovetail into the curriculum, and due emphasis can be placed accordingly on the learning needs of students for particular projects.

By engaging with and understanding how specific modules work, the information professional can then specifically tailor sessions to deliver the desired outcomes. This results in a version of Kolb's learning cycle whereby students learn the theory, then apply it and so reinforce their learning.

In the Education faculty at Plymouth, PGCE Education students write a reflexive paragraph that is very much process-based, outlining the issues they encountered and the cognitive processes involved in their searching and critical evaluation of information. This forms part of the portfolio within the 'Researching Relations Between Theory and Practice' module. Reflexivity and reflexive practice form a crucial part of the PGCE curriculum and effective collaboration with subject lecturers as part of their team enables synergetic working between information professional and faculty (Smart, 2006). Elsewhere in Education, the experiences with the BEd, for example, indicate advantages in developing skills progressively, working closely with faculty staff and designing the programme collaboratively so that the information literacy skills comprise an integral part of the curriculum, lending the experience greater academic weight from both student and staff perspectives.

There are additional models of collaborative working at Plymouth between Academic Support and other disciplines, including examples in Sociology, where lecturers share the teaching of information literacy with information professionals and Biological Sciences, where academic staff assess exercises that are set by the librarian according to agreed criteria. The highly desirable spin-off here is that teaching information literacy also serves to enhance the academic staff's own engagement with it. All these examples add up to improved professional interaction and an enhancement, expansion and understanding of roles which would not otherwise be achieved between these professional groups; the benefits from students' perspectives are a strengthening of their communities of practice and an altogether richer academic engagement on their part, with information professionals and academic staff working more effectively together

At City University students were expected to use both paper and electronic resources to support their own research. During the 1990s City University had made the use of the Internet a core part of MBA courses, and by 2000 this had been extended to the undergraduate programme. Second-year undergraduate students were required to choose one application of information technology in business, and to write a summary of this application as part of their assessment. They needed to demonstrate, in writing this summary, what sources they had used – reflecting that one of their learning objectives was to acquire professional information management skills. They were also expected to identify one key reference – which could be a book, an article, or a web page, early in this process, and they needed to submit their final assignment through a web page.

While the City students had a formal two-hour class, about information technology and information management, every Monday morning, it was stressed to students that they were expected to carry out independent study based on the issues raised in these classes. One of the formal classes was devoted to an assessed exercise where students were required to work in self-selected groups. Students were strongly encouraged to

use specialised resources offered by the university library – notably databases of academic and business journals – as reference material.

At several stages during this process, academic staff and information professionals worked together in ways that had a direct impact on students. The staff responsible for electronic resources within the library held workshops, and devised learning materials, which encouraged students to use databases such as Business Source Premier, which provides on-line access to a comprehensive set of papers from business journals. Academic and library staff together produced a video tour of the learning resource centre, which was used during student induction. The software initially used to allow electronic submission of the students' assignments was devised by the business school's web co-ordinator in close consultation with the academics responsible for teaching information management. Furthermore the web co-ordinator also on occasions worked alongside academics on setting up electronic discussion fora where students could raise issues about their studies and their assessment. In particular students were encouraged to use this type of forum, in preference to an exchange of emails with the lecturer, if they had revision questions so that the answers could be shared with the entire cohort of students.

In both institutions, some qualitative evaluation was built into the learning process. However it should be noted that this evaluation did take a different form in each institution.

In business at Plymouth the students were asked to produce a reflective log – consistent with a personal development plan – of their learning. Typically they reflected on the effectiveness of their teamwork, as in this example, which was also very effectively focused on what they would do differently with hindsight: 'As a team we could have met up earlier...and allocated time more effectively...We could have had a brainstorming session at the beginning enabling us to spawn more ideas which may have helped us in the future. If we were to re-do this task, and take into account these ideas, we feel the objectives would have been achieved to a higher standard.' Both academics and information professionals were involved with delivery of the material on information literacy, and their contributions were clearly seen by the students to be an integrated whole.

The Plymouth students were asked what aspects of the collaborative exercise they liked most. In 2002, 61% of students valued the social and collaborative aspects most highly, compared to only 31% who valued the learning to use information resources – an indication of the value of students collaborating.

Undergraduate students at City University were surveyed, as part of a final assignment, about what they would wish to change, were they to choose how information literacy was taught in subsequent years. Their responses were split on the value of the structured group work: some found it worthwhile and would have liked more, whereas others felt that it added little to their studies, and was merely a distraction from the tasks that they had been assigned. For instance one student observed that 'one additional feature that could be part of the module is an activity towards the end of the course... this ensures that information from lectures and further reading has been understood'. Conversely an example of a response that did not value group work was 'to make room for [guest speakers] I would remove the assessed work in classes' (there

was also little consensus on the value of guest speakers within the undergraduate programme).

One consistent pattern observed among students at both City and Plymouth was that they were much more receptive to working in self-selected groups, where they knew their colleagues and could negotiate about what each would contribute to the group. A possible reading of the different views of group work is that it reflects different learning styles. In an earlier year students had been surveyed on how much they liked learning things that could be used across different modules or topics within their studies. This aimed to find out how much their preference was for a serialist approach, how much for a holist approach, in the terms used by Pask (1988). However the responses to this question suggested that most students were holists, willing to look for connections between different parts of their studies.

In both the authors' institutions, undergraduate students were expected to carry out assignments involving group work, reflection, and independent searching for information. In both cases this included some collaboration beyond the campus, as students were encouraged to use web pages, email, and a virtual learning environment (WebCT in the case of the City university students, and a home-grown system based on Microsoft Exchange folders at Plymouth) to support their studies while away from the universities.

One interesting consequence of the use of a virtual learning environment at City University, was the value of new roles that had been created to support this. In particular, a 'module co-ordinator' was recruited: much of his job concerned publishing course materials using WebCT, checking consistency between web-based and paper-based materials, and resolving detailed problems, for example when students could not reach particular course pages on the web. Because he spent considerable time talking to students, he proved to be a source of valuable information to academics about what was working well with students, what they found valuable, and where they needed further support. By working closely within a team that also included both academics and with librarians, he was able to make a very tangible contribution to ensuring that courses were delivered in a manner that met students' needs. In the terms adopted by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) the module co-ordinator's informal contact with students would place their contribution in the category of building social presence.

This experience suggests that there is further scope for integrating the various members of learning support staff into collaborative teams. A constraint on this at present is that learning support staff typically have quite closely constrained roles, and this can work against their taking the initiative on collaboration. For instance the module co-ordinators' formal duties are largely concerned with managing the publication of course material on the web, and with certain areas of student support. However an important factor is that these roles are new, and there is potential to develop and redefine these over the years in ways that encourage collaboration.

4. Discussion and implications

Experience with collaborative work by students has helped to identify a number of barriers, but also some guidelines to overcome these. There are also some indications that individual students' propensity to group work is influenced by their preferred styles

and strategies: the work of Grasha (1996) recognises the immense diversity in preferred approaches to study, that can be found within a cohort of students. Honey and Mumford (1982) have devised a set of learning styles particularly appropriate to those, such as business studies students, seeking to learn management skills. One challenge in implementing teamwork is to provide some alternative approaches, so that students favouring different learning styles will find an approach with which they are comfortable.

Grasha also highlights differences between the temperaments of the typical faculty member and the typical student. He draws on the Myers-Briggs type indicator (Myers and Myers, 1980) and in particular suggests that many academics have a tendency towards *introversion* in the sense of an inclination to spend time in their personal worlds of ideas. An implication is that not all lecturers are natural collaborators: in fact in many disciplines, the demands of academic research favour those who are solitary workers by temperament, and who can be very productive as individuals. Also there can be a perception among academics that information professionals are ‘outsiders’ and that their contribution to teaching and learning should be limited.

The notion of a ‘comfort zone’ is also relevant in terms of a reluctance, in many places, of both academics and information professionals to go beyond their traditionally defined roles. There is also a connection with the view that a climate needs to be created which is amenable to collaboration, as one measure of such a climate would be whether academics felt comfortable collaborating actively with information professionals. While the service provider relationship alluded to by McGuinness (2003) can inhibit the application of creativity to learning approaches, it does ensure that different participants’ roles and responsibilities are clearly understood. But effective collaboration among educators does require at least some people to go outside the comfort zone, and preferably to act as champions who can encourage others to innovate. The examples discussed in this paper suggest that significant pockets exist within each organisation where both academics and information professionals were willing to step outside the comfort zone, and to collaborate in new ways. That is an important step towards creating a climate where collaboration is valued, at institutional level or at least across an academic department.

Collaborative work for students needs to have clear objectives, and preferably to be linked closely to measurable outcomes; in both cases discussed in this paper, collaborative work constituted part of the students’ formative assessment. In the particular case of information literacy, there are specific reasons that the community of practice approach provides a useful model for student learning (Rich and Brown, 2006). Notably it encourages students to build thoughtfully on their existing knowledge, and to challenge their own assumptions about what sort of resources and techniques they should use. It also offers a model within which both students and faculty can share ideas – a recent example from City University was where an undergraduate discovered a paper on issues arising from identity fraud, and brought it, along with his own comments, to the attention of a lecturer.

Group work is perceived by many students as time-consuming, particularly if face-to-face group meetings need to be organised, or presentations planned and rehearsed. Encouraging reflection-in-action can help students to recognise value in group work: a single reflective insight, that might be useful for students, can make an activity worthwhile.

5. Conclusions

In both the authors' institutions, the instances discussed here have depended on effective collaboration among students and also among staff. While it is impossible, on the strength of the authors' experience, to draw a causal link between collaboration between academic staff and information professionals, and collaboration among students, there are strong indications from the authors' experience that these are related. Notably, collaboration among both groups occurs when participants follow the principles of communities of practice, which in turn offer an appropriate framework for building information literacy. Students and staff alike can gain some value from sharing ideas about information literacy, and how best to use information resources: to this end, information professionals can with advantage be more vociferous in publicising their skills, and explaining what value they can add.

The specific cases related here were initiatives among particular groups of staff and students. While some individual responses reported that students were more predisposed to collaborate after working with both academics and information professionals – supporting the view that this process can encourage a climate of collaboration – it remains unclear whether this effect could be recreated across an institution. There is scope, therefore, for further inquiry, possibly including focus group research. Despite the differences between the authors' two institutions, the students' responses to collaborative work seemed very similar. However it would be interesting to investigate this in more detail, for example by setting up an experiment where students in each university were to pursue the same activity, followed by a standardised set of questions to elicit their reaction. Such an experiment would be useful in identifying where benefits might accrue from collaborative work.

A quotation from Dr Johnson (Boswell, 1775) is that 'knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information on it.' Historically, knowing a subject oneself has been the domain of the academic, while knowing where to find information has been the domain of the information professional. Given the amount and complexity of knowledge that is now available, Dr Johnson's division has become blurred, and closer collaboration between academics and information professionals is one way to recognise that in practice.

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