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Collaborative Information Literacy: The Future is Now

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Collaboration and sharing are themes that are deeply embedded in Vision 2020. When it comes to sharing our stuff, we know what that looks like. Sharing ourselves—our labor, our expertise and our vision—is a little less familiar. Vision 2020 describes a future where that kind of sharing is essential:

In 2020, Oregon librarians will rely on dynamic professional networks—local, statewide and beyond—for resources, support and expertise.

For three Oregon librarians, that future is now.

In the spring of 2011, I asked these three library leaders to talk about the collaborative work that they do. The highlights of our conversation are below:

The Players (and the acronyms)

- Michele Burke is a reference librarian at Chemeketa Community College. She is the chair of the Information Literacy Advisory Group of Oregon (ILAGO) and the incoming chair of OLA's Library Instruction Round Table (OLA-LIRT). And that is just the start. She extends this collaboration beyond the library community, most notably as a member of the Oregon Writing and Education Advisory Committee (OWEAC)
- Michael Baird works at Western Oregon University, and he is the coordinator of the LSTA-funded Cooperative Library Instruction Project (CLIP). In that role, Michael creates unbranded information literacy tutorials that can be used by librarians anywhere, and he also works to ensure that those tutorials get in the hands of the librarians who need them.
- Kate Rubick is the Instruction Services Librarian at Lewis and Clark College. She is also the current Chair of OLA's Library Instruction Round Table. In that capacity she is an ex-officio member of the Association for College and Research Libraries' Oregon chapter (ACRL-OR). With ILAGO, OLA-LIRT co-sponsored the 2011 Information Literacy Summit, and Kate also contributed her expertise as a presenter at that event. She has recently started serving as a CLIP peer evaluator.

Why Collaborate?

Michele, Kate and Michael work towards a goal shared by librarians around the state, in all types of libraries: helping Oregon students develop the information skills they need to be successful in school and as lifelong learners.

They talked about the importance of combining our efforts — the fact that students won't stay in one library forever, that our ultimate goal is a shared goal, and that all libraries (and all librarians) can bring something to the table.

"Librarians love to share"

Kate—Although I got my library degree in 1997 at Simmons College in Boston, my whole library career has been in Oregon. I have worked in public, community college and now a liberal arts college library. But working with librarians in Oregon has been a constant as I have moved among institutions.



Michael—Librarians love to share. We're good at it and we know that it's a good thing to do. We need to recognize this and make it a priority to share with and help each other.

"Our libraries are all connected"

Michael—Our libraries are all connected: throughout life our patrons pass from one of our libraries to the next, improving upon how they use information and then loop back around again. Collaborating to help one of us will absolutely be passed along, via our patrons, to improve the rest of us.

Kate—We all work at institutions that serve a particular group of students. But in a college career a student might transfer between our institutions. So collaborating with other academic librarians (and school librarians) about how information literacy happens at their institution will inform us about what are students may have found (or may find) when they are elsewhere.

"We all bring a different dish to the pot luck"

Michael—I love collaborating. I know that I have really good ideas, but it is especially difficult to examine those ideas in my own head from a variety of perspectives. The method of collaboration can vary greatly from informal, asking a quick question of librarian friends on Facebook, to arranging a formal partnership on a project. It is so incredibly rewarding to look at a finished product and revel in knowing that it is better than I could have done on my own, solely because other individuals were involved.

Michele—Our collaborations really are a melting pot that helps fuel our instructional creativity while adding the articulation piece that helps ensure our instruction remains relevant (to our four-year partners, to the work force, and to our students) ...

We all bring a different dish to the pot luck. Of necessity, my focus at the community college is on instruction. I don't have the time that I might like to invest in research that can be published to inform our profession, so I rely on my partners at research institutions to engage in that kind of exploration and share their findings. I may not have the time to devote to creating CLIP tutorials, but I can share what I know about our needs with the CLIP coordinator who can then build the learning object. On our end, there are certain kinds of instructional innovations that are easier to roll out in a community college setting, so I can share information about our experimental work. There are types of instruction that are not generally called for at our 2-year college, so I rely on partners at other schools to keep me informed about the kind of discipline specific instruction taking place so I can prepare our students. I would also add that we're stronger when we collaborate with people outside of Higher Ed. For example, we have a significant number of students who have recently been released from prison and many went through cognitive education programs while incarcerated. I see potential in collaborating with the people who coordinate those programs for the penal system in order for us to gain insight into the needs of that population so we can create targeted, relevant instruction, especially in terms of increasing retention.



Kate

Collaboration fosters social interaction and promotes communication and learning. So collaboration around information literacy just makes sense.

The Information Literacy Summit

In April 2011 the fourth Information Literacy Summit was held at Portland Community College. This event started as a way for Oregon State University to collaborate with partners in its dual-degree program, but it has quickly grown into a much broader event, bringing together librarians and classroom faculty from institutions around the state. The Summit provides a space for potential collaborative partners to meet face-to-face once a year, and the conversations that come out of this event are an important factor in keeping the momentum around these collaborative projects moving forward.

“the IL Summit acts as a motivating event”

Kate—My work with LIRT over the last couple of years has been, by all accounts, an exercise in collaboration. By definition, LIRT serves to promote cooperation and fellowship among OLA members engaged in library instruction. But when I started serving as chair, LIRT had been defunct for some years and I was charged with reviving it. Right at that moment, I was contacted by the Information Literacy Advisory Group of Oregon (ILAGO) about an event that they hoped LIRT would support called the IL Summit, which is a one-day conference around information literacy topics. It seemed like a great fit—and a leg up for LIRT. So began a kind of partnership (one that is still very much in flux and being defined) whereby LIRT and ILAGO pool resources and put together a content-rich (and, I might add, economically lean) program.

Michele—Each year the IL Summit acts as a motivating event around which to collaborate and I continue to learn from participating in the planning. Out of the IL Summit collaborations, we formed ILAGO, a group to work on articulation and respond nimbly to issues involving information literacy instruction. ILAGO helps plan the Summit and facilitates IL conversation outside of the event. In order to be “nimble” we have to know each other, so our ongoing collaboration gives us a solid relationship base from which to work. ILAGO is multidisciplinary and we’ve used OWEAC as an organizational model.

Kate—To me, it has made a lot of sense for these two organizations [OLA-LIRT and ILAGO] to join forces to put on one high-value event, especially in a climate where a lot of libraries are tightening belts and allowing librarians to take advantage of fewer professional development opportunities. But it has raised some new issues about how OLA units collaborate with non-OLA organizations. An OLA task force has been appointed to examine this, and the results of their work will be very useful to LIRT and A-RIG [Alliance Research Interest Group] and other groups grappling with these issues.



How Do You Make Collaboration Happen?

One idea that came up over and over again was the idea that when you collaborate, more opportunities for collaboration emerge. Putting our heads together can lead to new ideas, new ways of looking at old ideas, and new partnerships. A willingness to get out there and find out what we have in common with others is key.

“good ideas happen all over the place”

Kate—One thing that got me excited recently was some work I did with Robert Monge of Western Oregon University. We co-led one of the workgroups at the IL Summit called “The Next Gen OneShot: Information Literacy in the Disciplines.” To prepare for this workgroup we both conducted interviews of discipline faculty at our institutions. Clips from those interviews served as a springboard for small-group discussion during the session.

Originally, we conducted the interviews as a way of bringing faculty presence into the workgroup, since it was not realistic to expect our discipline faculty to attend the IL Summit in person. We discovered that interviewing faculty is a great vehicle for talking to faculty about information literacy, and also that by recording the interviews; it makes it possible to share that information with others. So something that was done to make logistics easier actually turned out to be a really useful tool. I guess my hope, in terms of impact, for this kind of work is others will learn from what we did and use this technique in their own institutions.



A few of the things collaboration gives back

- Triangulation—we advise students to test information validity, collaborating is a way to check our own instructional practices.
- Articulation—who are my students and what do they already know? What do they need to know to be successful at the next step? How are my peers interpreting those necessary skills? How do we define success outside of the transfer student model?
- Environmental scanning—collaborating keeps us in the loop about what is happening close to home, state-wide and beyond.
- Economy—by sharing, we can do more with fewer resources. We don’t need to spend time, money and labor reinventing the wheel.
- Communication—helps us avoid mistakes and capitalize on victories.

—Michele Burke



I also think that good ideas happen all over the place and sometime, as in the above, example working on the session for the IL summit, almost by accident. So, yes, any librarian at any library might come up with one!

Michele—Also, from the IL Summit and the IL Retreat, a collaboration was formed between Mt. Hood Community College, Portland Community College, Portland State University, and Chemeketa Community College. Our Portland area group worked to refine and describe the IL Proficiencies drafted at the IL Summit. We then talked about how to use the standards on our local campuses and how to use them collectively, then we shared our work at a following Summit and at the ACRL-NW conference in Seattle. We also collaborated with librarians from Washington and presented our work at the OLA-WLA Joint Conference.

“it is easier to collaborate when we’re comfortable”

Michael—I have to communicate with other librarians and instructors to identify learning problems and then articulate them in a meaningful way in order to begin considering solutions.

Michele—Personal connections create a comfort zone and it is easier to collaborate when we’re comfortable, so naturally we want to create these zones and increase their inclusiveness where possible.

“simply saying Yes”

Michele—Sometimes a vital factor in collaboration is simply saying Yes. I’ve been attending OWEAC meetings ever since and they are one of the most rewarding collegial and collaborative activities in which I engage. The OWEAC meetings have been a great way to connect with English and Writing faculty at 2- and 4-year schools and I have learned a tremendous amount from these intellectual, earnest, hardworking, and generous people.



Collaborative Projects

Information Literacy Advisory Group of Oregon (ILAGO):
<http://ilago.wordpress.com/>

Oregon Writing & English Advisory Committee (OWEAC):
<http://oweac.wordpress.com/>

Cooperative Library Instruction Project (CLIP):
<http://www.clipinfolit.org/>

2011 Information Literacy Summit:
<http://ilago.wordpress.com/oregon-il-summit/>



Predict the Future?

As they are working so hard to ensure that there is a future for library instruction, I asked Michael, Kate and Michele to think a little bit about what that future might hold, the good and the bad.

They worry about the same things we all talk about—budgets and staffing. They see collaboration as a constant, and as a way to address these challenges. As our information landscape continues to change, they see a new and vital role for information literacy instruction, if librarians are willing to put ourselves out there, to be aware of the new skills our users need to develop, and to keep an eye on the skills and resources we need to preserve as we continue to support the development of information literate learners into the future.

“Rewarding and vital and engaging”

Michele—As a new librarian I worried that instruction would start to feel canned or repetitive, but that is not at all the case, quite the opposite! I feel certain that instruction will continue to be rewarding and vital and engaging for our library community.

Kate—I think library instruction has a new cachet in academia. I think that faculty and administrators are grasping its value. I think faculty are genuinely concerned about their students’ library research proficiencies, and that they appreciate not having to shoulder the burden of teaching them those skills alone. So in that way, I think librarians are poised to capture the attention of institutional players and make a great case for information literacy related programs.

“We should be willing to put ourselves out there”

Michele—I’m worried that as budgets get tight, we won’t have the time or resources to meet and work as colleagues across institutions as often or as creatively as we would like. I’m concerned that, because we are so busy doing instruction, we are not being proactive and strategic enough about advocating for our instruction within the educational landscape.

Michael—The funny thing is that my project has the potential to become my greatest worry for 2020. I fear that online tutorials (both passive and active) will become a replacement for conscious and flexible instruction rather than serving as a tool to support and enhance instruction.

Michele—I hope students will find that high school does in fact prepare them for college and that community college does prepare them to be successful in achieving their goals whether or not that includes transfer to upper-division work. I hope we build more robust partnerships with K–12 librarians.

Kate—I worry about staffing. I worry about burnout. At our institution we recently lost a full time research and instruction librarian position—a librarian retired and then was not replaced. The rest of us are supposed to fill in the gap.



Michele—If we want everyone else to support IL across the curriculum, we should be willing to put ourselves out there and get directly involved with campus-wide initiatives like the First-Year Experience.

“Spend less time teaching where to click”

Michael—I like to think that our tools will continue to improve so we can spend less time teaching where to click and in what order, but instead more time teaching how to frame effective research.

Kate—How to protect your privacy online. How to evaluate sources with a focus on how to understand the corporate interests imbedded in the information available. How to find a book. How to find a journal article on a particular topic.

Michael—The ability to recognize hacks in the virtual reality matrix would probably be valuable. No, really, I can imagine an increase in digitally born crimes as the recent Playstation Network debacle demonstrated. Part of information literacy is also evaluating environments and circumstances where we share information, especially sensitive and personal information. 🌿



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