

What One Person Can Do: A Theory of Personal Involvement in
Establishing Library-Faculty Partnerships

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This essay will center on some of the theoretical and philosophical concerns that are encountered in the process of establishing librarian-teaching faculty relationships. These thoughts should be of interest to those (particularly librarians) who wish to establish such relationships, or those who wish to re-think and re-vitalize existing relationships.

Let me stress that this is no "ivory-tower" think piece; the thoughts expressed herein stem not only from personally reading and research on the topic, but also from the ongoing process of establishing new relationships at Drake University. It should be helpful, then, to briefly review my own experience working with teaching faculty/library faculty partnerships at Drake.

Teaching - Library Partnerships: Personal Efforts

I would like to begin with a moment of personal hubris. I am proud to have something of interest to say about teaching-library partnerships even though this is not my primary duty. Since my arrival at Drake eight years ago, when I was initially hired as the systems librarian, I have taken an interest in wider issues than the latest software release. I do this for two reasons: first, because my own personal interests are varied; and second, because by greater involvement in these areas, my work as a "computer person" is better informed and guided.

There was, of course, considerable instructional faculty - librarian interplay before my arrival at Drake in early 1992. Certain classes had strong library components, and certain teaching faculty were strong proponents of the library. There was, however, no formal library program that attempted to reach every student in a classroom setting.

Nor can I take credit for that; Karl Schaefer is the first Coordinator of Library Instruction at Drake (appointed in 1996), and deserves the bulk of the credit for our improved offerings. Those offerings now include a closer link with the Drake General Education curriculum, as well as mandatory library instruction for all First Year Seminar courses.

A brief review of my own efforts includes working with Drake's School of Education to co-teach one of Drake's first for-credit courses that was taught entirely on the WorldWideWeb; serving as a faculty co-advisor for (to date) four different doctoral dissertation candidates; and working with Dr. Schaefer in his early efforts to establish library instructional "beachheads" by team-teaching sessions of selected

courses. These early efforts did, I believe, oriented me in a different direction towards a more productive relationship between teaching faculty and librarians.

Theoretical and Philosophical Assumptions

What are the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that underlie increasing partnership between librarians and teaching faculty? A definition is in order before this question is parsed further. To begin with, what are "partners"? I would argue that traditional, "I'll call you when I need you" librarian-faculty relationships should not be called partnerships. A "partnership," for example, should include elements such as the active involvement of librarians in curricular discussions, and the active involvement of instructors in discussions regarding service provision by libraries. In my view, there clearly must be a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship existing before it can be called a "partnership."

Rationale for Existence of Partnerships

Why, then, librarian - instructional faculty partnerships? Because both groups are "where the students are." Both groups have long histories of providing out-of-class consultations. In-class participation for the academic librarian is also nothing new. What is new, is the relative increase in quantity and quality of that participation.

The reasons driving increased interaction are clear. They are, the increase in information skills that is required by the mass introduction of the personal computer into education as well as everyday life, and the hugely increased amount of information that is available on the Internet (at Drake, we use the catch-all term "electronica" to refer to this new environment). We possess the common experience of sailing on uncharted seas.

The rest of this paper centers on the "librarian" portion of this emerging relationship, but should be of interest to teaching faculty, as well.

A few general words about "traditional" classroom-library efforts are appropriate. For many years, librarians have pursued a process referred to as "bibliographic instruction," or BI, generally designed to teach users the basics of information and item search and retrieval. Topics covered typically included library orientation, the Library of Congress Subject Headings, as well as LC call numbers. Most academic instructors happily steered their students (particularly first-year students) towards these courses even as they themselves avoided them.

Collection development, or the purchasing of library materials in various

formats, is another area where teaching and library faculty have had interaction; sometimes cooperatively, sometimes not.

Yet these efforts, important as they are, are not, I would argue, enough to deserve the term "partnership" as we defined it earlier. Moreover, "electronica" forced librarians to look at not only these earlier efforts, but also other services such as interlibrary loan and cataloging, in new ways (the MARC record in cataloging, for example, is over 20 years old). Less use of print collection and more dependence by users upon Internet sources of varying ranges of quality, as well as demands from these users for even more of this kind of information, made

us realize that "doing old things in new ways" by trying to apply strategies developed in the print world to this new, untamed, and unorganized world, was not going to work. Our efforts, therefore, including seeking new partnerships, must recognize the radical nature of this sea change.

Format Wars

Thus we see librarians were deluged by the backwashes of electronica before it became a widely recognized concern in the rest of academia. Unfortunately, some librarians chose to fight the "format wars," saying that print would always be preferable to electronic access, despite increased demands by users for electronic information. This was a mistake, albeit a somewhat understandable one. This is especially true given that the librarian is charged with supporting life-long learning, that is, helping the user at whatever point they may be in the learning process. Teaching users about computers, how to use them and their vagaries, is not what most librarians prepared for; yet, given this "life-long" commitment, that is pretty much where they ended up.

Now we find the modern academic librarian in the position of defending what I call the "radical middle ground," a shifting and seemingly shrinking piece of turf wherein we defend the value, in certain educational contexts, of access to both electronic and non-electronic formats of information.

Partnerships and Educational Partnerships

How do we hold that middle ground? Only by personal involvement and initiative. We must stake out, as individuals, our role in any partnership with teaching faculty via a process of educational transformation. To make this point clear, note that a transforming process must include three things: an ending of something, a beginning of something new, and a "transforming agent" that exists both before and after, but appears in new and unexpected ways in the transformed entity.

This transformation must begin with "traditional" evaluation and classifying skills; but these skills must be re-forged in order to fulfill their potential in this new world. If we are not willing to undertake this transformation, beginning on an individual level, then I argue we are not deserving of the term "partner" in the educational process. Moreover, we will not be there for teaching faculty (not to mention our students!) as they undergo their own personal information crises.

How might we go about this process? I would begin by suggesting that we work on something librarians are good at anyway: asking the right questions, and shunning those with "easy answers." This process, I would argue, is illuminated better if we understand that much of what masquerades as "answers" in this brave new world are, in fact, the source of many of the problems of this electronic world.

"Case Study" of a "Wrong Answer"

Let us begin with an analogy: one drawn between those who teach biological evolution, and those who teach about information. Those who teach evolution constantly have to fight against the familiar and traditional view of evolution that suggests that evolution is a linear, inevitable process (we are all familiar with the "evolutionary chart" which shows a fish emerging from the ocean to inexorably be transformed into a man, albeit through the many intermediate steps of reptile,

mammal, monkey, and early hominid) when it is nothing of the sort; newer representations show evolution as a branching tree or bush, and students realize that chance and circumstance play major roles in determining what species survive and perish.

Similarly, those of us who work with information as a medium must deal with another common misconception. There are many different representations, but the underlying idea is usually same: (Data) organized is (Information) understood is (Knowledge) leads to (Wisdom)

There are many different, yet similar, representations of this idea, available on the Internet and elsewhere, but they share a common problem: they are nonsense. If we think about someone we think of as "wise," for example, perhaps our grandmother or perhaps the Dalai Llama or the pope or whomever, we certainly do not envision them having gone through a process similar to this. The idea that such a person is wise because they have successfully assimilated the most data and information is ludicrous on the face of it. Wisdom comes from experience, thoughtfulness, and a probing mind; consuming or even understanding "facts" plays, at best, a small part in its accumulation.

Information Inflammation

In fact, too much information is more often the case today, and I would argue this hinders, rather than helps, the creation of knowledge and wisdom.

We all know the terms: information overload, techno-stress, etc. I sometimes refer to it as "information inflammation." Although a little hard to pronounce, I hope that if you think about it, you will see that this is an apt description for the overwhelmed user of information today. If you look at a situation such as the coverage of prominent, breaking events, from medical studies to the death of prominent individuals, we see a process where the event is quickly followed by an avalanche (a "groundswell" if you will) of information and analysis.

This "inflammation" of the social organism is similar to the swelling that occurs in the body human when trauma occurs. The swelling has its initial utility (in both cases) but becomes detrimental and eventually crippling in the body human, if not treated. In society, the long-term result is the opposite of "knowledge" or "wisdom," but instead, a bunch of accumulated facts and Web sites that resist any deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The recent controversy over the Harry Potter books is, perhaps, an example of the results of the negative impact of this inflammation. Many parents (most whom, I suspect, have not read the books) objected to these wildly popular novels because they heard they contained references (however fanciful) to wizardry and magic (woe to these same parents if they ever discover the local middle school "media center" carries Macbeth on its shelves!) A much-reproduced cartoon shows disapproving parents instructing their Potter-reading son to, "Stop reading that and go play video games!"

This situation is instructive for a number of reasons. It demonstrates that, although computer games and simulations may be "challenging," they are often not challenging that portion of our children and our students that we would most like to grow; for example, their imagination. It also reminds us that, for good or for ill, the book is still the ultimate "virtual reality" engine.

There are many similar examples of the dangers of this kind of "inflammation"; moreover, there are many online problems parading as answers beyond the "Data leads to Wisdom" error. I argue that librarians, particularly those who teach information literacy, are uniquely positioned to help our students recognize such errors, and engage their critical faculties in the process. In doing so, however, we must guard against certain inherent pitfalls that dot the path electronica.

Nature of Computer-Mediated Limitations

For example, as we peruse the nature of computer-mediated limitations, I want to stress that we should not focus on the all-too-common "hygienic" problems with computers, the common complaints about lack of network bandwidth, annoying bugs in software, and the like. Harping on these concerns will merely allow students to dismiss us as neo-Luddites whose concerns will be "fixed" by the next software upgrade or additional T-1 line. Instead, we need to focus on some of the inherent weaknesses of computers as educational tools that will always be present.

To start with the obvious, computers are logic-machines. They can help us analyze problems to the extent that they are logical problems. Yet, if we turn to serious concerns such as, "Why don't American citizens vote?" we can see that thinking entirely logically is a hindrance to addressing this problem. For, if we, as individuals, address this concern in a strictly logical way, there is little reason to vote, since our one, single vote has little chance of influencing the outcome of any given election. What is missed by such an analysis, of course, is most of what makes us human, namely, such notions as duty, membership in community, seeking to improve the social good, etc.

The problem of computers being "logic machines" is compounded by the fact that computers are, further, "abstraction machines." A child who views a triangle on the screen does not experience a triangle as a thing, the way one who constructs a triangle from 3 pencils does. To have to view everything at a 2-dimensional, technologically-mediated remove is a unique development of the modern pathology. At the recent Educause conference, for example, I attended the presentation of Colin Powell, who is a fine speaker. Educause had provided large screens on which Powell's image was projected within the large arena. I was relatively near the erstwhile General, but, I noticed that most of the people around me, including many even closer than myself, were watching not the General, but, his projected image. Such people will go home and say, "I've heard Colin Powell speak," but they have no more experienced him as a speaker than someone who saw him on Larry King.

With computers as abstraction machines, this problem is even worse; a computer program is a self-contained world that admits of no outside world beyond its own pre-determined rules. Reality is not allowed to impinge, unless it is introduced as a new variable. The oft-heard complaint (particularly in libraries) "Why can't everything be on the computer?" will soon have its answer; everything will be on the computer when we are nothing more than computer-logic and abstractions; that is, when the computer becomes us, and we become it.

Approaches to Effective Partnership

Faced with such limitations, just what can one person do? Well, we should do what we have always done, or else we will have lost the battle by letting someone else define the battlefield. We must simply do it

with renewed vigor and determination. As educators and librarians, we must stay active and involved, particularly in the general education requirements; we must not let the demands for an "information literate" student supplant the need for a critically-questioning, ethically involved student, for example.

We must be creative in how, and with whom, we form partnerships. There is an obvious need to partner with the technically-savvy, and we have begun doing that. However, it is equally (if not more) important to partner with those who are not yet, or may never be, "computer-literate" (such people represent, now and in the future, the vast majority of humankind!) Our creativity must be put to use to best help these individuals, as well as to realize that many, particularly in the academic community, bring special skills to this new arena. One example of this might be the philosophy faculty, particularly those involved in teaching ethics. (How many people, philosophers or otherwise, have considered how the choice to use a computer in the first place is, at its root, an ethical concern?)

Obviously, we must keep informed; not just on what is the newest and greatest, but on how people learn to cope with what's the newest and greatest.

Finally, the thread that has run throughout these remarks is that we must not shrink from the tough questions; nor assume that a problem should be addressed, or even posed, in a certain way.

To do otherwise is to be unfaithful to the questioning spirit that called us to our profession of learning and teaching and helping. If we as librarians or teachers can not just espouse these values, but embody them for our students and our users, then, we will have reached a level of awareness and coherent expression of an individual that anyone should be "proud to call a partner."