Building a successful collaboration

Colgate University's collaboration for enhanced learning

by Mary Jane Petrowski, David Baird, Karen Leach, and Judy Noyes

Henry Ford once wrote, "Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success." This month's article takes a closer look at how one working group composed of librarians and information technologists spent their inaugural year becoming a true collaborative.

How did we build a successful collaboration and what helped to make it work? In retrospect, the "Collaboration IQ test" in Betsy Wilson's inaugural article helped us to understand the various factors underlying our success.[1]

Vision

Leaders within our institution of higher education recognized that faculty who wish to invest energy into rethinking how technology may improve student learning would benefit most from the collective expertise and synergy of librarians and information technologists. This vision grew out of earlier experiments with different models of faculty support that did not work as well as we had hoped.

At a preliminary series of "idea incubation" meetings, the complementary interests and expertise of library and information technologists staff were evident. Although much is made of the cultural differences between librarians and information technologists, we discovered both organizations had many "collaborative personalities" and a core commitment to advancing the educational mission of Colgate.[2] We believed that the new partnership would provide the most promising model of support for faculty and students at small colleges.

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Borrowing brains

In September 1999, the Collaboration for Enhanced Learning (CEL) was formed with four information technologists and three librarians. CEL members were selected because of their common interests in information literacy, technology, and ex-

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perience assisting faculty with incorporating technology into the curriculum. Two information technologists moved into the library, and a seminar room was converted into a lab for meetings and group work. Such propinquity made us neighbors and greatly facilitated informal exchanges of information and ideas.[3]

Administrators never told the group *how* to do things—just *what* to do. The new group initially worked to articulate their mission and common goals:

The CEL is a resource for faculty who want to develop more creative connections between teaching, learning, and technology. This may include using technology to support good practice in undergraduate teaching; developing special projects that might require more resource-based learning analysis, and synthesis of information; exploring international or crosscultural collaborative activities; or implementing online projects and group problem-solving activities. CEL members are committed to working with faculty to improve the educational uses of technology at Colgate and to develop information technology and information literacy across the curriculum.[4]

Resources

In October 1999, Colgate University submitted a grant proposal to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund requesting support for two educational technology staff positions for CEL.[5] In March 2000, Colgate University was awarded a $260,000 grant to provide seed funding for a director and an instructional technology specialist. Colgate will absorb the cost of the new positions over the three-year grant period and will continue the positions beyond the life of the grant. Colgate will fund faculty workshops, CEL travel, student assistants for faculty developing technology-enhanced courses, student training programs, and equipment and software required for programming in support of curricular innovation. Colgate also provides support for program evaluation.

Responsibilities

While the grant was being prepared, the group quickly became involved in the President Charles Karelis's Asynchronous Learning Initiative. During the Spring 2000 semester, Colgate began an investigation of the effectiveness of online threaded discussions in a residential liberal arts setting. There were 700 students in 34 courses taught by 24 faculty representing the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences divisions were involved in the initial pilot project.[6] The project took front and center for many months as CEL members worked to select a Web course shell, install software, offer faculty workshops, provide one-on-one consulting, and attend numerous group debriefings where faculty members shared their successes and frustrations. *Extending Conversations: Getting Started with Asynchronous Learning Tools in a Liberal Arts Setting,* a forthcoming CEL publication, will showcase and share good practice at Colgate.

The Collaboration for Enhanced Learning members front row from left: CEL Director David Baird, Assistant Science Librarian Peter E. Tagtmeyer, Head of Library Instruction Mary Jane Petrowski, Director of Technology Education Judith A. Doherty. Back row from left: Instructional Technology Specialist Ray Nardelli, Systems Librarian Cindy Harper, Director of Technology Planning Richard Grant, and Director of Instructional Technology Darryl Simcoe.

The best innovators aren't lone geniuses

When the dust finally settled in June with the appointment our new leader, we turned our attention to strategic planning. At last the

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group was finally in place and ready to plan for the future . . . but there was a bigger issue. Some group members thought our group dynamics needed work. How could we move beyond our current committee-like approach to solving problems and thinking? How could we bond? Maybe going off to a conference together would help. Despite the private reservations of some CEL members, we took a group road trip to the 11th International Conference on Creativity in Colleges and Universities held at Northwood University in Midland, Michigan, July 20–23rd.[7]

For most of us, the truly valuable parts of the conference were the two-hour workshop and after-dinner talk given by the Boyle brothers (Brendan and Dennis) who work for IDEO, a product design company in Palo Alto, California. Their "brainstorming and rapid prototyping" workshop vividly demonstrated the value of generating many ideas rapidly, focusing on problem solutions, encouraging early innovations, and design goal management. "Stay focused . . . one conversation at a time . . . encourage wild ideas": their process for designing toys, shopping carts, and Palm Pilots seemed equally applicable to educational projects.

Dennis Boyle's talk on how to build a culture of innovation and inspire a creative team was an eye-opener. The characteristics of a highly collaborative *creative* culture include curiosity, a habit of reaching out for ideas and help, and having group members who are both humble and confident.[8] "The Deep Dive" video reminded us that people can't be creative without heavy doses of freedom and fun.[9]

One year later

What a difference a year makes! Our perspective has changed from "I" to "us" (and from "them" to "we"). We've become more playful in our approach to work, while setting aside more time to think. What has the new improved collaboration produced? In the past few months we've undertaken a phase II asynchronous learning pilot project; prototyped a curriculum development Intranet for CORE 152 (a place for faculty to share teaching resources, pedagogical tips, assignments, etc.), and developed a Web site for the Center of Ethics and World Societies that will eventually provide access to speaker Webcasts.

Our final words of advice (paraphrased from Alvin Toffler): "The illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read. It will be the group that does not know how to learn." We've just started.

Notes

1. Betsy Wilson, "The Lone Ranger is dead: Success today demands collaboration," *C&RL News* (September 2000): 698–701.

2. Robert S. Freeman, Scott B. Mandernack, and John Mark Tucker, "An Issue in Search of a Metaphor: Readings on the Marriageability of Libraries and Computer Centers" *Books, Bytes, and Bridges: Libraries and Computer Centers in Academic Institutions,* edited by Larry Hardesty (Chicago: ALA, 2000): 13–25.

3. The magazine *Fast Company* routinely profiles businesses that design for propinquity.

4. See http://cel.colgate.edu for a full description of specific goals.

5. A copy of the grant is available at http://cel.colgate.edu/.

6. Constance Harsh, "The Asynchronous Learning Pilot Project: A Report," Colgate University, Spring 2000. 26 pages. A copy of this report is available upon request from any of the authors.

7. Information on next year's conference (July 12–15, 2001) is available at http://www.northwood.edu/abd.

8. To read more about IDEO's unique "knowledge-brokering" culture, see Andrew Hargadon and Robert I. Sutton, "Building an Innovative Factory," *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 2000): 157–66.

9. ABC's *Nightline,* "The Deep Dive: One Company's Secret Weapon for Innovation," February 19, 1999 [video: VHS]. ■