

Learning Communities, Adult Learners, and Instructional Teams at IUPUI

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Introduction

Adult independent learners are becoming an increasingly important and sizable segment of the college student population. It has been projected that within the next ten years the majority of students will not be the eighteen-to twenty-four-year-olds who come to higher education directly from high schools. Instead, the largest group will be students who are older and attend school on a part-time rather than full-time basis. Recent studies show that not only is there a shrinking pool of the traditional “younger” students and a rapid expansion of the older population but also that part-time students are the fastest growing population in higher education (Hussar, 1993).

Access to library resources and developing skills are important elements of the academic experience for all students. Yet, adult learners experience barriers in the use of the library and its many resources. In the meantime, the advent of electronic information retrieval in university libraries has caused resources available to our users to grow exponentially. Technology has sensitized us to potential differences in skill levels and “learning

styles.” Institutions of higher education and their academic units and libraries have been asked to re-examine their roles and to come up with innovative methods or alternative services to accommodate the needs of adult learners as well as the needs of their traditional students. Through establishing learning communities, several universities have begun to address and accommodate the learning and teaching needs of their students. As a result of this new environment, libraries and other academic and computing units on campus have become partners in the new learning environment.

This paper describes Learning Communities Program in development at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). It draws upon the experience of one of the Learning Community which utilizes an “instructional team” approach to teach various information literacy and technology skills to adult learners over 25 years of age. It examines the unique needs and learning objectives of an adult learner. The paper investigates the issues and challenges of collaborating with faculty , other team members and adult learners operating in a team environment.

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Learning/Teaching Paradigm and Academic Libraries

Increasingly, institutions of higher education are being asked to provide students with critical thinking and problem solving skills. Equally important has been a paradigm shift within colleges and universities to move toward “learning paradigm” rather than “teaching paradigm”. As a result of this new learning environment, some of the universities and academic units responsible for teaching and learning efforts on their campuses have been forced to come up with innovative ways to educate their students to prepare them to participate in the “lifelong” learning process. This new shift on learning has resulted in new research, new methods, and new considerations, creating a new learning environment for faculty, librarians, and learners as well. As a result, various academic and computing service units have joined efforts to expand and enhance the teaching and learning mission of their institutions.

In most universities and colleges, academic libraries are part of the academic units of the campus and are expected to contribute to the institution’s educational mission. Support for the role of libraries in educational reform through the integration of information literacy skills into the curriculum can be found in works such as the article written by Patricia B. Knapp over 40 years ago which states “if we wish the library to function more effectively in the college... we must direct our efforts toward the curriculum, working through faculty” (Knapp, 1958: 831). In 1989, the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy issued its Final Report, in which they noted “ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn...they are people prepared for lifelong learning because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand” (American Library Association, 1989).

In more recent years, other writers such as Patricia S. Breivik and E. Gordon Gee (Breivik and Gee, 1989), Hannelore B. Rader (Rader, 1997), Brendan A. Rappale (Rappale, 1997), and Gabriela Sonntag and Donna M. Ohr (Sonntag and Ohr, 1996) have emphasized the need for forming partnerships between the library, faculty, classroom, and university administration to integrate electronic information and information literacy instruction into the curriculum. Kimberley M. Donnelly lists four distinct approaches that librarians have used to develop and integrate information literacy into the curriculum

of their respective institutions (Donnelly, 1998). The four approaches are:

- The Required, core-curriculum, for credit model;
- The Required, discipline-specific, for credit-course model;
- The Elective, for-credit course model;
- The Course-integrated model.

Faculty and librarians’ collaboration has been a major factor in developing the above successful information literacy programs. Another recent development has begun in some colleges and universities to better understand “how their students learn,” “in what kinds of environment or setting,” and “what educational reform” are needed to enhance their learning experience. As a result of this renewed interest in “students’ learning,” some universities have created innovative approaches that attempt to create rich, challenging and nurturing academic communities for their students. One such approach has been the creation of “Learning Communities.” Once again, academic librarians have emerged as active partners in the educational arena through their involvement in the learning communities program of their respective institutions.

Learning Communities

How do we define “learning communities?” One major proponent of the learning communities movement, Barbara Leigh Smith, states that the, “learning community approach fundamentally restructures the curriculum, and the time and space of students...link together courses or coursework to provide more opportunities for active learning, and interaction between students and faculty” (Smith, 1993). In another recent article, Philip Tompkins, Susan Perry and Joan K. Lippincott discuss the “new learning communities” movement in several universities such as the University of Washington (UW-UWired Program), and the Southern California (USC, Jump Start Program). These educators note that “New Learning Communities Program was developed to support pioneers in education who use networking and networked information to support student-centered teaching and learning” (Tompkins, Perry and Lippincott, 1998). They also state that “important models existed that demonstrated the convergence of the increasingly important role of collaboration and collaborative learning, the availability of Internet and networking... and the importance of including information literacy in the higher education curriculum” (Tompkins, Perry and Lippincott, 1998).

IUPUI Learning Communities Initiative

IUPUI is a public, four-year urban university of some 27,000 students. About 98 percent of the students are Indiana residents and 48 percent are part-time students who work and have family obligations. There are 1,400 full-time and approximately 800 part-time faculty employed at IUPUI. IUPUI was formed in 1969 when Indiana University and Purdue University merged their Indianapolis operations. IUPUI is recognized as a leader in urban higher education, ranked as Indiana's third largest and most comprehensive university.

Since 1996, IUPUI has been the home institution of one of Coalition for Networked Information's (CNI) New Learning Communities (NLC) project leaders. IUPUI offers students a variety of educational and career opportunities. The size and complexity of IUPUI, however, may create problems for all students, especially the adult learners, who have not been in school for a number of years. Some may find it difficult to make connections with other students, faculty members, and campus resources. The Learning Community Program provides an environment where students are supported in making those connections to better ensure a successful transition to college. Learning Communities are facilitated by an Instructional Team which is a collaborative effort of a faculty member working with a librarian, and supported by a student mentor, an academic advisor, and a technologist.

Since Fall 1996, the IUPUI University Library has been involved in collaborating with faculty and other academic units in providing support to the Learning Community program. The IUPUI Librarians were able to devote more attention to understand and accommodate the needs of our First-Year students as well as our adult learners with respect to information literacy and technology skills. All Learning Communities include a first-year experience class. Some learning communities link two or more classes, and some are specifically designed to introduce students to their majors. All students entering IUPUI for the first semester in college are eligible for a Learning Community.

Instructional Teams and Adult Learners at IUPUI

Instructional Teams are an integral component of the learning communities program. In fall 1996, there were 23 instructional teams on campus. Called together by the faculty member to prepare and/or revise a course, the instructional team moves through four phases in the

development of a successful learning experience for students enrolled. The four phases of development within instructional teams are:

1. Team Formation
2. Development Design
3. Implementation
4. Evaluation

In each of these stages, team members have particular roles to play. For further information about Instructional Teams at IUPUI see our Web page: (<http://www-lib.iupui.edu/itt/itt.html>).

The library assigned a team of librarians to support instructional teams. The author was one of the librarians assigned to work with two non-discipline specific courses whose linkages were based on generally connecting students to the university and to the scholarly community. The objectives of each course were intended to reflect the student population they targeted. The description printed in the Schedule of Courses reads: First Year Success Seminar: "Designed to help returning students ages 25 and over, or any student who is a parent, develop habits and skills that will enable them to be successful in the intellectual and cultural environment of IUPUI."

The Instructional Team members met to discuss their roles and to develop an understanding of "learning styles" of adult learners. They decided to study Malcolm Knowles' works. In his writings which date back to the 1960s, Knowles discusses the concept of "andragogy, or the art of teaching adults" (Knowles, 1968). In the andragogical perspective the librarian or any other team member becomes a "facilitator" rather than the "giver" of all knowledge. Students learn by methods such as collaborative strategies and link what they already know to newly acquired skills. As Knowles and Brookfield noted in their separate works on andragogy, the adult learner is self-directed, more motivated to acquire information and skills relevant to real life situations. The adult learner is also well experienced professionally and personally and expects an immediate payoff or practical application (Knowles, 1990; Brookfield, 1986).

After studying the above works, the instructional team met several times to develop and provide learning opportunities to enhance educational experiences for adult learners. The team members worked together to develop roles, to achieve goals of planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating each course. By col-

laborating on curriculum development and design, the team members were able to teach various information technology skills and other critical skills. The unique needs of adult learners were incorporated into the assignments and projects. Listed are some of the unique ways the team members were able to contribute and enhance the learning experiences of adult learners enrolled in Learning Communities Program.

Faculty

Introduce students to the culture and society of the university; provide academic status for the program; course planning; maintain an academic course orientation; model success strategies; assessment of students products and projects

Librarian

Expand the range of teaching and learning materials; participate in course planning, and learning objectives; incorporate information skills into the curriculum; facilitate discussions, contribute to critical thinking and evaluation of information sources; employ active learning; assessment of student products.

Student Mentor

Role model; mediator between students and the faculty; students' advocate, expert on campus resources; course planning; email & technology assistant

Academic Advisor

Expert on campus resources; academic policies; university regulations; facilitator on the use of a variety of learning styles

Technologist

Technology expert on e-mail & basic Internet searching

Issues and Challenges

As with any new initiative, the Instructional Team members faced issues and challenges in teaching information literacy and technology skills to the students. Some issues included:

For students:

- Various age groups, 25 to 60 years old, different needs, learning styles and motivations;
- Low-self esteem among some students, a high level of confidence (not realizing how to ask for assistance);
- Computer & technology apprehensions;
- Family and job obligations, not enough time to

establish contact with the instructional team members and campus community.

For the instructional team:

- Technologist's lack of knowledge about the adult learners learning styles;
- Faculty & academic advisor lack of knowledge about the library and its online resources;
- Insufficient infrastructure (networking, personnel, equipment, facilities, etc);
- Difficulty scaling projects (adding more courses and more students);
- The significant time commitment required to develop such projects has taxed the ability of faculty and librarians to carry out other "traditional" responsibilities, and limits involvement;
- Problems with off-campus access;
- Copyright of materials that might be incorporated in the network resources.

Conclusion

As academic libraries engage in widespread redefinition of goals and reallocation of resources, the above pilot project should be evaluated from the perspective of value to academic faculty, its students and the positive roles that library faculty have taken to represent the institutional role of the library. Instructional Teams have provided many learning opportunities for its members and the student body. Having a voice in the course planning, integrating information literacy into the curriculum, and being involved in student learning at a more fundamental level has been beneficial to team members, and especially the instructional librarians. Having closer connection with the institution's teaching & learning mission and playing another role central to meeting the changing information needs of the academic community has contributed to higher visibility for librarians involved in the Learning Communities Program.

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