Info Lit Squad Goals:
Using Interdisciplinary Faculty Learning Communities to Facilitate Real Talk about Information Literacy

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Introduction

When the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) introduced the Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education as a supplement and eventual replacement for the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, it suggested that librarians not only discuss the implications of this new theoretical approach amongst themselves, but also to "work with faculty, departmental or college curriculum committees, instructional designers, staff from centers for teaching and learning, and others to design information literacy programs in a holistic way."[1] In its direct appeals to faculty and administrators, the Framework also expressed support for "creating communities of conversations" and "a series of campus conversations" about this new understanding of information literacy and how it can be incorporated into the campus curriculum.[2]

This paper describes one institution's efforts to create a forum for these faculty-librarian conversations about information literacy using a year-long topic-based Faculty Learning Community model. A Faculty Learning Community (FLC) is a "group of interdisciplinary faculty who engage in an active, collaborative, year-long program" in order to focus on "researching and testing a scholarly and pedagogical topic that is important to the larger academic community."[3] This newly created Information Literacy FLC discussed an early draft of the ACRL Framework, provided feedback to ACRL from a non-library perspective, and discussed other information literacy concepts and issues during its one year term. As a result, the FLC's work continues to promote more broad-based campus conversations about how information literacy is integrated into the university's curriculum.

Literature Review

The concept of FLCs, now a common approach to faculty development in higher education, has been largely shaped and developed by Milton D. Cox from the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Miami University.[4] At Miami University, Cox defines an FLC as "a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building."[5] FLCs share similar principles and goals as those of student learning communities—unity, learning, encouragement and support—and have been demonstrated to effectively reduce the isolation felt by many faculty members.[6]

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The structure and purpose of FLCs can vary from institution to institution. However, FLCs typically fall into one of two categories: cohort-based (focusing on issues common to one group of faculty/staff, such as: junior faculty, mid-career faculty, deans, etc.) and topic-based (focused on a topic or issue that in common to many groups on campus and provide a learning opportunity to all faculty ranks and cohorts, also allowing for the inclusion of appropriate professional staff).[7]

Academic libraries are no strangers to the use of FLCs to facilitate professional multi-faceted conversations with non-library faculty. In 2011, librarians as Westminster College led a six-part conversation series with non-library faculty from their institution about the ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.[8] The Medical Library at Oakland University's William Beaumont School of Medicine also used an FLC model to lead a new faculty development program in 2011–2012.[9] Librarians at The College of Brockport created an interdisciplinary year-long FLC to examine students' research methods, resulting in a collaboratively written research methods *LibGuide* for their students.[10] Given the success of these programs, the FLC model seemed to be a good fit for facilitating conversations between librarians and non-library faculty about information literacy per the Framework's recommendations.

Squad Goal: Creating an Information Literacy Faculty Learning Community

FLCs have been a mainstay of faculty development at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) since 2010. The university's center for teaching and learning—The Learning, Teaching, & Innovation Technology Center (LT&ITC)—supports MTSU faculty by coordinating and funding five or six annual interdisciplinary FLCs. These FLCs are part of the LT&ITC's broader mission to support the improved teaching practices and pedagogy of its faculty. The Center's mission states, "At the LT&ITC, faculty come together to develop, improve, and integrate creative and effective teaching practices to enhance student learning."[11]

Each year, the LT&ITC invites MTSU faculty to submit proposals for themed FLCs, and those proposals are reviewed by the LT&ITC Executive Board. Once a slate of FLCs is approved, a call for participation goes out to the university community, and FLC facilitators select participants through a formal application process. Past topics for successful FLCs sponsored by the LT&ITC include student veteran pedagogy, mid-career faculty, civic learning and civic engagement, graduate education, and others.[12]

The FLC proposal process requires applicants to provide the major theme, ideas, and goals of the FLC; specific yearlong activities to be included; likely member composition of the FLC; qualifications of the facilitator(s); and a budget with partnership funding secured.[13] Most FLCs meet once monthly for topical discussions on readings, current research, or to hear invited experts on the topic. Beyond the meetings, the group can also facilitate informal discussions on topics and exchange research electronically through email or in an online classroom environment.

The FLC members can chose to disseminate the results of the group's work in a variety of ways. Typically, members will offer an on-campus faculty workshop to the campus at large hosted by the LT&ITC, present a paper at a state or national conference, or publish an article in a scholarly journal.[14]

The university's Provost's Office encourages faculty involvement in FLCs by funding financial stipends for participants. Each faculty participant receives a payment at the end of the FLC upon completion of a reflective essay for the final report. FLC facilitators receive two payments—one is issued after completing a midterm report, and the second comes after submitting a final report. In the FLC proposal, the facilitator may request budgetary support for books and other materials to be purchased through the LT&ITC. The facilitator is also encouraged to secure supplemental funding or in-kind support from their academic department or other entities on campus.

The LT&ITC also provides administrative support for the FLCs. In addition to coordinating the faculty participant application process, the office provides facilitator training and support, physical meeting space, and assistance with filing financial paperwork and purchases through the Provost's Office.

In April 2014, the LTITC issued its annual call to faculty for new FLC proposals. Vance, a faculty librarian in the James E. Walker Library, submitted a proposal to create an information literacy-themed FLC. Vance grounded the Information Literacy FLC proposal's theme and ideas within the larger professional discussion of ACRL's shift from the Standards to the Framework. At the time, ACRL had released drafts of the new Framework, and was seeking public comment. Using mentions of "information literacy" in the University's Academic Master Plan,[15] Vance was also able to make a connection between the larger ACRL transition and the University's 10-year academic planning process.

The Information Literacy FLC proposal was planned using an early draft of the ACRL's Framework document as a guide. Vance proposed five topical discussions around the Framework's draft threshold concepts. The proposal said that members would not only discuss the concepts, but also reflect on their own teaching as they critically examined the Framework document. The FLC proposal was approved, and a call for participants went out to the University's faculty through the LT&ITC.

Eight faculty members applied to participate in the program. Vance, the facilitator, reviewed the applications and invited seven faculty to participate. They came from departments in the University's College of Basic and Applied Sciences, the College of Liberal Arts, and the College of Education. One FLC member left the university halfway through the academic year, so a total of six non-library faculty members completed the FLC.

Squad Goal: Facilitating Real Talk about Information Literacy

In the Information Literacy FLC's inaugural meeting, the facilitator introduced members to the draft Framework document and contextualized it within the broader professional discussions of information literacy. Despite the Framework's assertion that "Threshold concepts originated as faculty pedagogical research within disciplines,"[16] none of the disciplinary faculty in the FLC were familiar with the terminology or language used in the document. The Framework document became an obstacle to our conversation as members got bogged down in differentiating frames from threshold concepts and knowledge practices from dispositions. The group spent an unexpected amount of time defining and norming the Framework's vocabulary before it could dive into the actual content. While faculty members did not disagree with any of the specific tenets of the Framework document, the presentation of the information stifled conversation more than it inspired.

The second conversation examined the Scholarship as Conversation frame. Faculty liked this frame, and were able to apply it to their own disciplines. For example, faculty noted that sometimes students who are new to a discipline lack the vocabulary to participate in scholarly conversations. Discussions of the subsequent frames were less engaging since the themes seems to be repetitive and the concepts discussed in the frames were not mutually exclusive.

Midway through the FLC, the facilitator collected overall impressions of the Framework document, and submitted these comments to ACRL as part of their formal review process. After completing this summary response, the facilitator abandoned the FLC's frame-by-frame schedule, and used the monthly meetings for themed discussions of information literacy. The conversations were much more productive, meaningful, and engaging once the group abandoned the Framework drafts.

The FLC hit its stride when it became a place for faculty to talk about their students' research, writing, and use of information. Some FLC participants taught lower level general education classes while others taught upper level and graduate classes. This range of perspectives allowed members to talk across disciplines about where

students excel and where they struggle with information literacy. By localizing the conversations about information literacy, the group was able to share experiences about rhetorical writing, students' reading comprehension, plagiarism and patch-writing, and issues unique to special populations like student veterans and transfer students. The FLC also found connections between information literacy and other peripheral campus projects like student participation in its annual Scholars Week activities and the University's new Quality Enhancement Plan on student engagement, integrative thinking, and reflective writing.

Squad Goal: Turning Real Talk into Real Action

As the FLC's year began to wind down, the group began to think about its legacy. Rather than give a workshop or writing a paper, the Information Literacy FLC chose to make its mark on the campus by drafting a proposal for an information literacy faculty grant to help facilitate a more deliberate focus on MTSU students' use of information in their writing and research. The group brainstormed, conducted reviews of similar grants from other institutions, and drafted a document to present to the library's dean.

Three members of the Information Literacy FLC expressed an interest in continuing the conversations beyond the FLC's one year of funding. Vance approached the library dean about creating a new Information Literacy Faculty Advisory Group (ILFAG) which could offer a faculty perspective to librarians on library instruction teaching and student learning. The dean approved, so Vance rounded out the committee with other faculty members who were not part of the initial FLC.

The new ILFAG picked up where the FLC dropped off. The group finalized the $2,000 Information Literacy Curriculum Integration Grant, and secured funding from the library's dean. The grant was awarded to a faculty member in the summer of 2016, and the library will offer the grant again in 2017.[17] The ILFAG members served as a review committee for the first round of applications.

Additionally, the ILFAG discussed the library instruction program's formal student learning outcomes, the results of the university's participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement's Information Literacy module, the university's general education student learning outcomes assessment reports, and a library project that examined a third-party's suite of online learning modules. The ILFAG is now in its second year, and it continues to offer the library a faculty perspective on student learning and information literacy.

Conclusion

MTSU's Information Literacy FLC was a resounding success. By using the infrastructure of the LT&ITC's FLC program, the library was able to bring together a group of interdisciplinary faculty to engage in a year-long program in which they discussed how information literacy fit within the context of the larger academic community. The FLC participants built a new professional community around a common interest, reduced the isolation of their classrooms and departments, and sought to extend their collaborative work to affect the campus at large. The faculty members' continued interest in volunteering to serve on a new extension of the FLC was a great testament to the success of the program.

The group's conversations fulfilled ACRL's recommendation to create "communities of conversation" about information literacy and the new Framework. The resulting "real talk" allowed the library to get a new faculty perspective on big picture issues that were taking place in the academic librarian profession. While ACRL's proposed Framework document was the impetus for the FLC, the group found broad-based conversations to be more productive and meaningful.

The FLC was also able to transform "real talk" into "real action." The formation of a new Information Literacy Curriculum Integration Grant for MTSU faculty and the creation of the ILFAG continue the momentum created by the FLC and will have a lasting impact on the campus, faculty teaching, and student learning.

Notes

1. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," American Library Association, accessed January 23, 2017, http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/infolit/Framework_ILHE.pdf, p. 10. The Framework was adopted by the Association of College & Research Libraries Board on January 11, 2016, as an eventual replacement for the "Information literacy Standards for Higher Education," American Library Association, accessed January 23, 2017, http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/standards.pdf.
2. "Framework," 13–14.
3. "Faculty Learning Communities," Middle Tennessee State University, Learning, Teaching and Innovative Technology Center, accessed December 7, 2016, http://www.mtsu.edu/ltanditc/FLC.
4. For a history of FLCs, see Cox's "The Role of Community in Learning," in *Teaching and Learning in College: A Resource for Educators*, ed. Gary S. Wheeler (Elyria, OH: Info-Tech, 2002).
5. Milton D. Cox, "Introduction to Faculty Learning Communities," in *Building Faculty Learning Communities*, New Directions in Teaching and Learning, no. 97, ed. Milton D. Cox & Laurie Richlin, Jossey-Bass, Spring 2004, 8.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 8–9.
8. Dianne VanderPol and Emily A. B. Swanson, "Rethinking Roles: Librarians and Faculty Collaborate to Develop Students' Information Literacy," *Journal of Library Innovation* 4, no. 2 (2013): 134–148.
9. Misa Mi, "Expanding Librarian Roles Through a Librarian Initiated and Facilitated Faculty Learning Community," *Journal of Library Administration* 55 (2015): 24–40.
10. Jennifer J. Little et al., "Interdisciplinary Collaboration: A Faculty Learning Community Creates a Comprehensive LibGuide," *Reference Services Review* 38, no. 3 (2010): 431–444. doi: 10.1108/00907321011070919.
11. "Faculty Learning Communities," Middle Tennessee State University, Learning, Teaching and Innovative Technology Center, accessed December 7, 2016, http://www.mtsu.edu/ltanditc.
12. "Past Faculty Learning Communities," Middle Tennessee State University, Learning, Teaching and Innovative Technology Center, accessed December 7, 2016, http://www.mtsu.edu/ltanditc/FLC/archive.php.
13. Thomas M. Brinthaupt, e-mail message (via Pat Thomas) to MTSU Faculty, April 21, 2014.
14. Thomas M. Brinthaupt et al., Developing Technology-Centric Best Teaching Practices for Higher Education. In *Technology-centric Strategies for Higher Education Administration*, ed. Purnendu Tripathi and Siran Mukerji. (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, In Press).
15. "Building on the Blueprint for Excellence: Academic Master Plan for 2007–2017," Middle Tennessee State University, accessed January 25, 2017, http://www.mtsu.edu/AMP/docs/amp.pdf.
16. "Framework," p. 13.
17. "Information Literacy Curriculum Integration Grant," Middle Tennessee State University, James E. Walker Library, accessed January 25, 2017, http://libraryguides.mtsu.edu/jewlawards/infolitgrant.