Who's afraid of partnerships for information literacy initiatives?

Working together to empower learners

by Lynn D. Lampert

As librarians strive to infuse information literacy programs into university curriculums, an issue that dominates the landscape is whether we will listen to our faculty and collaborate to include both our and their visions. Clearly, in order to succeed, we must keep in mind Cerise Oberman's admonition, "There are a variety of voices currently saying something extremely important: librarians don't own information literacy and information literacy is not always described in the terms that librarians would use." The current collaborative challenge offers us the opportunity to transform interaction into new realities and new relationships, both in and beyond libraries, which will assist us in our work to promote information literacy initiatives across our college and university campuses.

As the information literacy coordinator and distance education librarian at California State University (CSU)-Northridge, I have many opportunities to support fellow faculty members working to incorporate information literacy goals into their curriculum. One particular interaction with a unique program outside of the traditional curriculum proves that the collaborative efforts of faculty and librarians can help every student, regardless of his or her location, cross the seemingly insurmountable bridges of the information universe by creating communicative internal and external learning communities. This article focuses on how partnerships and programs that emerge out of collaborations with those working outside of libraries—and even universities—offer infinite potential for achieving the goal of empowering all learners, both off campus and on, with the necessary information literacy skills for lifelong learning.

New partnerships across campus communities

Following a "teach-the-teacher" workshop that outlined our library's information literacy program for faculty, I was contacted by the Center for Management and Organization Development (CMOD)—a nonprofit consulting practice in the College of Business Administration and Economics at CSU-Northridge that brings real-world experiences into the academic setting while providing businesses and nonprofit agencies with access to the university's business faculty.

I was asked to design a class promoting information literacy in the CMOD's Los Angeles (LA) County Academy, a unique public-to-public partnership created in 1999 to meet Los Angeles County's workforce training and de-
development needs by developing job-related certificate programs for their employees. The College of Extended Learning administers the program, and classes are team-taught by university faculty (full-time and adjunct) and staff from the county and other agencies. The principal partners in the project are the LA County Department of Human Resources and six California State Universities (Bakersfield, Dominguez Hills, Los Angeles, Long Beach, Northridge, and Pomona).

The LA County Academy offers a preparatory course for future county managers, courses for current and future personnel managers, and problem-solving classes (as well as certification training) for entry-level clerks. The program focuses on the key skills needed by managers to meet the increasing demands of a continuously changing environment. The certificate program was developed collaboratively by CMOD, the LA County Department of Human Resources, and the CSU consortium of all CSU departments of extended learning in the Los Angeles basin. Clearly there are many stakeholders impacted by new initiatives.

The faculty of the LA County Academy Program wanted to have a class developed that would introduce adult learners to a set of information literacy skills deemed imperative for their success in both the program and workplace. The curriculum for the course undergoes joint review and approval by non-librarians, teaching faculty members in several disciplines, and LA County program administrators.

Students in the academy program include individuals who work in all of the LA County’s departments. The information literacy training component developed for this program offers an opportunity for these working adults to learn how to efficiently acquire knowledge in an online environment both in and out of the workplace.

After an overview of key information retrieval tools and services, students learn about the various services available, compare their ease of use and the quantity and quality of their results, and have a clearer knowledge of how to perform increasingly complex searches.

Links to searching resources and informative Web sites are presented to the participants for use at work after the program ends. Upon completion of this session, students are better able to find information using a combination of search sites and resources; know a variety of sites on the Internet that can be used to find references to information on specific topics; are able to better evaluate which of these resources best meets their needs; and can compose simple and advanced search queries from a combination of keywords and symbols that can expand or narrow a search. Reviewed resources include recommendations made by librarians, the program faculty, and LA County.

This class has marked the first introduction to online research for many of these adult learners who serve so many in the community. In a sample survey of students, 92 percent stated that they had never had instruction about using the Internet or online research techniques, while 67 percent stated that they spent 15 to 19 hours a week online at work. The survey results also show that 75 percent of the students were more likely to use the Internet to find an answer to a work-related research question than consulting resources available through their institutional intranet, advice from a colleague, or consulting a librarian.

From reading recent research on information literacy and the workplace, I discovered the overlap of undergraduate student needs with those of the adult learner in this program. In addition, by learning about the importance of information literacy from publications of the business and government communities, I was able to transfer information literacy theories from the domain of the library to the issues of the program and the disciplines and stakeholders it supported. This investigation outside the confines of library literature strengthened my efforts to relate the importance of my proposed information literacy curriculum to the program faculty.

The collaborative challenge presented by the LA Academy project began with a phone call from a faculty member asking for instructional services for students outside the library’s traditional target learning community. Today the project continues to grow and facilitate new relationships that strengthen the library’s visibility and credibility as a genuine partner with faculty in educating students about the importance of information literacy skills. This new relationship has highlighted the need for librarians to allow the information literacy movement to take us beyond the traditional course by course journey where only individual librarians working with individual and classroom faculty or with a particular “traditional” pro-
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gram may successfully integrate the library into particular courses. Working with faculty members, departments, colleges, and extended learning programs and their curricula will help us to reach a broader spectrum of students. By transcending the boundaries of our traditional instructional environments we will be able to tackle the voices of concern about information literacy outside librarianship and perhaps beyond higher education.

A philosophical shift toward partnerships for information literacy

In their essay "The Future of Collaboration between Librarians and Teaching Faculty," Jean Caspers and Katy Lenn lament that the cost-cutting trend of increasing reliance on adjunct faculty greatly impacts collaborative efforts in higher education. "The norm will no longer be collaboration based on years of contacts and interactions. Librarians will need to make an extra effort in working with adjunct faculty who teach on an irregular basis and do not spend a great deal of time on campus."

Arguing for an increase in collaborative efforts between librarians and teaching faculty to bridge these barriers, they urge librarians to market instructional roles to the entire campus and greater learning communities. Their recommendation calls for librarians to build a range of "coalitions for information literacy that utilize political skills, including negotiation, persuasion, compromise and strategizing to achieve certain objectives."1

Ideally, librarians will adopt such skills, as they are all necessary for our success in collaborating with faculty to enhance library instructional outreach objectives. However, present reality shows that it is often commonplace to neglect the need for full partnerships and compromise when dealing with the topic of information literacy—an area where both real and imaginary boundaries still impede potential partnerships.

The growing number of online users drives the need for librarians to build and depend upon information literacy community partnership models in order to "help prepare the public to utilize information efficiently and effectively so they can fully participate in the workplace, education, community and family life." 2

With a reported 72 percent of the U.S. population online, and indications that there is still a positive relationship between educational attainment and Internet use, the need for programs that intersect the boundaries of university and community continues to heighten. 3 The work of the ALA Special Presidential Committee on Information Literacy Community Partnerships (2000–2001) should continue to serve as a framework for the growth of information literacy programs like the one developed for the LA County Academy. As stated in A Library Advocate’s Guide to Building Information Literate Communities, "Everyone has a stake in building information literate communities. Corporate and nonprofit, government, education, social service and other sectors are all potential partners in ensuring that all people have the resources and skills they need to fully participate in an information society." 4

Before I began working with the LA County program, I did not fully consider the positive impact of collaborating with adjunct and full-time faculty who teach our extension programs and courses. With our campus student population surpassing 32,000, the extension of instruction outreach efforts initially seemed beyond the productive scope of working to transition a traditional BI program to an active information literacy program. However, the work involved has shown that faculty-librarian collaboration in information literacy curriculum development and assessment is in fact the key to reaching learning communities within and outside of the expanding walls of today’s higher education institutions.

Moreover, if the reality and perception of reluctant librarians’ attitudes toward collaboration on information literacy instruction truly is as dire a situation as that painted by Rise L. Smith, much greater work along these lines lies ahead in forging new relationships. In expressing her concerns about the reluctance of librarians to relinquish or share information literacy instruction with faculty, Smith states, “Unfortunately, this attitude prevents information literacy from penetrating deeply into higher education and may partially account for the fact that the literature (continued on page 253)
of information literacy 'remains confined within the LIS discipline.' High-quality, course-integrated, curriculum-wide information literacy will not come from guarding the territory of library instruction . . . but rather from approaches that empower faculty, ‘teach the teacher,’ and cause librarians to ‘break out of the library building and socialize with the faculty’ wherever they teach.”

The act of “building coalitions for information literacy” should mark the first step in developing successful information literacy programs. However, a coalition is by definition a temporary alliance initially brought together for joint actions or goals. A coalition for information literacy is a partnership that needs to evolve beyond its founding objectives to meet expanding and sometimes permanent needs. The success of the collaboration will depend on whether or not all the voices involved in the collaborative process are heard and respected.

Notes

3. Ibid., 151.
4. ALA. “Special Presidential Committee on Information Literacy Community Partnerships (continued on page 255)


*C&RL News* ■ *April 2003 / 255*