

Librarian and Lecturer in Partnership: A Caribbean Experience

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ABSTRACT

“Librarian and Lecturer in Partnership: A Caribbean Experience” addresses the issue of collaboration between lecturer and librarian in an academic setting, more specifically in the Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago. Drawing on research and experiences provided in the library literature, the writer alludes to the benefits of collaboration, the reasons why collaborative partnerships should be pursued, the challenges to be faced, as well as factors that would facilitate collaboration between librarians and lecturers. Feedback from students and lecturers is also provided.

The experience gained at an academic library—the University of the Southern Caribbean (USC), where the writer currently serves as library director—is provided against the backdrop of the literature consulted. The chapter closes with an appeal for increased collaborative efforts and provides recommendations on how partnerships can be formed in an academic environment in the Caribbean.

INTRODUCTION

At a library committee meeting of the USC (formerly Caribbean Union College), held in 2003 and comprising mainly of deans, library director, academic vice president, and a student representative, the issue of developing our students into critical thinkers was again considered. The problem was not unique to this institution. Students were making “extensive but inappropriate use of...information resources in their academic research” (Voigts 5). It was a recurring problem that we needed to address. It was understood that finding and implementing a remedy was not solely the responsibility of either librarian or lecturer. Both needed to work together—but how? The professional literature, discussed later in this chapter, served as a source of valuable information on the benefits of collaboration, the reasons why collaborative

partnerships should be pursued, the challenges to be faced, and other pertinent issues related to collaboration between librarian and lecturer.

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration is a powerful tool that helps increase student achievement as well as “assure that the library is an integral component of the curriculum” (Milbury 30). As noted by Buchanan Luck and Jones, “the effectiveness of librarians’ curriculum development” is also improved through collaborative ventures and course instruction (163). A good working relationship between both parties, librarian and lecturer, is the springboard for setting students on the path to lifelong learning. Both professionals bring to the fore, specialized skills that in tandem reap rewards for the student. Curt Asher noted that the librarian uses several keys to open doors of knowledge. They include tools to find information and know where it is located; how to construct a search; how to distinguish between sources of information; and how to evaluate the value and credibility of sources. Students locate, assess, and select the material. Lecturers help the students with interpretation of the information through the provision of appropriate teaching methods. Librarians and lecturers provide separate interdependent instruction, both of which have intrinsic value, and it is their independence and interdependence, which best serves students. Knowledge and expertise of each professional should be clearly delineated so that each can best provide students with the benefits of their expertise (52–54).

From studies and personal experience, collaboration with faculty is the best way to help students to learn lifelong research skills (Moore 77–86). Buchanan, Luck, and Jones also found that in the process of working together, the experience gained through the symbiotic relationship, encouraged the development of other forms of instruction that served to benefit not just students but librarian and lecturer as well (163). Mutual respect is one of the major ingredients for such relationships to be developed and maintained in an academic environment.

CHALLENGES FACED IN COLLABORATION

There are several constraints to librarian-lecturer collaboration. Small cites the work of Williams who posited administrative and curricular demands that serve to impinge on the time needed to collaborate (10). As noted by Winner, “Teaching users to understand the structure and role of information and to use critical thinking in the evaluation and selection of material they receive is labor-intensive” (26). Add to that the already slim margin of time, meetings, reports, staff issues, implementation of plans, and a plethora of other day-to-day matters, and the possibility of collaboration is slim. A second constraint is the difficulty encountered in convincing lecturers to collaborate especially when they are ignorant of what can be done by

librarians for them and their students regarding the teaching and learning process. Small underscored the fact that unless all partners see the importance and understand the benefits of collaboration to themselves, each other, and their students, collaboration will always be elusive (10). This challenge is further exacerbated by negative perceptions of lecturers held by librarians and vice-versa according to Stahl and Baker (133). A further study done by Miller and Schontz found that “teacher-librarians are struggling to become partners with teachers who don’t want them” (28).

Badke proposed a third challenge, that being the different cultures that create different priorities; librarians focus more on process, faculty more on content, though the two are not mutually exclusive. Asher, however, was forthright in his assertion that “teaching students to analyse data, evaluate ideas, and develop a philosophical understanding framed within a subject discipline are elements of information literacy that lie outside the expertise of most librarians” (54). This point was reinforced in the study conducted by Buchanan, Luck, and Jones, where librarians noted that they relied on the professor for subject expertise and classroom management skills (162). As Asher summarized, the jobs of both professionals are important for student achievement. The librarian opens the door to a new piece of knowledge; the lecturer helps the student to interpret it (54). The challenge for librarians in the 21st century is that of working within the boundaries, while seeking to find creative ways of navigating potential obstacles in their quest to partner with lecturers in training students to not just locate but also to assess material upon which they should base their learning (Rader 74–90). Librarians must collaborate with lecturers since, as advocated by Donald Riggs, lecturers can be described as chief instigator of library use for, notwithstanding, library orientation; it is the lecturer that provides the assignments that require utilization of the library by students (498).

Ken Haycock delineated factors that facilitate successful collaboration. Four of those factors provided fertile soil for the germination of collaboration in the experience of the USC. They are:

- **Faculty/Staff Characteristics** – Teachers and librarians exhibit mutual respect, understanding, and trust. They see collaboration in their own self-interest, offsetting their costs of time and loss of autonomy. The partners are able to compromise.
- **Communication** – There is open and frequent formal communication, supported by more informal personal relationships and communication.
- **Purpose** – The teaching team has a shared vision with concrete, attainable goals, and objectives for the curriculum unit(s). Their purpose is unique, that is, it could not be accomplished by either partner alone.

272 Caribbean Libraries in the 21st Century

- Resources – There is skilled leadership by the librarian and administrator supported by sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time. (48)

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN: OVERVIEW

The USC is a private co-educational institution with a diverse student body operated by the Caribbean Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It is in the Maracas Valley, about 10 miles northeast of Port-of-Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago. There are currently five schools at the university. At the inception of the project these schools were called faculties. These schools are:

The School of Education and Human Sciences

The School of Humanities and Social Sciences

The School of Business

The School of Theology, Religion and Behavioral Sciences

The School of Sciences and Technology

Through the years, this author, who currently serves as the library director, has been an active member of faculty: attending faculty meetings, providing current awareness services as well as orientation services, teaching (albeit limited) library instruction to both student and faculty, and serving on various committees, which include those that deal with policies, information technology, and offerings in new programs. The library director is also a member of the highest administrative body on the campus, the administrative council. These interactions and resulting relationships formed have served to lay the foundation for collaborative ventures, the nature of which will be discussed.

COLLABORATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN

In recent years, the question of how best to incorporate information literacy instruction into the academic curriculum has grown beyond the boundaries of professional librarianship and has become a general concern regularly addressed by classroom faculty, educational administrators and even regional accrediting organizations... . (Walter 34–35)

It was the academic vice president who arrived at a solution to the dilemma of developing our students into the critical thinkers identified in the opening paragraph. Having been apprised of the information needs of students through various meetings with the library director, it was obvious that the academic vice president had mulled over the solution for a while before presenting it to the library committee. She suggested that the library committee vote

for a proposal to be submitted to the academic policies committee, a committee that makes recommendations to the president via the administrative council. This proposal would advocate specifics relating to the inclusion of a library course for credit within an existing department. The course would be built around library research and critical thinking skills. The lecturer would be the librarian. There would be close collaboration between the librarian and the dean of the faculty of humanities. She also verbalized, as did Buchanan, Luck, and Jones, that time involved in such a process was significant enough to warrant that the task should not just be added to regular responsibilities of the library director "any more than classroom faculty should teach an overload class without some compensation in either time or money" (163). Therefore, monetary compensation was advocated.

Thus, the vision was shared and the goal seemed attainable. The main objective was the development of the students into critical thinkers who would be able to distinguish "between true pearls and those glittery paste jewels that dissolve upon close examination" (Voigts 5); students who were also able to, according to Curt Asher, "swim forever in a river of ideas" (55). Librarian and lecturers would work together in the accomplishment of this objective. Library staff was tired of being inundated with requests from students mainly for material identified in a course outline or alluded to by the lecturer. Valuable items in our collection remained untouched, not borrowed because they were not referred to by the lecturer either verbally or in writing. Too much money was spent on material that was not being utilized, simply because they were not visible outside of the library either by students or lecturers. In addition, as advocated by Small, the ever increasing importance of information technologies further spurred on the urgency for collaboration (10). It was obvious that face-to-face contact between librarians and students, who felt that the Internet was an adequate substitute for the library, was severely limited. One student, in particular, had proudly asserted that she didn't need the library since she could get all she wanted on the Internet. This affirmation brought to mind a scenario in the literature of a student who relied heavily on what appeared to be an authoritative essay for her report on medieval practices. The report was actually authored by a radiologist with little knowledge of either the Middle Ages or of premodern medicine (Voigts 5). The students at the USC, and in some instances, lecturers, needed help in navigating the information superhighway effectively.

Yet, there existed serious constraints. How could such an idea be considered in the face of administrative demands that sat squarely on the shoulders of the one professional at the library? Where would the librarian find the time to teach an entire course for credit given the reality of staff shortage, both professional and paraprofessional, faced by the library? In addition, the increase in student enrollment at the university further exacerbated the problem. The dean of the faculty of humanities refined the proposal. His solution was to have library research built into an existing mandatory course

in the English department, over a long-term basis. He saw the advantages to be gleaned from such integration. It appeared that Badke also had similar ideas, as in a prior study he proposed what he called a bolder plan for collaboration between librarians and lecturers "to imbed information literacy credit courses within existing departments." This, he said, would address the constraint of "cultural conflict while creating a proper climate for collaboration" (63–80). Lupton, echoing Badke, encouraged that librarians need to work in tandem with academics to integrate information literacy into course content and programs of study, and view students work to ascertain whether information goals are being reached (81). It was a perfect union that would provide just what the student needed. The Academic Policies Committee, comprising mainly of members of faculty, unanimously voted for the project.

Communication facilitated the development, growth, and longevity of the process and played a pivotal role in the process of collaboration. Apart from the dean, the chair of the department as well as individual lecturers worked with the librarian on an ongoing basis, sharing plans, visions, and course content via telephone, e-mail, and face-to-face contact. The course, within which library research methods were incorporated, was English Composition II, an undergraduate three-credit core course concerned mainly with teaching research writing and engendering critical thinking skills. The needs of the lecturers, librarian, and students were outlined. Specific information was provided, which included duration of sessions, days and times, classrooms, class schedules, course outlines, course objectives, number of students per class, and telephone and e-mail contacts of lecturers. Lecturers were eager and excited about the prospect of working together with the librarian. They verbally expressed their delight over the collaborative venture, which they were hopeful would result in papers with more substance that would be easier to grade. Formal written communication ensured continuity of the process. The reality is that lecturers' attachment at the university can be transitory, some are hired and stay on permanently, and others are temporary. Oral communication is not a dependable means of perpetuating a process or keeping systems alive.

The proposal worked well. Since the project started in 2003, library research has been an integral component of English Composition II, a core course on writing and research in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the USC. Components of the Big6 Skills were incorporated into instruction (Eisenberg and Berkowitz). The experience echoed that of Buchanan, Luck, and Jones, for team-teaching built trust in each others expertise and experience (162). As of 2005, the relationship between the lecturers in the English department and the librarian is one of collaboration and mutual respect. Students have voiced their appreciation of a system that provides them with the ability to not just locate information but also to apply it to their research needs. The exclamations of students include comments, such as: "Why didn't I know all of this before? I am now finding so

much relevant information.” Strong relationships between students and the librarian developed. The library was now a visible and real component in their experience. In addition, the chief instigators—faculty—of library use had not only recognized but also verbalized the importance of the library to students. Although time did not permit the gathering of empirical evidence, a verbal assessment from the dean of the School of Humanities and Social Studies was provided. According to the dean, research took a new slant. Students were being encouraged to think outside the box, read, challenge lecturers, and broaden their horizons. One significant dimension of the course was that students are instructed to approach areas of research with a new perspective to enhance the repository of current research and not just to focus on secondary research, which borders on regurgitation of the old or reinventing the wheel. Soon a book containing input from lecturers in the English department and the librarian will be published to assist students in the preparation of assignments and the fulfillment of other course objectives. Collaboration must indeed be relational rather than circumstantial with a long-term focus (Moore 77–86) .

It is also important to separate the concepts of orientation and instruction. The two concepts must not be confused. The former introduces the library and its services to the user, the other instructs on the maximization of the resources of the library in fulfilling information needs. One role, according to Lupton, is that of trainer, the other that of educator (82). Again Buchanan, Luck, and Jones encapsulated this idea well when they noted that “the concept of Information Literacy Instruction as opposed to training in library use or research methods is still foreign to most faculty and to many librarians as well” (161).

Apart from, but growing out of the alliance with the School of Humanities, collaboration developed and is currently ongoing between the librarian and lecturers in the School of Theology, Religion, and Behavioral Sciences. The word had spread and lecturers in other departments also wanted their students to benefit from this integrated approach to teaching. Training for lecturers in all the schools (faculties) has also been scheduled since re-educating the faculty must be part of any collaborative venture between librarian and faculty, especially in the face of unprecedented growth of information and communication technologies.

FACTORS THAT WOULD FACILITATE COLLABORATION

As advocated by Small, librarians “should not bear the total responsibility of raising awareness and demonstrating the possibilities for collaboration” (11). Collaboration training during professional preparation programs was posited as a means of raising awareness of the needs of and ways in which educators can work together. While we seek to realize this dream however, and even amid the challenges, we must bear in mind that collaboration can happen with “diplomacy and modeling” (Milbury 30). It can be done and

must be done. Negative attitudes must be reversed. What the librarian, and by extension, the library, can provide for lecturers and ultimately students must be promoted. Librarians must be perceived as educational leaders. As advocated by Buchanan, Luck, and Jones, librarians must take the lead and further educate themselves and lecturers about positive outcomes (164). Librarians should inform lecturers about the many contributions they can make to student learning. Embracing this perception and retraining lecturers through workshops and programs could be undertaken. Librarians should work on improving liaison with faculty and not wait for the lecturers to come to them, librarians should initiate this process.

According to Gary Hartzell, "the skills and knowledge that make you a technically excellent librarian will not alone make you an influential one." Changes in everyday activities will need to be made since "influence is both built and exercised through continual interaction with others." Going outside the library and into the school must be part of our business as librarians. Our stage must be widened (13–15). Librarians should be a part of, if not, a member of faculty, and attend meetings as well as serve on committees. Librarians should build individual relationships and get involved in freshmen activities and other core courses, meet in classrooms and offices apart from their own, change the dynamics of encounters. Learning new roles is difficult, but it is also possible (Hartzell 15). Librarians need to respect, communicate, and collaborate continuously with faculty. Librarian and lecturer is an indispensable relationship that must be formed and cemented, for such a partnership is the most significant factor in the development of students into critical thinkers and, ultimately, achievers.

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