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Crafting Identity, Collaboration, and Relevance for Academic Librarians Using Communities of Practice

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Abstract

Faculty/librarian collaboration is vital for librarians to remain integral to the academy. We now have an opportunity to change how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by faculty and administrators. There are viable solutions for expanding the role of the librarian in ways that could lead to better faculty partnerships. First, librarians must be grounded in a shared purpose and professional identity and establish a contextual framework for our own professional 'boundaries.' We cannot create an intersection with the knowledge and experience of others if we do not have an understanding of our own frame. Interviews and investigation of the professional literature led to a re-discovery of communities of practice. Communities of practice (CoPs) are promising tools for librarians because they can be used to develop and sustain professional identity. Once the shared purpose and practice is identified, CoPs can facilitate collaboration between librarians and faculty and develop partnerships that will increase understanding, create meaningful connections and improve perception. Communities of practice build professional empathy, and this empathetic understanding is the essence of alignment. Once our services are aligned with the needs and expectations of our users, we will become more relevant and valuable to our institutions.

Keywords

Communities of practice; Professional identity; Faculty/librarian collaboration

Crafting Identity, Collaboration, and Relevance for Academic Librarians Using Communities of Practice

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Abstract

Faculty/librarian collaboration is vital for librarians to remain integral to the academy. We now have an opportunity to change how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by faculty and administrators. There are viable solutions for expanding the role of the librarian in ways that could lead to better faculty partnerships. First, librarians must be grounded in a shared purpose and professional identity and establish a contextual framework for our own professional 'boundaries.' We cannot create an intersection with the knowledge and experience of others if we do not have an understanding of our own frame. Interviews and investigation of the professional literature led to a re-discovery of communities of practice. Communities of practice (CoPs) are promising tools for librarians because they can be used to develop and sustain professional identity. Once the shared purpose and practice is identified, CoPs can facilitate collaboration between librarians and faculty and develop partnerships that will increase understanding, create meaningful connections and improve perception. Communities of practice build professional empathy, and this empathetic understanding is the essence of alignment. Once our services are aligned with the needs and expectations of our users, we will become more relevant and valuable to our institutions.

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Introduction

This is not the story we meant to tell. The collaboration between the three of us, two College of Science librarians with 25 and 17 years of professional experience and a School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) graduate student nearing the end of her studies (now a Research Services Librarian at Valparaiso University), was formed as the result of the Directed Research program offered through the Indiana University SLIS program in Indianapolis. The program gives emerging professionals the opportunity to gain valuable research experience for course credit. Oakleaf recently wrote, "Community college, college, and university librarians no longer can rely on their stakeholders' belief in their importance. Rather, they must demonstrate their value."¹ Thus, the goal of our project was to demonstrate our value by uncovering the best

methods for calculating the h-indices of faculty in the College of Science at the University of Notre Dame. The h-index is one of the latest measures of publication impact based on citation counts. A scholar with an h-index of 5, for example, has published five papers each of which has been cited by other papers at least five times.² Our objectives were clearly defined by the three of us at the outset with additional support from a graduate student advisor, an Associate Professor with over 17 years of professional experience. Using the Web of Science database as a starting point, we decided it would be helpful to determine:

- Effective search strategies for finding faculty publications,
- How faculty curriculum vitae citation lists compared to the publications indexed in Web of Science,



- If Web of Science was the best database for the h-index calculation, and
- Whether it was better, for reporting purposes, to calculate the h-index at the individual or the departmental level.

The project was undertaken with the knowledge that a faculty member's h-index score is an increasingly important factor for determining tenure and promotion at the university.

This seemed like a valuable service for the faculty in the College of Science, and a way to broaden their perception of the nature of our professional services. However, we were surprised to discover the flood of curricula vitae from the Department of Biological Sciences never arrived; instead we got a trickle. We soon understood our perception of what was important and valuable to the College of Science faculty might be out of alignment. Then we discovered another complication. In previous years, administrative assistants from the department had provided the individual h-indices using Web of Science. When one faculty member shrugged in response to our efforts to create a masterpiece of search-discovery and said, "Well, I expect it's good enough," we began to realize the faculty were satisfied with the results obtained by their administrative assistants. They did not need the score to be rigorous; they were not worried about whether Google Scholar would be a better tool than Web of Science. In their eyes, it seemed, the calculation was sufficient for clerical duty.

While these complications meant we could not meet our original objectives, we knew they did say something interesting about our view of ourselves as library professionals; they indicated a misalignment between the needs and interests of departmental faculty and our own. As professionals, our work should not only be relevant to the needs of our departments, it should also reflect our knowledge and experience. We began to investigate tools librarians could employ to improve relevance and change the perceptions of our services in the eyes of faculty colleagues. We conducted informal interviews with a few faculty members from the College of Science and professional academic librarians and re-

searched the professional literature, including disciplines outside of librarianship. This led to the rediscovery of the Communities of Practice model. Communities of practice (CoPs) are promising because they can be used not only to facilitate collaboration between librarians and faculty, but to create additional opportunities for librarians to develop and sustain a professional identity. A firm sense of professional identity must come before we expand roles within the academy or attempt to identify a shared practice. Once we know the boundaries of our professional framework, we can determine the services we ought to provide, thus facilitating both relevance and respect. We can be seen as integral academic colleagues.

Professional Challenges

In the midst of our h-index research, we explored the extent to which some faculty members from the College of Science felt our services matched their needs. We gathered not only casual feedback from the h-index project, but met with a few faculty from different departments to conduct informal interviews. Those interviewed were chosen by the College of Science librarians based on the faculty members' relative engagement with library services. After weeks of painstakingly combing the CVs of teaching and research faculty to match their publication lists with those indexed in Web of Science in order to generate the best h-index results, we received an email response that was particularly enlightening. The faculty member wrote, "We are not asking for the H-index, just the plots [of citations to our papers] from about the last decade. H-indices are not very informative." This was suggestive for two reasons. One, we believed the h-index was a significant measure used for tenure and promotion considerations. We were also unaware that the results submitted to faculty members were too exhaustive. They only needed a limited publication analysis for their reporting. Overall, however, we began to understand that our work was not as valuable to them as we expected and the results produced by departmental assistants generally met their needs. The interviews with several faculty in the College of Science also proved illuminating. We were interested in what they wanted us to know

about libraries and library service and were curious about what they would say or not say about the role of the librarian. One faculty member from the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry began the interview by saying, "I used to send students to the library, but I don't anymore because they can get the information in less than two minutes" (presumably from the Internet). While he said there are negatives to this approach because "student searches are not as effective," it is a reality he accepts. His goal is to "link the classroom to the real world," and he shared the various ways he has used technology to promote learning within his classroom, to disseminate research and to promote the work taking place in his laboratory. Knowing we were interested in the issues from a library perspective, he volunteered his ideas for how library professionals could be more involved. Here we were careful not to make suggestions; we wanted to learn how he perceived the possibilities for effective library service. He recommended that the library store the audio and video presentations published by students from his lab and have a Facebook page with links to his laboratory page. He also said he and his students would "benefit from regular updates about material that is relevant to what I am teaching," and the library could "create a resource site for relevant courses that I would direct students to for extra reading."

While at first glance these expectations seem low, they are also slightly encouraging because indicate avenues for building collaboration and creating a partnership with this faculty member. His comments suggest he does see the library professional as a potential classroom resource, if not a research partner, and believes the library could be a portal for promoting his lab projects. This is important to him because he believes marketing his research is a vital part of "doing science." He also envisions a more technologically rich environment for the library, particularly expressed through the comment that the library "has to come up to the new technologies." He said, "Older faculty might still use books, but the iPod, iPad generation will soon replace them. There are changing horizons and the library has to be open to change." While he worries about the pace expected of (and by) his stu-

dents – he had much more time to adapt to change when he was being trained as a young chemist – he accepts the inevitable. His feeling that the library can do its part to carry the charge of information delivery compatible with technological change is important because it shows his perception, at the very least, is in tune with the transformations occurring within the library profession.

Our interview with a mathematics professor also indicated potential areas of librarian/faculty collaboration. Unlike some of his colleagues, he believed impact measures used by the academy to gauge success, like the h-index, are not transient. He suggested that our initial project was valuable and our investigation of tools for better impact measures and data collection was worthwhile. Of course, since he is a mathematician, he values quantitative measures. In fact, the differing reactions to our project amongst the academic disciplines, even within the College of Science, was a healthy reminder that sweeping statements about what works and what does not should be gently applied and based upon the specific academic cultures librarians navigate while working to create partnerships within the individual disciplines. In the case of the mathematician, he suggested the library expand the parameters of its curatorial work by storing and organizing research data. He said, "The library should be at the forefront of this. It is a natural library function." Interestingly, while he also said, with regret, "the mathematics department no longer needs physical libraries," he felt they do need a place where "faculty can go to speak with librarians." He also suggested that librarians embrace services similar to a public library, offering patrons e-book rentals, a popular fiction section, and the use of new technologies. Like his colleague from the chemistry department, the mathematician's comments reveal an inclination for building partnerships with library professionals. This inclination alone is a valuable insight.

Another conversation with a faculty member from the biology department resonated with us. He suggested librarians might be too task-oriented and "would be better served by embracing a search and discovery research model,"

a kind of serendipitous approach to learning and scholarship, a model akin to that employed by scientists. He said our professional practice “should shift to this ‘discovery’ approach,” and it caused us to speculate about whether he desired such a shift in part because he wished to engage in the development of a kind of shared practice with his College of Science librarian. At face value, his comment does not seem feasible. Librarians cannot behave like academic researchers all the time because much of our work is about meeting the needs of others. A task-based approach is often necessary to get the job done as effectively as is expected. However, his words held some insight. Perhaps a similar, or at least analogous, approach to our work would lead to better collaboration with our subject faculty, more effective relationships and, ultimately, an increased perception of value. Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk suggest this potential for alignment when they wrote that librarians can “become active partners with faculty in the educational process and in scholarly communication.”³ Even if the professional practices are not equivalent, we could communicate our work in their terms in order to foster more effective communication with faculty colleagues.

After reviewing the informal faculty interview material, we gathered feedback from a few library professionals to determine their perspectives of the service-alignment challenge. Part of Hesburgh Library’s strategic plan is to ensure librarians are meeting the needs of the faculty. The librarians themselves hope to identify what is important to the teachers and researchers and offer innovative services to refresh well-established relationships or to make connections with new faculty or departments. They want the knowledge and expertise that matters to their faculty colleagues, and they want to be able to effectively demonstrate that they possess it. One librarian candidly said, “I’m sometimes hesitant to engage with faculty in their areas of research because I’m concerned that my limited knowledge in my liaison areas, when compared to the expertise of the teaching faculty, will reflect poorly on the library.” Rather than being grounded first in his own professional domain, he seems to feel he should identify with the do-

mains of his faculty colleagues; this, understandably, causes discomfort.

Overall, the librarians expressed concern because their practice must be re-defined in a rapidly changing environment, and it is too easy to default to the roles with which they are most familiar or comfortable. If they operate too much within this comfort zone, they might not be stretching far enough to meet the needs and raise the expectations of their patrons. They also believe that if they do not align with their users, it could impact what they are able to do by limiting the resources currently available to them. Like the profession as a whole, librarians at Notre Dame understand that there is an opportunity to change how they are perceived by faculty and administrators. Gilman and Kunkel write, “As the academic library’s role as collector/provider of resources faces growing challenges from the explosion of openly available content online ... it is vital for libraries to expand our role, both in our patrons’ minds and in reality.”⁴ Within these roles, effective faculty/librarian collaboration is vital for librarians to remain positioned as integral components of an academic institution. However, one outcome of the exciting challenges of our digital age is that librarians must defend this position. “Today, major paradigm shifts in the delivery of information are the driving force behind the changing roles and responsibilities of academic librarians,” write Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk.⁵ The library profession itself is at risk if we cannot move beyond the guardian-of-the-book identity.

Literature Review: Communities of Practice

This sense of urgency about our professional relevance increased as our initial project seemed to fail. However, when we began to examine the misalignment between what we hoped to offer subject faculty and what they actually needed, and investigated tools librarians can use to improve relevance and change perceptions, we rediscovered the communities of practice (CoP) model. CoPs are formulations of socialized learning. They are knowledge communities that occur and develop naturally. Research scientist Etienne Wenger and social anthropologist Jean



Lave named them and suggested that by harnessing their potential, CoPs could be formalized within organizations to facilitate innovation, support best practices and promote personal and professional development for individual members.⁶ According to Wenger, “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”⁷ This form of group-making is not new. Communities socialized knowledge long before the term CoP was used. The fact that they exist as a natural structure for people who wish to share and collaborate using knowledge as a commodity to achieve a common purpose, makes them even more potent as a deliberate management tool. There are three elements of a community of practice: domain, community and practice.

- A domain is a “specific area of expertise that members share....
- [a community is the] set of people who interact with one another, who engage with one another, who talk with one another, who think together and develop relationships with one another in the process....
- [a practice incorporates] ways of dealing with the problems typical of their domain – that is developed over time.”⁸

These elements must be present for a group to function as a CoP. Wenger writes that a CoP is “cultivated” through development of domain, community and practice in parallel.⁹ The intentionality of this kind of knowledge management extends them beyond an informal meeting of friends or other network formulations. The group must be identified through the shared domain. Wenger writes:

The first characteristic of practice as the source of coherence of a community is the mutual engagement of participants. Practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another.... Practice resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do. Membership in a community of

practice is therefore a matter of mutual engagement. That is what defines the community.¹⁰

The group could be a community of plumbers working out solutions to problems or a gathering of new library professionals helping each other cope with their institution’s governance policies. The group could be a local community, interacting face to face, or online. Most frequently, the group would not even know to call itself a community of practice.¹¹

Wenger and Lave’s interpretation of the social theory of learning has generated both scholarly interest as well as many instances of successful practical application. Communities of practice have been used in business and academic settings to facilitate knowledge management, to drive innovation and collaboration, and to support growth in rapidly changing professional environments. Wenger and Snyder write that these CoPs can “drive strategy, generate new lines of business, solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, develop people’s professional skills and help companies recruit and retain talent.”¹² The idea appealed to many organizations, and CoPs began to be incorporated into well-established management cultures. However, universities and academic libraries have been slower to adopt the model even though they appear to be a natural fit for research and learning environments. “Only recently have universities, mostly in the United Kingdom and Australia, incorporated communities of practice as potential tools for encouraging research collaboration among faculty,” write Henrich and Attebury.¹³ In fact, Wenger himself has discussed CoPs as potential tools for the academy and within libraries.¹⁴ Jeff De Cagna speaks with Wenger about the concept from the perspective of an information professional. We decided Wenger’s definition from this perspective is particularly relevant for our purpose. He says CoPs are “a group of practitioners who have taken on the responsibility of managing knowledge in their domain. This responsibility entails not only sharing knowledge, but also creating knowledge, and scanning the environment to see what new technologies or methods may be on the horizon. It may also mean intro-

ducing newcomers to this knowledge domain, as it exists within a given organization.”¹⁵ When we considered the traditional academic model, where expertise is shared or developed within a group with a common research interest, the applicability became apparent. However, in academic libraries where the traditional academic research model is less established or not intentionally practiced, CoPs might be less effective than they could be for the library professionals who belong to them.

One helpful way to avoid the notion that communities of practice are just another management fad inherited from the business world is to see them in action. We will begin by describing a group that looks like a CoP but is not. Then will follow an interesting example of a community that functions much like a CoP without deliberately doing so. It is important because it shows a group that could easily transition to a CoP, through a slight adjustment of intention, because most of the elements are already in place. Finally, we will discuss a successful CoP in an academic library.

Our first example is a small, local committee. Each year three community organizations form this committee to organize the annual La Porte Santa Parade in La Porte, Indiana. The group meets once a week for five months. Members are a diverse group of professionals who use their individual resources and network connections to organize the event. Membership in the committee is voluntary, and each person is expected to contribute equally although meetings do have an agenda set by a chairperson. The group gathers to complete their task (the downtown parade) then disperses until the next year. The La Porte Santa Parade is not a CoP because it functions more as a team. As Wenger suggests, a team is defined by a particular task, and a task is different than a domain. Unlike a team, a “community of practice is defined by an interest in a shared domain, so what brings people together is the interdependency of their knowledge, not the interdependency of specific tasks on which they are working.”¹⁶ The La Porte Santa Parade committee is a good example of a group that looks similar to a CoP, but is not formulated with the three elements, domain,

community and practice. Instead, the committee derives its identity from the task that defines its purpose.

Our next example has many of the qualities of a community of practice although the similarities are not intentional; rather, true to the nature of CoPs, the group has organically moved in this direction. The 100 Year Starship Study Public Symposium began with a strategic planning workshop in January, 2011.¹⁷ The purpose of the workshop was to gather interested experts to discuss how they would “develop a sustainable model for persistent, long-term, private-sector investment into the myriad of disciplines needed to make long-distance space travel viable.”¹⁸ The project received seed funding from NASA’s Ames Research Center and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). The first outcome of the workshop was the 100 Year Starship Study Public Symposium which took place September 30 through October 2, 2011 in Orlando, Florida. The symposium was divided into tracks such as Time-Distance Solutions, Biology and Space Medicine, and Destinations. Each track had a chairperson, men and women who are experts in their fields. Symposium participants were scientists and technology experts. They presented papers and participated in discussion panels within the tracks led by the chairs. The goal of the groups was to come up with solutions for problems associated with space travel. In this sense, it functioned differently than most academic symposiums. Participants had a set purpose, an end goal, and each expert gathered to collectively work out how to overcome a tough obstacle.

The workshop and symposium is an example of a nascent community of practice in action. Participants shared expertise (or domain), community and practice. They joined the CoP voluntarily. The information was presented as the work of a collective body. They were more than a community of interest because they operated out of a practice, one with established methods for managing problems within a domain. The 100 Year Starship participants were not just an informal network of relationships among people, another way to define a group; instead they were organized by “a core of participants whose

passion for the topic energiz[ed] the community and who provide[d] intellectual and social leadership.”¹⁹ It could be argued that the group should be described as a team because they gathered to serve a task, long-distance space travel. In theory, once this goal is achieved, the group will cease its work. In this case, however, the end goal works more as a driving force. The collaboration and innovation resulting from this organizing purpose should lead to significant scientific and technological innovations. According to the workshop agenda, the latter are of the highest importance to the project funders. In this sense, the “task” becomes subordinate to the knowledge sharing. Finally, the collaboration within the Starship group did not end at the close of the symposium. As evidenced by the yearly public symposiums, members continue to work together, both virtually and face to face, in order to achieve the desired outcomes established by the CoP.²⁰

The Promise of Communities of Practice in Academic Libraries

We recognize that a statement about the need for academic librarians to assert their relevance and entrench their institutional value with an identity beyond that of master-of-the-efficient-book-transaction is not new; certainly, a proposal that suggests the library profession should improve its perception is not groundbreaking, nor does it go far enough. In 1989, for example, A.J. Anderson writes that an academic librarian and her staff “were regarded as nothing but glorified clerks.... Faculty members were as a rule friendly, but there was always an undercurrent of ... condescension.”²¹ Shen points to a similar disconnect and suggests librarians need to rethink their roles with faculty in order to develop effective partnerships with them. “In the view of some librarians holding Ph.D. degrees with rank and tenure, other university faculty members ... may look down upon librarians.”²² The very fact that this has remained a challenge for so long, even in the midst of vast technological advancement in the delivery of information, indicates the problem goes beyond a reticence about promoting our professional expertise. It suggests we have not done enough to claim our purpose and define our roles within the new

information landscape. If we are still perceived as glorified clerks, it is because our patrons have not been taught to expect more from us. Of course, it is up to library professionals to create this expectation and understanding through promotion of our shared practice. Often, we are unsure about how to formulate this practice within the academy. Richard Pantano asks, “What is the place of the academic librarian in the landscape of higher education?” and “Who decides if librarians are educators and who decides their place in a college or university?”²³ Are we technologists, archivists, overseers of study spaces, book gatherers, helpful research assistants? Sometimes the answer feels like a little bit of everything, and at the same time we understand these do not fully describe what we can or should provide. For science librarians, at least, these roles can often be covered by others such as circulation staff, departmental assistants, graduate students, even research professors.

However, this does not mean the work that results from these roles is not vital for teaching and research. It is just that they do not go far enough to ensure our indispensability to the academy (as much as is possible). They do not fully support what we could offer considering the ongoing advances in the delivery of information. The roles say more about how little our patrons expect from us, rather than what we can actually offer, and this points to a disconnect or misalignment between ourselves and our users. Because we are confused about our purpose, it is quite possible that we are as disconnected from the real needs of our patrons as they are from our capabilities. This uncertainty will prevent us from creating opportunities for collaboration or effective partnerships; misalignment could make us irrelevant.

We believe that a fundamental problem for the profession today is that the changing nature of the information landscape has left librarians as confused about our practice as our patrons. The strain of releasing the traditional service model, while concurrently trying to formulate a new practice for information delivery that accommodates the glut of tools now available, makes the College of Science librarian feel he must know his liaison areas as well as the faculty experts do.



He might even find it easier to identify with them because their professional framework is more clearly defined. The challenge is to unravel the confusion in order to develop effective partnerships with faculty and remain relevant and valuable to the academic enterprise. We should be able to proudly wave a banner: this is who we are, this is what we do! However, this is exactly where we stumble. We cannot work to improve our perception within the academy until we have established a shared practice, our particular approach to the services we are willing and able to offer in consideration of the current information environs. In fact, our research at Notre Dame indicated potentially viable solutions for expanding the role of the librarian in a way that could lead to better partnerships with faculty colleagues, particularly the embedded librarian model. If redefined in terms of CoPs, its efficacy is further supported; it is a sophisticated CoP. However, the collaboration between the three of us led us to an important realization. We can aspire to it, but we cannot fully activate the embedded model until we have established our own CoP. Embedded librarianship will not truly work unless we engage from CoPs with firm boundaries, ones grounded in a deep-sense of professional identity. The danger of embedding is that we do so before having our own CoP. We might become too absorbed within an outside discipline, rather than the ideal – creating “striking points,” or moments of intersection, between our work within the academy and that of our faculty colleagues. Academic librarians should start by establishing a contextual framework for our own professional ‘boundaries,’ our shared purpose, before attempting to create an intersection with the knowledge and experience of others. We propose that clearly defining a shared purpose supports relevance and respect for the library professional because it helps to solidify a shared practice. Effective CoPs within the academy will facilitate the definition of this purpose.

Communities of practice are promising for librarians because they can be used to invigorate a sense of belonging, the foundation of a shared purpose. They can deepen knowledge, facilitate collaboration, and develop professional identity, as outlined by Andrew, Ferguson, et al.²⁴ Some

librarians seem to feel their own communities are complacent, tired or disengaged. The good news is there is no obstacle to forming a CoP within a library. One example of this occurred at the University of Idaho.²⁵ Librarians there formed a group to help new faculty achieve promotion and tenure. Membership in the group was voluntary and limited to library faculty. Together, the group decided the desired outcome of their formation would be collaboration, publication, research and development of relationships among faculty members. They also drafted a charter and signed a group agreement that stated members would abide by a code of confidentiality and professional courtesy. They met once a month during the academic year, and meetings were structured. The first half of the meeting was devoted to presentations by members about research or research-in-process. During the second half of the one hour gathering, the group held informal conversations about the presentations, including feedback to support the research interests of their colleagues, as well as discussions about other ideas or topics of interest. The University of Idaho library group had the three elements – domain, community and practice – necessary to make it a CoP. It was limited to library faculty, so members shared a domain. The CoP was formed by volunteers who shared regular interaction and collaboration, including a group agreement with defined goals. The discussions and input about individual research and other topics related to their shared practice indicate the presence of the third element. Ultimately, the librarians found the CoP beneficial. Henrich and Attebury write “a CoP can bring together librarians from diverse positions such as digital initiatives, cataloging, or public services and raise awareness of how current ideas, projects, and research related to each serve the larger organization....This collaboration itself can lead to idea creation, innovation, and project success.”²⁶ In fact, Henrich and Attebury’s article about their experience was one outcome of the University of Idaho Library’s CoP, an example of “idea creation, innovation and project success” in action.

The University of Idaho example illustrates how librarians can work with their peers, to challenge them, to raise the bar. This may not be



comfortable. Informal CoPs are driven by collaboration. For successful research and collaboration efforts, CoP for academic librarians must be 'mature'; they must have both wisdom and energy. The first step would be finding 'mature' librarians within the institution. Here, mature does not refer to age or time spent in the profession. Rather, the group would be well-served by those who are still energized by their work and who participate in discourse, through debate, scholarship or interest about broader issues regarding the profession. "These learning communities [CoPs] are truly organic, energized primarily by a generative blend of individual identity and shared passion," writes De Cagna.²⁷ Once formed, the group would need to engage with material about CoPs so each member could understand the potential purpose and function of such a CoP. As suggested, this purpose and function should ultimately be defined through the results of group collaboration. This determines the 'boundary' of the group. The initial drive for formation might be to discover professional identity, as librarians or as members of a particular institution or discipline.

However, the group itself should focus on this general, initial purpose. They might construct a value statement, rules of engagement ("nothing will be discussed outside of the CoP unless we agree to," for example) or stated objectives. It might be important to include measures of success as well as a definition of success itself. The CoP should meet regularly. The members might also want to contact a knowledge management consultant to provide advice on the CoP formulation; the expert advice could improve sustainability.

There would be other outcomes as well.

Through working within these CoP frameworks, academic librarians would be employing a helpful tool for connecting with faculty. "We're fortunate that there's a growing awareness of how community interaction and research are entwined into communities of practice," writes Huwe. "The timing is right to enter these communities as peers and to put our skills to work for [faculty]."²⁸ The flow of knowledge would not go in one direction, from the faculty to the librarians; the librarians would need to formulate and communicate their own professional understanding for the practice to be a true

community experience. Therefore, those of us who struggle to do this, in large part because we do not have a rooted sense of professional identity or really know how this identity functions within the institutions we inhabit, will be encouraged to explore who we are and what we can do in order to be fully participating members of the community. Andrew, Ferguson et al. indicate the value of Wenger's constructivist view of learning, "where meaningful experience is set in the context of personal development... [and whose] result is an integrated approach to learning, achieved through a combination of social engagement and collaborative working in an authentic practice environment."²⁹ This meaningful experience occurs because CoPs are "grounded in the deep interest of their members, encouraging them to share personal histories and journeys, weaving a narrative to contextualize professional and practice development... CoPs learn through the act of social participation."³⁰ As we have suggested, the challenge is not to form CoPs with faculty until we have developed our own.

Once the shared purpose and practice is identified, communities of practice can facilitate collaboration between librarians and faculty and develop partnerships that will increase understanding, create meaningful connections and improve perception. CoPs build a kind of professional empathy, and this empathetic understanding is the essence of alignment. Henrich and Attebury write:

The extraordinary amount of attention given to CoPs in business and education suggests that in spite of some challenges, they overwhelmingly provide useful benefits to the organizations in which they exist. Both a goal and an outcome of CoPs, improved communication provides tangible advantages to organizational efficiency. In corporations this may take the form of coordinated efforts among various divisions and departments, while in higher education this could easily result in the interdisciplinary collaboration that is so prized at universities and colleges today.³¹



Academic librarians who engage in this social participation with their faculty colleagues could gain the knowledge, or at least the working discourse, necessary to have the kind of discipline-specific communications desired by our colleague who was hesitant to engage with the specialists because he worried about embarrassing the library. Librarians would have a better sense of the projects to tackle; efforts truly relevant to the needs of their departments. When the relevant work is under development, the increased sense of professional identity would help librarians promote their projects and ultimately improve both their reputations and institutional value.

Criticisms and Challenges

Librarians who choose to form a community of practice must also recognize their limitations and challenges. Roberts reviews the literature describing limitations of CoPs and adds a few of her own. These include different degrees of power within the CoP, issues of trust, member preferences and predispositions, size and spatial reach, cultural lack of sense of community, and the pace of change (leading to “fast vs. slow” CoPs).³² Nagy and Burch discuss challenges faced in particular by academic institutions, especially a level of autonomy not present in most business environments. “Academic autonomy essentially involves self-directed practice with vague organizational connection and resourcing We believe that the context of academe requires appreciation of pressure and forces that may impede the effectiveness of [CoPs]....”³³ In our experience, academic librarians are nearly as autonomous as other academics.

We discussed a few other challenges among ourselves while considering how a CoP might be implemented in the Hesburgh Libraries at Notre Dame. A significant challenge is assessing the success of a CoP: it requires some finesse and flexibility. The librarians at the University of Idaho, who used CoPs to facilitate institutional integration of new library faculty, took informal measures to gain an understanding of how the new program served the group. Assessment also requires context, and the latter must be established at the start of the new initiative. Wenger advises setting strategic context that “lets com-

munities [CoPs] find a legitimate place in the organization” by articulating “a strategic value proposition” and “a need to leverage knowledge” and identifying “critical business problems.”³⁴ The University of Idaho librarians created planning documents that established what would be measured at the end of a predetermined length of time. It also helped them to determine how the results would be measured; in their case, a preliminary survey was administered. Henrich and Attebury write, “The planning documents for the group included a plan for evaluation, noting that a brief, informal survey of the larger group would be distributed at the end of the first academic year. This brief survey was intended to get a sense of the attitudes of senior faculty members about the utility and practicality of the group with regards to their own personal and organizational goals.”³⁵ The feedback proved to be very useful for developing and refining the CoPs. They made some changes and this need for flexibility was expected at the outset; in fact, it was built into the strategic context. The charter document for the group stated, for example, “This is a working document and a working group structure and is subject to change.”³⁶

Pilot Project

At the conclusion of the directed research, we presented our findings on communities of practice to colleagues within the Hesburgh Libraries. A small group of us, the science and engineering (STEM) librarians, decided to test the concept on ourselves. The group consists of the two science librarians co-authoring this paper, plus our engineering librarian. We had been working together as branch librarians for nearly twelve years, but we did not share a sense of professional identity, what it means to be a science/engineering librarian. We resolved to meet once a week to discuss common concerns. We also agreed that it would be a good idea to visit together other science, engineering, and medical libraries, so we submitted a proposal for funding for these visits to the library administration. Following the annual Special Libraries Association conference in Chicago, we visited four such libraries and found that the joint experience in and of itself deepened our sense of community.

For example, when we asked our colleagues about the value of a traditional reference desk, we found that we learned as much from the conversation among ourselves (where we agreed and where we differed) as we did from the libraries we visited. Shortly after the visits, however, the Hesburgh Libraries were re-organized, and our responsibilities, largely unchanged in the past decade, changed significantly. This challenge for our CoP was exacerbated by our lack of formalization. We had not written objectives, discussed measures of success, enlisted institutional support, or found a mentor or guide for its successful implementation. The re-organization and lack of formalization have not caused us to abandon our CoP – we still meet almost every week and plan to renew our commitment to its success. The focus, though, has drifted away from building a shared professional identity to managing day-to-day tasks. We are becoming more like the La Porte Santa Parade group and less like the Starship symposium CoP. Our experience thus highlights another limitation or challenge. Important goals, like improving our perception among faculty by deepening the understanding of our professional identity, can give way to more urgent considerations, like who is my supervisor and what does she want me to do.

Conclusion

Communities of practice have been successfully employed across many professional environments. They are a promising tool for expanding the knowledge base of library professionals and facilitating cross-professional communication and collaboration. CoPs could also help librarians develop and maintain a professional identity, a vital foundation for improving perception within the academy. After all, if we do not know who we are and what we can do, we will not be able to convey our value to faculty colleagues or administrators. The goal is not only to root our professional practice within the institution in such a way that we become an integral part of its performance, it is also to build a better understanding of our work by aligning it to how we are perceived by others. We cannot survive if we are perceived as glorified clerks. If we do not change this, our positions will become redun-

dant. However, the onus is on us. Our colleagues will learn the value of our professional knowledge and experience when we show them how to value it. It might be tempting to think about marketing strategies here, but marketing sometimes gives the wrong impression. The problem of perception must go beyond brochures and cheerleading in faculty meetings. By defining a shared purpose and developing a vehicle for good communication, we can move beyond the canned self-promotion. Yes, in some cases we must redefine, even defend, our purpose. However, there is a way to convey our *raison d'être*. We can build solid, mutually beneficial relationships with our patrons and allow these connections to occur within the intersections of a shared practice. This is why we believe the communities of practice model warrants further research. It is a promising tool for facilitating alignment and revealing the intrinsic value of the library professional within the academy.

Endnotes

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⁸ J. De Cagna, "Tending the Garden of Knowledge: A Look at Communities of Practice with Etienne Wenger," *Information Outlook*, 5, no. 7 (2001): 6-12, 7.

⁹ Wenger, "Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction."

¹⁰ Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 73.

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¹³ Kristin J. Henrich and Ramirose Attebury, "Communities of Practice at an Academic Library: A New Approach to Mentoring at the University of Idaho," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36, no. 2 (2010): 158-65, 161.

¹⁴ De Cagna, "Tending the Garden of Knowledge", 6-12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

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²⁶ Henrich and Attebury, "Communities of Practice at an Academic Library: A New Approach to Mentoring at the University of Idaho," 161.

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²⁹ Andrew, Ferguson et al., "Developing Professional Identity in Nursing Academics: The

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³⁰ Ibid.

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³² Joanne Roberts, "Limits to Communities of Practice," *Journal of Management Studies* 43, no. 3 (2006), 623-639.

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³⁵ Henrich and Attebury, "Communities of Practice at an Academic Library: A New Approach to Mentoring at the University of Idaho," 164.

³⁶ Ibid.