10-21-2020

What Collaboration Means to Me: Centering Values to Foster a More Diverse, Inclusive, and Equitable Knowledge Ecosystem

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From the Field

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"*Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.*" - Clifford Geertz[1]

Collaboration provides the foundation for any advancement we make as a profession. Social learning is predicated upon it, and we collaborate continuously and instinctively. Yet the very ubiquity of collaboration in our profession means that too often collaborations go unremarked, taken for granted, and unnoticed. In this regard, Clifford Geertz's observations on culture can also be said of collaboration: we find ourselves as a profession suspended – often without sufficient awareness and attention – in webs of collaborations that we ourselves have spun. In this way, collaboration presents risk as well as opportunity. The risk is the degree to which unexamined collaboration structures perpetuate bias and iniquity in our profession. The opportunity is that, having spun ourselves the webs of collaboration that suspend us, we can refashion them to better align with our core values, and in particular our values of diversity, inclusivity, and equity. By foregrounding diversity, inclusion, and equity in the ways we collaborate – particularly our routine collaborations that might otherwise go unremarked, we can advance DEI values in ways that go beyond the episodic, and are sustained, quotidian, and impactful. Here I will discuss this both in the context of organizational culture, as well as in the way we approach collaboration with partners external to our local organizations.

Organizational Culture and Collaboration

Over the past year, we at CRL have been intentionally foregrounding diversity, inclusion, and equity in all aspects of our organization. Although much attention could be spent on discussing collections and library services, here I want to highlight what we are doing in terms of organizational culture and team building. We aim to intentionally implement inclusive norms for collaboration throughout our organization, from the way we hire and onboard staff, to how managers and direct reports organize their 1:1 meetings to create robust, two-way feedback loops, right down to the ways we design and decorate communal spaces in the CRL facility. Our approach is inspired by the learning organization principles outlined in Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*,[2] in addition to the great deal I have learned from working with DeEtta Jones and her team (https://www.deettajones.com).

One important way we are intentionally creating a culture of inclusivity is in how we are designing the way our standing committees and task forces work. For example, what follows is the list of team norms taken directly from the charge of the standing CRL Leadership Team:

- **Team First:** Although CRL Leadership Team members represent different departments, teams, and functional areas, we bring the perspectives of our local teams and functional areas in order to increase the collective intelligence and effectiveness of the CRL Leadership Team.

- **A Team Not a Meeting:** The CRL Leadership Team norms, expectations, and team-based approach to work extend well beyond our formal team meetings. The CRL Leadership Team is a team we build and foster together, not a meeting we all happen to attend.

- **All Voices Count, Silence Means Dissent:** It is the expectation that all members will actively participate in the team's work and hold each other accountable for the team's success. If team members are silent or non-participatory, we will assume that the silent party has a dissenting viewpoint to share and we will actively make a space for it.

- **Balance Advocacy and Inquiry:** When participating in discussions, we should spend as much time working to understand the points of views of others – especially when these views are unfamiliar or positions we might disagree with – as we do to advocate for our own positions. We seek to understand each other as much we seek to be understood by each other.

- **Welcome Productive Tension:** Honest disagreement on substantive issues is not only to be expected, it is to be welcomed. Productive tensions raise the collective intelligence of the entire team. When disagreement arises, see it as a gift – an opportunity to learn from another team member's point of view and benefit from another team member's set of experiences. If the team falls quickly into consensus while discussing challenging topics, we will open a space for generating counterpoints to get countervailing thoughts on the table.

- **Dissent and Commit:** The team welcomes robust debate, particularly on difficult issues on which reasonable, expert options vary. But once the team commits to a decision, the team acts as one to support and advance it.

- **Assume Good Intent**: To quote Indra Nooyi: "Whatever anybody says or does, assume positive intent. You will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different."[3]

Committee members regularly spend time discussing these norms. We discuss them when new members join the team. We reference the norms throughout day-to-day work. We adjust them over time. They have assumed the power of routine. The point is that we intentionally establish norms to make space for divergent views, encourage debate and disagreement, and, ultimately, decide on courses of action that the team commits to and supports as a team. Three points here are worth noting. First, although these norms intentionally foreground values of diversity, inclusivity, equity, and belonging, they also emphasize team effectiveness, organizational mission, and results. Second, we are a mission driven organization, and we bring DEI values into our organization not simply because

we believe it is the right thing to do in terms of professional ethics, we do it because it makes us a smarter organization, committed to mutual learning, innovation, and team effectiveness. Finally, the final norm – "assume good intent" – has been powerful and well-received. Though it goes without saying that good intent hardly makes up for harmful impacts, intent matters. We find that assuming good intent as an organizational norm fosters trust and sets the stage for continued learning and growth.

External Collaboration: Incentives and Values

Collaborations above and beyond the level of the local organization are also continuous and routinized to the point of often passing unremarked. Here again, there is risk as well as opportunity. The risk is that when they become routine, our external collaborations can become spaces where underlying incentives become hidden and inherent bias takes root. The opportunity is that by bringing heightened mindfulness to the incentive structures underlying external collaborations, we can see more clearly how we might better collaborate, with whom, and under what circumstances. Upon reflection, collaborations that might appear at first as natural and desirable might be seen to be neither; and collaborations once thought to be unlikely and difficult might reveal themselves to not only be possible, but necessary. What is often needed is a stronger appreciation for the role of values and incentive structures that lay at the foundation of all collaborations.

For-Profit/Non-Profit:

Arguably the most fundamental and conspicuous differentiating factor between organizations – manifested not only at the level of incentives, but often also at the level of culture – is the relative degree to which an organization prioritizes the role of profit. The familiar shorthand, that nonprofit organizations prioritize mission, while for-profit organizations prioritize profit, can become unhelpful caricature. Yet the shorthand does capture something as basic as it is important. Commercial entities *are* ultimately accountable to generating profit; a for-profit company unable to generate profit, regardless of what good it might otherwise accomplish, is by definition a failing concern. By contrast, nonprofit organizations are ultimately accountable to advancing their missions. A nonprofit organization failing to advance its mission, even if it is generating great profit, cannot reasonably claim to be a success.

Commercial organizations intersect with and empower the work of research libraries at nearly every level of operations – yet an area that at times generates confusion, even at times frustration, is in the collaborations between research libraries and commercial publishers of scholarly content. I will sidestep here the large and complex topic of Open Access. My topic here is the importance of surfacing root incentive structures and using these incentive structures as guides for exploring what might and what might not be possible in terms of collaboration between research libraries and commercial publishers. It is important to note that at the level of mission – to create and disseminate scholarship for the widest possible audience and impact – there is substantial overlap between research libraries and commercial publishers. In this mission overlap, research libraries and commercial publishers should and must look for ways to make common cause and advance their areas of mutual concern.

However, the baseline incommensurability in incentive structures on the topic of profit-seeking will often make finding common ground and deep partnership impossible between research libraries and commercial entities. This is natural and to be expected. Often the most we can and should expect in terms of collaboration with commercial entities is an efficient negotiation process in which research libraries license

content on the best terms we can negotiate that align with our values of openness and access, realizing that what we are able to achieve within the current structure will likely fall short of our aspirations.

Nonprofit/Nonprofit:

The divide between non-profit and for-profit organizations is important, but it can hide as much as it reveals. "Nonprofit" is a tax status, and reveals little about the business model of an organization, its staff compensation and incentive structures, or its organizational culture. Within the non-profit space, a useful division can be made between nonprofit organizations with a vendor business model, on the one hand, and nonprofit organizations with a co-op, membership model, on the other. This difference can be profound, manifesting at the level of organizational culture, internal incentive structures, and an organization's ability to collaborate with external partners. Non-profit organizations with a vendor business model have incentives similar to those of for-profit organizations, and can act in ways that are hard to distinguish from for-profit organizations. This can have benefits, of course, but it can also lead to confusion among research libraries that wonder why a non-profit organization looks and feels so like a vendor.

The fact that there exist vendor models within the nonprofit ecosystem can be confusing, but there are ways to mindfully navigate this landscape in ways that highlight where there are opportunities for, or blockers to, collaboration. By-laws for organizations, often readily available online, can make clear how non-profit organizations are governed. Also important is the annual IRS Form 990 which nonprofits file, available through ProPublica's online Nonprofit Explorer. IRS Form 990 contains information regarding officer compensation, incentive bonuses in the compensation structure, and whether service on the board of directors is voluntary or compen-

sated. This information is critical for understanding an organization, and can make more visible the underlying incentives and structures at work when collaborating with a particular non-profit organization. The point here is that research librarians can and should give as much time and attention to thinking about whether, when, and how to collaborate with nonprofit organizations as they do with for-profit organizations, as the non-profit status alone reveals little about an organization's business model, incentive structure, and culture.

Opportunities for collaboration between research libraries and vendors, whether commercial or nonprofit, have been and should remain robust; and research libraries should maintain an open posture to collaboration. However, we should be mindful of the differing incentive structures at work in vendor organizations and mission driven organizations, particularly as we foreground values of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the work of research libraries. At the end of the day, wide swaths of the academic knowledge ecosystem – including a very great deal of the work of research libraries – is not conducive to market logic and profit-seeking incentive structures. This is as true for Open Science and big data as it is for preservation and cultural heritage. Creating a diverse, inclusive, and equitable knowledge ecosystem – one that foregrounds DEI principles not only in what we do, but how we do it – requires a values-led approach to work, values-led resource allocation, and values-led collaboration.

I began by noting that collaboration is everything – the very foundation for progress we make as a profession. Our collaborations are constant and routine, and as a result they can go unnoted and unremarked. In this space there is both risk and opportunity. We can exist suspended in the webs of our collaborations, or we can see refashioning our collaborations and the way we collaborate as opportunities to advance professional values, and the values of diversity,

equity and inclusion in particular. To my mind, making visible the incentives on which collaborations are based, and the values which they advance, is crucial to building the research library

profession and the knowledge ecosystem we want, for the benefit of all.

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[1] Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

[2] Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York, Crown Publishing Group, 2006.

[3] Nooyi, Indra, "The Best Advice I Ever Got," *Fortune*, last modified April 30, 2008, https://archive.fortune.com/galleries/2008/fortune/0804/gallery.bestadvice.fortune/7.html