Collaboration and ETDs
Institutional and International Strategies

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Abstract

Electronic thesis and dissertation projects offer many opportunities for collaboration, both within the university and among universities. Collaboration requires the development of shared goals and shared meaning, an infusion of resources by each party, a respect for the contribution of each community's skills and perspectives, and an attention to process. Within the university, many parties are required for a successful ETD collaboration, such as academic administrators, faculty advisors, students, librarians, information technologists, and others. The Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) community also offers many opportunities for collaboration as a whole or by regional or country sectors. In addition, collaborations between NDLTD and other groups working on digital library initiatives in areas ranging from adoption of standards to best practices for digital preservation would leverage the content and expertise of the NDLTD members in valuable ways.

Introduction

The Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) offers many opportunities for collaboration both among its members and in the broader digital library community. On the institutional level, most electronic thesis and dissertation (ETD) projects require collaboration among a variety of groups: academic administrators, faculty advisors, students, librarians, information technologists, and others. ETD projects have growing in many universities around the world, but they are still not formally accepted in many institutions. While in earlier years this might have been attributed to problems with or concerns about digital technology, at this point in time, social and organizational issues within institutions have likely slowed progress in many institutions that have yet to adopt an ETD policy. In some cases, the difficulties of collaborating among campus units and groups could be the cause for the hesitancy to adopt ETDs in a university. Understanding better the difficulties of collaboration and some factors that can lead to a successful collaborative process may assist institutions in successfully developing ETD programs. In addition, collaboration among NDLTD institutions may benefit from a more in-depth understanding of collaboration.

Collaboration and the Digital Environment

Frequently the term collaboration is used to denote any individuals or groups who are working together on a project or initiative. However, in the management literature of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, researchers have attempted to define more clearly the characteristics of successful collaboration as compared to other types of working together. Often they use the terms "collaboration" and "partnership" interchangeably. Michael Schrage in his *book Shared Minds*, believes that collaboration is a "different quality of interaction" from cooperation or other types of working together. Collaborations involve "… people who realize that they can't do it all by themselves. They need insights, comments, questions, and ideas from others. They accept and respect the fact that other perspectives can add value to their own." Another author (Henderson, 1990) describes features of relationships he describes as partnerships: a long-term commitment between partners, a sense of mutual cooperation, shared risks and benefits, and participatory decision making.

The range of skills required to develop content and services in the digital environment have been the impetus for collaborative projects in many areas. For example, opportunities for collaboration in the digital environment include:

- Development of digital course content
- Development of digital library resources, e.g. historical image collection; e-journals
- Delivery of services to users such as training of individualized help
- Development of institutional policies on intellectual property, security, and privacy

Often such projects and services benefit from the expertise of more than one professional group and from the perspectives and resources of a variety of units on campus.

In conversation, the words "partnership" and "collaboration" often are used to describe relationships that are more appropriately described as "exchange" relationships, such as the relationship between a buyer and seller (Kanter, 1994). For example, the graduate school might

describe a relationship where the campus library manages the cataloging and maintenance of dissertations and theses for the university as a collaboration, when in fact it is an "exchange" relationship. In an exchange relationship, one party gives resources, such as money or equipment, to another party to accomplish a set of objectives. The party pays the implementer to carry out the project according to the goals of buyer of services. The seller of services may advise on strategies and options, but the buyer of services makes decisions based on its own mission and goals.

In contrast, in a genuine partnership or collaboration, the parties must develop shared goals. They need to have a common vision of the end point of their project or of the shape and dimensions of what they are developing. To arrive at that point, they need to develop a shared vocabulary, so that their communication is not compromised by misunderstandings due to jargon that is used differently in separate professional fields.

As an example, let's suppose that the university administration has determined that they will have an ETD program at their institution and asks a committee of administrators, faculty, librarians, and information technologists to implement policies and procedures. As the committee begins its work, tensions arise between factions. Some administrators press for a quick implementation of an ETD program, advising that students' theses be scanned to quickly develop a large number of ETDs without the time and effort of training students to create and submit their own ETDs. The faculty and librarians on the committee press for time to adopt software for ingest of ETDs and to develop a local training program for students. Neither understands why the other favors its strategy and mistrust develops among factions. In actuality, the dissension can be traced to differing underlying assumptions about the project, which have never been openly discussed by the committee members. They have all assumed that they have a shared goal - develop an ETD program for the university - without genuinely examining what that means to the various parties. In this hypothetical case, the underlying goal of the administrators is to increase the visibility of their university by showcasing the products of their departments and students via the Internet. Therefore, they favor a strategy that will result in the largest number of ETDs on the net in the shortest amount of time. In the other hypothetical camp, the faculty and librarians have an underlying goal of developing graduate students as future authors in the digital environment. They believe that educating students to understand the technical, economic, and policy issues related to scholarship in the digital environment achieves important educational goals. The point here is not to determine which group has a better perspective on the rationale for an ETD project; rather, the key is that groups need to have clear discussions of the goals of their project in order to develop consensus and shared meaning or difficulties are bound to arise.

In addition to developing shared meaning, the parties involved in successful collaborations:
• Contribute resources to the initiative
• Develop shared vocabulary
• Acknowledge the contribution of each sector and each participant's skills
• Develop a clear working process
• Develop group as well as individual accountability (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993)

The digital information environment in general and ETD programs specifically offer many opportunities and incentives for collaboration; however, there are barriers to collaboration in any setting (Bernbom et. al., 1999). For institutions working on an ETD project, there is a common environment for all sectors, e.g. the university. The university offers individuals and departments with a broad range of expertise and skills. However, while individuals may work in the common environment of a university, their professional backgrounds and departmental affiliations may lead to a different sense of mission and different priorities. Also, while a range of skills may be critical to the success of an ETD project, different professional specialties often have different organizational values and procedural styles, which can inhibit collaboration. The collaborative group needs to develop mutual respect for the contributions of each unit (Kanter, 1994; Katzenbach and Smith, 1993). In the university environment, where the status of various groups compared to others may impede the ease of development of mutual respect, this is especially critical for successful collaboration. As Kiesler (1994) points out, collaborations across units can be particularly difficult. They "… rel(y) more than other kinds of interaction on trust and a sense of common purpose. If collaboration is to be carried out across organizational, social, and/or geographical boundaries, those boundaries can impede the development of trust."

Collaboration is a means of leveraging resources of several campus units. One organization may contribute computer or network capabilities, another unit may contribute staff time, etc. However, there can be a real or perceived imbalance in what each unit contributes which can lead to distrust or a feeling that one group holds power over another.

Within universities, a number of groups will need to be involved in ETD collaborations, depending on the goals of the project. Sectors involved may include academic administrators to make policy and provide funding, faculty as both academic policymakers and student advisors, students who create the digital content, information technology specialists who develop a technological infrastructure for the program and assist with training, librarians who develop strategies for housing and maintaining ETDs, and committees with participation from a number of sectors that develop guidelines addressing such issues as access, restrictions on access, acceptable formats, and preservation. In the development of ETD projects, stu-

dents are often an underutilized group. They may provide leadership for ETD projects as they become aware of the benefits of sharing their work via the Internet. They may have wide-ranging contributions to make to ETD policies and procedures on campus as well as contributing content. Leading management expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter writes, "The problem with those who resist learning from the young is that they equate youth with inexperience, and that's a mistake" (Kanter, 2001). In the digital environment she advocates "reverse mentoring" where more senior individuals in an institution learn from those with fresh new knowledge.

Collaboration and NDLTD

NDLTD is entering a new stage as an organization. What might we envision as the role of collaboration in its development? NDLTD is, in itself, a collaboration of individuals representing institutions who believe that scholarship will be enriched by the availability of theses and dissertations on the Internet. The members share a common goal, and I suggest that they develop some explicit strategies for carrying out collaborative projects. My organization, the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) is also a collaborative organization, founded by two computing and one library organizations. Our members come from the higher education, national and state libraries, consortia, publishing, scholarly societies, and government. We have used a strategy for collaborative projects that have addressed such topics as new learning communities, university presses, assessment in the networked environment, and institution-wide information strategy development (see www.cni.org). I suggest that NDLTD may want to consider a similar strategy for at least some of its projects.

The strategy includes these stages:
- Initiate projects through a champion who works with the NDLTD leadership
- Establish the goal and outputs of the project as well as a timeline and criteria for participation
- Send out a call for participation via the network
- Establish a procedure for choosing participating institutions and select among respondents to the call
  - Have an initial face-to-face meeting for participants
  - Focus on developing shared goals
  - Develop a clear process and timeline for the project
- Complete the project work at participating institution's sites
  - Establish communication channels
  - Establish project milestones

- Disseminate results
  - Conclude with in-person event of participants
  - Disseminate a product, such as a report or training materials
  - Hold regional workshops to disseminate information
  - Plan a session for the ETD conference

This process has been used successfully to develop consensus among participants about the nature of the project and the anticipated outcomes. It has provided opportunities for individuals representing various professional spheres to exchange ideas, contribute expertise, resolve misunderstandings about jargon, and clarify what resources each institution will contribute to the project.

While our CNI projects, which have involved primarily North American and European institutions, have benefited from face-to-face meetings at the beginning of a project and often at the end of a project, this might be particularly difficult in international NDLTD projects. It can be quite difficult even to arrange conference calls when participants include individuals from Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, and Australia. New network tools facilitate group interaction and may be employed to good benefit in NDLTD projects. Software for online communities can be useful tools for project communication and wikkis have already been used for communication within NDLTD. If in-person meetings would be useful, the annual ETD conference could be a venue for these project meetings.

There are many potential areas for focused projects related to ETDs. Some were identified in the early years of NDLTD; others were identified through a strategic planning process a year ago. Some projects might be best achieved among NDLTD institutions in general or by country or region. In this category, developing additional training materials and developing more promotional materials would be well-suited for country or regional projects. In addition, a standards group within NDLTD works on identifying and promoting use of standards.

There are a number of potential areas of work that might best be addressed through collaborations between NDLTD and related communities. For example, NDLTD could more formally work with national libraries, library organizations, and standards groups on issues of digital preservation. NDLTD could work on metadata and metadata harvesting issues with such groups as the OAI Metadata Harvesting Initiative, libraries, and library organizations. We could work on promoting ETDs as a key component of institutional repositories with groups such as the Open Knowledge Initiative (OKI), the Fedora project, and others. We can continue to work on fund raising for graduate education and ETD projects with international agencies.

Conclusion

NDLTD has clearly articulated goals and values and this provides a rich context for collaborative work among institutional members. However, with differing SYSTEMs of higher education in member countries, different vocabularies among the groups of professionals involved in NDLTD (information professionals, faculty, academic administrators, librarians, students, and others), and different levels of resources available for ETD projects, the need for attention to the collaborative process is clear. By developing a working style that includes attention to communication, particularly the development of shared goals and shared vocabulary among partners, a respect for the contributions that each party brings to the project, and a clear understanding of the process the group will take to achieve its goal, I believe that many fruitful collaborations will yield benefits for all members of the NDLTD community.

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