

Collaboration: Negotiations in Publishing and Project Management

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Abstract

Librarians have a strong history of engaging in various types of information and knowledge creation activities: from connecting readers to fiction works to assisting researchers – at all levels – to engage with historical works and rare and original materials. For many librarians these efforts take place as co-creation (librarian-client); and facilitated creation (librarian-client). Increasingly these efforts are collaborative creation (librarian-librarian). This paper focuses on librarian-librarian interactions and how such collaborative efforts can be pursued in a way which maximises outcomes for librarians as well as their clients. In particular this paper will explore, through the presentation of two very different case studies, how these librarian-librarian projects can work, with the aim of encouraging library and information professionals to not only work *better* together but to also work *differently*. The first case study looks at traditional academic activities by unpacking experiences of co-editing a collection of essays. The second case study looks at some of the experiences of working with a multi-national group of professionals producing a conference paper and an accompanying article. Both of these case studies will highlight some of the positives of working in a collaborative environment in addition to looking at how to overcome some of the challenges that can arise when working on projects, large and small, in this way. Moreover, these examples will provide frames of reference so that those who have not worked on a collaborative project are able to relate the mechanisms and tools outlined to real-world examples.

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Introduction

Librarians have a strong, and indeed very successful, history of engaging in various types of information and knowledge creation activities. Such activities include the connecting of readers to a wide variety of fictional works, across every conceivable genre and sub-genre, thus helping people to, through fiction, reflect on and re-imagine the world around them. More traditional knowledge creation activities have also seen librarians assist researchers – at all levels (from secondary and tertiary students to professional scholars to those pursuing private research projects) – to engage with historical works covering every culture and every recorded time period as well as rare and original materials generated in all areas of human endeavour.

For many librarians these efforts take place as *co-creation* (librarian-client); and *facilitated creation* (librarian-client). It is important to note here that librarians do not take on a passive role in these interactions, one that is directed entirely by the client, but an active role that sees these information professionals encourage clients and make suggestions that are integral to each research project's success.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how, increasingly, these efforts are *collaborative creation* (librarian-librarian). Indeed, this paper aims to encourage more librarian-librarian interactions through demonstrating how such collaborative efforts can be pursued in a way that maximises outcomes for librarians, personally and professionally, their clients as well as the broader information industry. This will be achieved through the presentation of two very different case studies, both taken from the experiences of the authors, which serve to outline how these librarian-librarian projects can work. It is hoped that these brief examples will encourage library and information professionals to not only work *better* together, in contributing to the body of research surrounding the information services industry, but also encourage librarians to work *differently*. The first case study looks at traditional academic activities by unpacking experiences of co-editing a collection of essays. The second case study looks at some of the experiences of working with a multi-national group of professionals producing a conference paper and an accompanying paper for a set of refereed conference proceedings. Both of these case studies will highlight some of the positives of working in a collaborative environment in addition to looking at how to overcome some of the challenges that can arise when working on projects, large and small, in this way. Moreover, these examples will provide frames of reference so that those who have not had opportunities to work on a collaborative project are able to relate the mechanisms and tools outlined to real-world examples.

Benefits of Collaboration

With collaboration, many people, or at least some people, can achieve more than just one person working alone. This is not simply that more people can do more work (although this is certainly a key factor) it is that the ideas and learning from the process of collaboration, as well as the ideas and learning about what the collaboration is actually about, increases the capacity for achievement. Skills are shared, technologies are tried, more people can take an idea and share it with others – almost like an ever-growing fishing net, as people start from the centre, and work out, and expand, adding more net which can reach out to new areas. Effective collaborations can almost achieve what we term here as a glow of influence: as those involved talk with others and as the results of research, or other type of effort, are subsequently seen.

Collaboration is, primarily, an opportunity to develop and to share ideas. This is where one person suggests something, which triggers an idea in a second person's brain, which leads to a modification in a third and so on. The idea, which started, might be changed along the way but, hopefully, changed into something better and far more amazing. This also is a reality check for someone who may have thought that they had an original idea, only to find that someone else has had it and has already done something exciting with it. This can be a reality check, too, for unhealthy ideas, ones that are destructive and discriminatory. Thinking as a group needs to be done in a way that *expands* the possibilities rather than *contracts* them. For example to start triggering ideas something as simple as placing post-it notes with key words on a wall can work well; posting can be done as individuals with ideas discussed more broadly within the team environment.

Collaboration can work well for large and small projects. Indeed, collaborations can be effective with two people or many more. With more people involved, scalable tools need to be used (some of the tools available are addressed, briefly, below). Similarly, scalable strategies also need to be used, with decision-making processes discussed, so that it does not all come back to one person, unless it really needs to. Too often people think it needs to come back to one person, when in fact, it is about having agreed outcomes, with some discussion around process. Collaboration will not always work well for perfectionists, or for people for whom their way is the only way. This type of work needs people to be open differences, to be able to agree on outcomes, be willing to engage in discussions about process and to work out, early on in a project, how, as people contribute incredible ideas, to make both the outcomes and processes better. It is important to emphasise here the value of discussing processes as this element of collaboration – as people focus on the 'what' instead of the 'how' – is often overlooked. Such discussions do not need to be extensive, yet are critical to an effective outcome especially as "one sort of collaboration isn't automatically 'better' than another; it depends on your purposes" (Krause 2007). Much process is around compromise. For example, saying that collaborations may not work well for a perfectionist does not mean that exceptional work cannot actually be achieved: quite the opposite. What is critical here is the alleged view that perfection is always out of reach. Yet process can assist in articulating when a project is not necessarily perfect but has achieved the set goals of the group. Sometimes this can be as simple as focusing on what is really important. An illustration of this can be seen in the authors' YouTube clip that accompanies this paper: the process of producing the video clip was discussed and, as it was acknowledged that the production would not be perfect, effort was directed at the message. So, while technically not a perfect presentation, the result is a presentation that is closely aligned with the goals of this particular collaborative undertaking.

There are opportunities, across all collaborative projects, to contribute and to lead. It does, however, really need to be *collaboration* rather than a mere *distribution* of tasks. True collaboration is not about saying 'me too' and then expecting other people to do all the work. It is about diverse ideas, skills and actions that converge to contribute to a better and more robust outcome than would have been otherwise possible. This sounds idealistic, but that is part of the point. Collaboration should bring together disparate ideas to provide a better outcome than would have been achieved if the team members of a group had all been acting alone.

Collaboration is also, importantly, an opportunity for mentoring and for being mentored. Different people participating in a collaborative project will have different skills, and as such, will be able to simultaneously learn from and teach other members of the group. All collaborations will not be equal but they can be a way of mentoring people to increase and expand their skills. In addition, people do not always join the collaboration at the same point, some long-term collaborations require new people learning skills from others, and also bringing new skills into the mix. A respect for diverse skills is also important – an approach that is too extreme; a member that believes that they have nothing or everything to contribute is unhelpful. The value of teamwork features in many guides for working together:

Much has been written about the theory of teams and team-building, but ultimately good team-work is a matter of developing good relationships. Research is often long-term, laborious, and full of setbacks so it is important to develop a good personal chemistry.

Collaborative work should be based on respect and equality. Every team member should be valued, from the person at the beginning of their PhD to the professor with a list of publications as long as a bank holiday shopping list. Asymmetrical relationships which value fame and disparage inexperience may damage the cooperative endeavour (Emerald Group Publishing n.d.).

Collaboration can facilitate skill development for the individual. This may be as a part of mentoring, or because different skills are required and so need to be learned ‘on-the-job’ to ensure the completion of a project. This can result from a requirement for new skills to be learned across the group as a whole, or simply new skills for an individual.

Collaboration is not exclusively an altruistic activity. It is widely acknowledged that contributing to a collaborative project can also enable career development for the individual. For example, new skills may lead to career development and opportunities as these open up a range of diverse work opportunities.

This type of working together also allows for the potential for repurposing materials, sharing the outcomes in a variety of ways and highlights the importance of acknowledging everyone’s contributions. It is essential to always acknowledge people’s involvement, and do this in a way that is truthful and genuine. It is important for people to know that the outcome was the result of collaboration. Jennifer Lamberts has written that: “Perhaps the most difficult barriers to effective collaboration [...] are concerns about authorship of results and ownership of ideas or data” (2013). Though writing within the context of scientific research, Lamberts’ assertion is relevant for all fields.

Utilising the example of a sporting team the on-field collaboration is obvious. You can see the players interacting with each other: you witness each person’s contribution to the team. There are, however, many key collaborators behind the scenes such as the coaching squads and support crews. Yes, it is vital that the work is done, and that it is done well, it is just as vital to recognise that everyone has contributed – not necessarily in a highly visible way – and that there is always plenty of room to

acknowledge people's contributions. For many people acknowledgement is one of the main benefits of contributing to a collaborative project. Acknowledging one person does not decrease value of another: it demonstrates that people value the work of their co-collaborators. Giving credit is also incredibly easy: it is claimed here that there is always enough to go around.

Collaboration for Beginners (and for experienced collaborators)

One of the challenges of any project, be it an individual undertaking or a team effort, is the need to balance the workload of the project with existing workloads – both in the workplace and in the home. Most librarians today are required to balance competing demands and priorities including increased duties and responsibilities in a library to a number of other demands with other interests, other projects, personal study, family commitments and carer responsibilities being some of the stronger pulls on a person's time.

For this reason it must be acknowledged that human relationships (even the very long-standing and the very strong) are complicated. This is particularly apparent when working with other people, even if you are working with people that you know well and have worked with before. Sometimes difficulties can be predicted through an awareness of how a certain team member works or through a general appreciation of how group dynamics can change throughout the duration of a project. It is, however, crucial to remember that collaborative projects are transitory. Certainly some projects take longer to deliver upon than others but inherent with every project's start date is a corresponding end date. One of the essential skills of collaborating is developing an understanding of how you work with others and how others work with you. This allows for more informed decision making when offered an opportunity to collaborate. This paper argues for increased levels of collaborative activities but is not suggesting that every librarian needs to accept every opportunity to collaborate. Indeed, sometimes learning to say 'no' is just as important as learning to take a risk and say 'yes'. It also needs to be remembered that if a project is not as fulfilling as imagined you can always say 'no' next time. Saying 'yes' to similar opportunities can also be important as "effective research partnerships are often hard to come by" (Lamberts 2013) and working with the same person, or people, on successive collaborative projects can be very productive as there is a preliminary understanding of how people on the team work thus allowing for focus on the task at hand instead of the relationship building components of collaboration. This can also increase output as "almost all 'real writing' is the product of collaboration" (Krause 2007) and for some working with familiar people and deploying familiar processes in the pursuit of 'real writing' will increase productivity.

One of the central aspects of any collaborative process is to, as early as possible, articulate and clarify the different assumptions of the individual collaborators. Different people work in different ways, acknowledging this at the beginning of a project can circumnavigate frustrations around discovering these differences halfway through a project or in the immediate lead-up to a project's delivery date. It is also important to recognise that people will work differently on different projects: a conference paper may see one person want to focus almost exclusively on the presentation while that same person may want to take a more active role in the research of a journal article. The key message here is to take nothing for granted, even small teams who have worked on numerous projects together need to constantly re-

negotiate what they do and how they do it as well as regularly re-evaluate the outcomes and how they can work better (or differently), together, next time.

One of the more significant decisions that can be forced upon someone working on a collaborative project is around project completion. There are numerous examples, of which the first case study presented in this paper is just one, of different levels of engagement with a particular project resulting in some team members undertaking more work (in some instances all of the work) required to successfully realise a project's goals. Only the person undertaking the bulk of the load is able to answer questions around: How much work is too much? Will the end result be worth it? What am I prepared to do, prepared to take on, to see the task at hand through to completion? In this context the responsibility to the project must be measured with responsibility to fellow collaborators: if one person is having a difficult time it is likely that some of their colleagues are also experiencing difficulties in achieving team goals. Again, focusing on the bigger picture, the project's outcomes, can be helpful. It is also necessary to keep in mind that even what might be considered, by some of the collaborators, as an unsuccessful collaboration, a project can still produce useful (and often surprisingly positive) outcomes.

Another aspect of collaboration is that there is a need to collaborate on how to collaborate. It is often assumed that people will naturally undertake the tasks listed for a particular project in their own area of experience or of expertise. This can be beneficial for the group but ignores opportunities for the professional development of members to take on challenges in new areas. In addition not all work undertaken to support a collaborative effort is exciting or even interesting. Like any work there are boring aspects as well as stimulating ones. Unpacking how we collaborate is also beneficial when change is forced upon a project: the rules might be updated; the goals expanded; team members may move on; a type of technology may improve or become suddenly no longer available.

To provide a clearer focus for these discussions below are two case studies, both of which are based on the experiences of the authors, which draw out some of the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively.

Case Studies

Collaborating with Another Person: a cautionary tale

Two academics, A and B, working within the information services profession were presented with an opportunity to co-edit a volume on a subject area that was of great interest to both A and B. There were some initial difficulties in resolving some of the basic logistical issues – A and B lived in different time zones and had very different sets of family and work commitments – but various measures, predominantly designed to facilitate communication, were put into place and the project began to move forward.

Two of the issues that emerged, within the early stages of the project, were around the different expectations that A and B had around deadlines and some of the specific outcomes of the project. A failure of both A and B to define and deploy a schedule of work and to clearly articulate standards for contributions made the working relationship increasingly difficult as the project progressed. Superimposed upon this stressful situation was the need for A and B to

coordinate and work with numerous contributors. Over time each started to feel that they were shouldering the bulk of the responsibility for the project's success thus diverting energy into an ever more negative relationship instead of on the delivery of a large-scale text.

On reflection A and B agreed that resolving issues as soon as they became apparent would have made the project both easier and more enjoyable. The main breakdown within the relationship was realised to be communication with a key learning being that it is important to reply to all email, and other, messages rather than avoiding these when things go wrong. Such avoidance can generate anxieties around one party feeling harassed and another party feeling ignored or developing concerns that some crisis has befallen their colleague.

It is important to note that the project was successfully realised – despite A and B struggling with each other and the process. Both participants in this collaboration achieved their goal: the production of a high quality textbook of significant scale and scope. Yet neither party takes from the project a suite of positive experiences and neither is willing to work with the other on similar projects in the future. The main lesson here being around lost opportunities due to an unpleasant experience that could have been avoided through early and more consistent communication in addition to following through on some individual tasks in a timelier manner.

Collaborating with Another Person: a good news story

Presented with an opportunity to work on a project smaller than the one undertaken by academics A and B, discussed briefly above, an academic (C), a librarian (D) and a student (E), committed to a collaborative process for the purposes of presenting a conference paper and preparing a piece of work for inclusion in the resulting set of refereed conference proceedings. Again, C, D and E lived in different time zones and had different sets of work and study commitments. Each of the team members also presented with different levels of research and writing experience.

One of the issues that emerged, approximately half-way between the start of the project and the first deadline (the delivery of the conference paper to an audience of peers), was a slight loss of confidence experienced by E. As a student E began to feel intimidated by colleagues C and D as both C and D had more research and writing experience in addition to having English (the language of the conference and the associated set of refereed conference proceedings) as a first language. This was a difficult time for E while C and D thought that E was not interested and was ignoring an opportunity to collaborate. C and D decided to commit to an informal mentoring program for E which, ultimately, resolved the situation.

On reflection C and D had initially expected more from E than a student was able to provide. Reimagining the two-part project from a collaboration with three team members contributing equally to a project in which each team member contributed according to their capability and capacity allowed both elements of the project to move forward without feelings of antagonism or

resentment that lead, in extreme circumstances, to project failure. In this case study each person felt valued by their colleagues and each person gained personal and professional outcomes from the experience.

Both the conference presentation and the associated set of refereed conference proceedings were successfully realised – C, D and E each benefiting from a conference experience and an accompanying publication. Each of the participants in this collaboration also achieved personal outcomes through the establishment of an informal mentoring process while the team members are all willing to work on building this team through the delivery of similar projects in the future. The main lesson here being around how collaborative efforts are a series of ongoing negotiations: expectations defined in week one of a 15-week project often need to be re-evaluated and re-structured to accommodate different situations as they arise and assist in managing expectations.

Types of and Tools for Collaboration

It is hoped that these case studies offer some points for consideration for librarians. There are multiple opportunities for librarians to collaborate – the above being just two examples – for both inter-disciplinary interactions and information industry specific (inter- and intra-institution) experiences. This way of working will facilitate, for librarians and their colleagues in the information services industry, the exploration of “new models for working together to produce and disseminate scholarly materials” (Harkema & Nelson 2013). Regardless of who librarians choose to collaborate with some of the basic tools of collaboration will prove vital.

Collaborations can take the form of projects, papers, articles: onsite and online. Some of these will mostly be done in the same workplace, with people you have already met. Others will require you to work with people you have not met face to face. This is not necessarily harder. Some guides put forward that building a personal rapport is essential (eg: Herman Miller n.d.) but, it is argued here, this is often a luxury.

With collaboration it is important for people to accept responsibility for the work they committed to, and to keep others informed. Effective communication, as noted in both case studies, is critical. For example people need to inform others about any changes to other workloads that may impact on the collaboration. Avoiding replying to emails or other communications is not a strategic solution. Avoidance is a short-term answer to any problem. Social media can be useful to determine if something has been happening in one of the people’s lives that is impacting upon their contribution. For example, if someone goes from being very active on social media to totally quiet it may mean that something dramatic has happened in someone’s life, or it may simply mean they are on holidays. It provides hints to know whether to follow up, how to follow up, or to give someone space.

As already mentioned email is critical, and meetings might also be considered critical, although some people enjoy meetings as an end in themselves rather than for the outcomes that an effective meeting can provide. You do not need to meet unless you really need to, there are other ways to check in on how things are progressing. Email can cover off on a lot of detail that might be discussed in a meeting and is also useful for bringing information together and for providing regular reminders. You may

decide to use an email group so no collaborators are left out. There are various options for this including Google Groups or other collaborative spaces like BaseCamp, which may be public or private depending on the work being done. This gives threads for different discussions, while enabling tracking back to find out what has been happening earlier and also serves as a repository keeping all the communications in one place.

It is, as noted above, a luxury to have face-to-face meetings especially if people work in different locations. In these circumstances collaborators can consider online meetings and the use of tools such as private Google+ Hangouts, Adobe Connect or Skype which can all work well. These can save travel time (in addition to travel costs which can significantly restrict the opportunities for collaborating with others) as people can use the tools at their desk. People react differently if they can see other people in a meeting, and this can get around some of the teleconference issues like how do you know who will speak next without taking a highly structured approach. Shared screens in online meetings, which is possible through Google+ Hangouts and other tools can also help as everyone can see the same screen at the same time and can make comments and interact in real time. You may be better having 15-minute meetings at short notice just to sort out a few issues rather than longer meetings that repeat information in documents that should have already been read and acted on.

A shared online workspace is important. If the collaboration is all in one workplace it can be a shared drive, but this will not be possible if there are people from different workplaces working together. Google Drive (utilised for the writing of this paper) with the folders, which can be shared so all the documents in them are also shared, can prove to be an essential tool. Track backs are possible, or you may choose other conventions such as editing in different colours.

Post-it notes still have a place. These can work for face-to-face discussions as well as online. Having people put their ideas down, without initially discussing them increases the number of ideas suggested. If there is initial discussion people think their idea has already been suggested, when they may have a subtle difference that is important. Depending on the work being done a wiki may also be a valuable addition, and pages can be used a bit like post-it notes to contribute ideas to a wider discussion.

As outlined above, and drawn attention to in the case studies, the establishment of clear and agreed deadlines, which can be different for different parts of the work require careful consideration for both set up and follow through. The most obvious, but still occasionally neglected tool, is the (be it electronic or physical) calendar. For some work you will need to set up official files to comply with internal work practices, make sure you keep these up to date as they can be a helpful asset. Of course these tools are just a sample of those that are available to collaborators today. Talk about the tools with your fellow collaborators. Learn from each other.

Conclusion

This paper has, it is hoped, encouraged librarians to engage in a librarian-librarian knowledge creation project for the first time or served to encourage librarians who may have collaborated in the past to try collaboration again. “Collaborative research is now a common part of the research landscape” (Emerald Group Publishing n.d.) and it is important for librarians to engage with this way of working. This is especially

important for those working in settings where collaboration is being actively encouraged to improve productivity and service provision (Public Service Commission 2014).

Collaboration requires a set of skills that can be improved and refined over time. Certainly any type of collaboration needs significant effort – as does undertaking any activity that is worthwhile – the results of collaborative enterprise can, however, be extraordinary. There are numerous resources available to support collaboration: the authors hope that this simple guide will be of value to those librarians who have collaborated or are considering a collaboration for the first time.

Certainly the more traditional ways to contribute to knowledge creation already noted – those activities focused on librarian-client interactions – have always been, and will continue to be, an essential component of the remit of librarians and other information services professionals. Yet, the potential for librarians to be part-owners of these research processes through librarian-librarian interactions (resulting in conference papers and other types of presentations, books, journal articles, magazine pieces and more) is still to be fully realised. It is these activities, in an information age that is constantly changing, that will assist in keeping librarians at the forefront of research-based endeavours. Librarians that are active researchers themselves are better equipped to engage with the research efforts of their clients. Moreover, those who deliberately set out to generate new information, rather than locate information that is already available, simultaneously promote their own capabilities as well as the capabilities of the broader information services industry. Thus enhancing personal and professional reputations. It is important to emphasise that such, seemingly academically-based projects, are not the exclusive domain of the university librarian but can be taken on by librarians working in any type of educational setting in addition to those librarians working in public libraries, in state and national libraries and in special libraries. Each librarian has the capability and the capacity to contribute to knowledge creation. It is argued here that two or more librarians working together to achieve this goal in a collaborative framework can, with experimentation, practice and some risk taking, achieve more together than could be achieved through individual effort.

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