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Author(s)	**Chan, GRYC**
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Enriching Students' Learning Experience: Furthering Opportunities for Faculty-Librarian Collaboration

Gayle R. Y. C. Chan, University of Hong Kong Libraries, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong
E-mail address: gryclibr@hkucc.hku.hk

Abstract

In addressing the challenges in the curriculum re-structure moving from a three-year to a four-year undergraduate curriculum from 2012 at the University of Hong Kong, coupled with the move to outcomes-based approaches within a learning commons environment, further opportunities arise for librarian-faculty collaboration to enrich student learning. Findings from a student survey confirm the faculty's perception that subject librarian involvement would be beneficial in helping students achieve better assessment outcome for the course. Collaborating with both faculty and students is essential to achieve best results in building and assessing collections as well as in connecting information resources with student learning needs, just as in the planning of learning commons.

Keywords: faculty-librarian collaboration, learning commons, student learning, outcomes-based assessment.

Introduction

Building collections that respond to changing needs and expectations through close faculty consultation and assessment interview is exemplary of successful collaborative activity. The University of Hong Kong Libraries (HKUL) faculty liaison program is characterized by collaboration with faculty members and students to ensure that the function of collection development is centered and directed at faculties' and students' needs. The faculty liaison program, developed from the findings of a faculty needs survey conducted in 2004, encourages subject librarians to engage in dialogues with the academic faculty to build information resources that integrate into students' learning goals targeting course-specific needs.[1] This paper examines the changing needs, opportunities, benefits and challenges in furthering collaboration between faculty and subject librarians to enrich students' learning experience to achieve the "learning commons" of students.

This study is prompted by the move towards the four-year undergraduate curriculum to be implemented in the year 2012 from the present three-year system at the University of Hong Kong (HKU).[2] The curriculum restructure aims to offer students an enriched learning experience through the development of a common core program to enable core generic competencies in different areas of inquiry and disciplines. The four-year curriculum reform also prescribes the gradual shift to outcomes-based approaches to student learning (OBASL) to be phased in from 2009 to full implementation of OBASL in 2012. This paper explores emerging opportunities for librarians to assist in identifying the information resources required to achieve student learning outcomes in the reformed curriculum. Collection development librarians are in an excellent position to assist faculty to align information resources to academic program learning activities through better connection between the library and disciplinary needs. The study presented in this paper uses a model (an essay assignment) to investigate the needs and benefits of the collaboration between the professor and librarian to enrich the students' broadening experience outside the classroom through a learning activity.

The University environment: challenges and emerging opportunities

HKU will approach its centenary in 2011, and is in the process of implementing plans for its new Centennial Campus, which will expand the size of its existing main campus by one-third and be equipped with leading edge teaching and research facilities. A central learning commons will be at the heart of the new Centennial Campus.[3] One of the major challenges for the Libraries in adopting the learning commons concept is to address the diverse learning communities that embrace multiple instructional strategies, technology based formats, experiential learning in a digital learning and research environment. HKUL addresses this challenge by moving towards a system that places emphasis in providing access to its full range of latest information and communication technologies and digital collections. Students and faculty now appreciate on-site in person assistance offered by subject librarians for faster and more efficient access to library resources. The role of subject librarians to contribute as a partner to integrate information resources services into the learning commons to enrich students' learning experience will expand to target undergraduate students, especially in their first year, to achieve the core competencies.

Within the learning commons, where the information resources are "organized in collaboration with learning initiatives sponsored by other academic units, or aligned with learning outcomes defined through a cooperative process,"[4] lie further opportunities for subject librarians to build on the instructional role to guide the amalgamation of teaching resources in fulfillment of the program objectives and outcomes. Learning outcomes are defined as "the essential and enduring knowledge, abilities and attitudes that constitute the integrated learning needed by a graduate of a course or program."[5] Scott Bennett emphasized that the learning commons depends for its success not only on support services, but also on the "involvement of academic units that establish learning goals". He went on to stipulate that librarians and computing staff cannot alone create a learning commons, as it is the other academic units who define institutional and program outcomes. In this scenario, it would be reasonable to presume that an emerging role for subject librarians, other than building collections that match with learning outcomes, will

be collaborating with the academic faculty to integrate information resources to enable students to carry on learning beyond the classroom in the learning commons.

In the lead up to the four-year curriculum change, HKU has already had ten years of experience in the development of broadening courses. These broadening courses, some of which will continue to be offered as the common core curriculum, are intended to broaden students' perspectives to enrich learning in disciplines other that their major field of studies. Faculties associated with the development of the broadening courses perceive an absolute need to equip students with an advanced knowledge of information resources to give students better understanding of the subject matter beyond the classroom. In nurturing the skills of their students to identify appropriate resources for their learning needs, the collaboration between faculty and subject librarian is viewed as essential. A decade ago faculty relied on graduate students, demonstrators or tutors to assist them to identify appropriate literature resources for their own teaching and students' learning needs rather than librarians. This is no longer the case, as the 'electronic revolution' in library resources has changed the library from a book depository to a modern, complex gateway to information. Subject librarians have developed knowledge of the literature and search retrieval skills, thus they are in a unique position to perform a more focused search than teaching assistants. Despite faculty's viewpoint that the subject librarians are not experts and may know little about the topic just as the student, yet librarian involvement and collaboration are perceived to be beneficial in helping students to achieve better understanding of the subject matter if appropriate information resources are consulted in tackling learning activities outside the classroom.

Survey findings

The students' perceived needs for the professor's and the librarian's help were identified through a survey intended for future course enhancement given to the student at the end of a broadening course. The said broadening course (*Scientific perspectives on Obesity and Anorexia*) is offered to non-science majors and assessed on a continuous basis. There is no formal examination for this course. One of the components of this

course is an essay assignment on a science topic. The assignment is to be tackled by the students themselves, without reference to contents covered in the lectures. Such "open" approach is intended to provide students with the opportunity to think, to search (and research) and to broaden their science perspectives without restrictions.

From the survey findings, it is clear that the students would like more guidance from the professor. When asked whether it would be helpful if the teacher in collaboration with the subject librarian provide guidance on how to make successful searches for an assigned essay topic, 80% of the respondents gave a positive reply, even though 73% replied they never attended any library orientation. The students have identified the following challenges in tackling the essay assignment [*Mother's milk is best – the science behind it*] and have provided the following suggestions explicitly for the professor to help students produce a better essay in free form comments:

- *the topic poses challenge for the non-science students*: the requirement and expectation for a scientific research paper versus a paper in the social sciences discipline should be explained at the outset
- *need help to refine the topic*, which some find it too broad to focus-e.g. biological or chemical aspect, the "open approach" left too much doubt in some students' mind
- *need guidance*, not so much how to seek for information, but actually recommended sources which are relevant to the assignment
- *want sample of a science essay to clarify the expectation and how to achieve good grade*
- *appreciate the freedom to search and think the approach was good;* some students would prefer this way
- *lesson/tutorial, voluntary rather than mandatory, to be offered on an individual basis to solve searching problems, understanding the topic, how to write, proofreading— similar to a writing clinic*
- *help needed to improve searching methods*
- *"teach them critical thinking"*

- *Understanding the "science behind it" concept was very complicated,* too much, too time-consuming for the non-science student to explore every aspect.

Additionally, students were asked to comment on the difficulties in searching relevant information. Despite that the majority or 73% of the students deemed themselves as trained or conversant in searching skills, 47% of the students specifically noted difficulties in performing a focused search that yields relevant and quality information. Students expressed the need for guidance in deciphering the relevancy, quality and quantity of search results, particularly in defining technical or scientific terms encountered. Unsuccessful attempt in searching for appropriate resources was understandable for this class of non-science students tackling a subject from a science perspective without adequate background and solid guiding questions or search terms. First year students constituted 77% of the class with the majority from the Social Sciences including Law, Education, Business and Economics and the rest from the Arts. Web search engines were the most consulted, most popular being Google (77%) and Yahoo (73%), followed by the Libraries' electronic resources web page as the third most consulted (64%).   When asked to list in order of priority the top three sources of information which most frequently satisfy their information needs, HKUL library resources only came in third after Google and Wikipedia. The level of satisfaction with the type of resource used in fulfillment for the essay assignment, as one might guess, was relatively higher with web resources (56%) than library resources (45%). The findings seem to suggest that students increasingly rely on web resources as their top choice for access to digital resources, which would imply that the use of library purchased or subscribed resources may not be well optimized.

It is clear that the librarian alone cannot address all of the issues raised and but to work in collaboration with the faculty to come up with ideas together to address the concerns mentioned, regardless whether the issues are generic or specific to the assignment. The findings from the course survey have identified both the generic and course-specific needs to be addressed in the planning of library instruction activity or program to be applied.   The comments can also guide and inform the desired level of

librarian assistance, keeping in mind that outcome is to enrich students' learning. The overall objectives from the librarian's perspective are to be able to:

- play a role in assisting in student learning activities by guiding the search for information resources which align with the students' learning outcomes defined by the faculty member, thereby helping the student to achieve a higher grade
- raise the awareness and value of library resources
- understand students' information needs and seeking behavior
- understand students' preference and criteria in selecting information resources to guide future collection development.
- make unfamiliar and specialized resources known, on top of student's own search to yield more focused results on the topic
- evaluate the students' search result to assess value of links in consultation with faculty member

For the professor, the motivation of the learning activity is to stimulate the mind of the students, to broaden the science horizon without limits through an essay as the learning activity outside classroom teaching.   The subject librarian faces similar challenge as the students. In order to grasp the understanding of the topic and to direct the students to effectively search for the most appropriate sources using the correct search terms, consultation with the professor is deemed absolutely necessary. The information resources recommended may be presented in a tutorial lesson or embedded in the e-tutorial, blog or whatever e-learning platform used by the professor. This mutual understanding and cooperation are critical to the success of the collaboration between the professor and the librarian who is familiar with the tools and searching techniques to help the students achieve the goal of the assignment.

Conclusion

Attributes of successful collaboration between librarian and faculty encompass mutual goals, mutual respect, advance planning, and substantive contributions by both

parties for designing instructional goals and activities and delivering them through learning activities.[6]   As always, collaboration takes time and effort and it must be demonstrated to be good return on investment. Do faculty and students view this as good return on investment? Our findings of the study seem to suggest a resounding yes.   The new four-year curriculum that HKU will implement in 2012 will shift away from the traditional model in which learning is centered around the knowledge of the faculty to a student-centered approach which focuses on the student learning experience measured by learning outcomes.   In addressing the challenges arising from the new curriculum reform and the move to outcomes-based approaches within a learning commons, we librarians need the academic faculty and students to shape our roles and to provide us the opportunities for collaboration to enrich student learning.

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Biographical notes

The author is currently Head of Collection Development at the University of Hong Kong Libraries and has held this position since 2002. She heads a team of subject and specialist librarians to work in close consultation with the faculty to shape the libraries collections and to connect students with the appropriate information resources. She has oversight of an annual materials budget of US$12 million and is responsible in establishing a sustainable strategy that meets collection goals.

"Faculty–librarian collaboration in improving information literacy of educational opportunity program students" discusses how librarians and faculty teamed up to teach basic information literacy skills to "socio-economically disadvantaged students" at Rider University, in New Jersey. The article was written by librarians (Ma Lei Hsieh and Sharon Yang) and faculty (Susan McManimon) at the school. Be purpose-driven. Collaboration and communication are used not for their own sake, but for the ultimate purpose of successful student learning. In "Communicating the library: librarians and faculty in dialogue," Peter Brophy believes that "academic libraries are in the business of human learning rather than in the information business." However finding opportunities for relevant teaching can present challenges, often leading to a lack of integration. In this paper, guest writers Sean Stone and colleagues from Indiana University discuss their involvement with an expanded dental hygiene curriculum in the University School of Dentistry. This expansion has provided the opportunity to plan integration of information and oral health literacy instruction and evidence based practice across the new curriculum, and provide transferable skills for any major. In particular, the paper addresses the developmental work the health librarian