

Helping Faculty Help Themselves: A Collaborative Approach to Peer Mentoring

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the issues for creating a self-sustaining model for encouraging and promoting the use of technology in the classroom in a Liberal Arts environment. Technologists, Librarians and other existing academic support organizations must collaborate to foster an environment that encourages peer-mentoring amongst faculty. Generating enthusiasm for technology in the classroom cannot be done with static one-way communication.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.1 [Computer Uses in Education]: integrating technology into the classroom, supporting pedagogical projects.

General Terms

Management, Performance, Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

Faculty, technology, development, integration, sustainability, support

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult ongoing challenges for academic IT in the Liberal Arts is encouraging as well as enabling faculty to integrate technology deeply and in meaningful ways into their basic class structures. While at many institutions of higher education such integration has already become a basic expectation if not a reality, schools with a commitment to a traditional Liberal Arts educational model have in general integrated technology more slowly, less consistently, and with some resistance. Nevertheless, student entry and exit surveys at Liberal Arts colleges increasingly show an expectation among students for professors to be "online" with their teaching. This disconnect justifies a "proselytizing" approach to academic technology that

aims not just to enable interested faculty to adopt technologies but also to persuade faculty to adopt technologies appropriate to their classes and skill levels and to consider new media of communication as standard tools of academic work for themselves and their students.

This is not at all to say that a "one size fits all" approach should be foisted on faculty, but rather that academic technologists should pay attention not just to identifying appropriate technologies and appropriate uses of technology for particular pedagogical styles and goals, but also to the ways in which faculty learn about, adopt, adapt, and internalize new learning and teaching methods. At Vassar we have noticed that in departments or disciplines where a few faculty members actively use technology, the energy and success of these faculty made thinking about and using technology less intimidating to their colleagues. Identification and support of such "faculty learning communities" is therefore an important step in reaching resistant faculty with new ideas and approaches. At Vassar, we decided to create an integrated outreach and support program that took as one of its core missions the development of peer mentoring among faculty and the encouragement of like-minded communities that would be both generative and iterative. Since this program is still young, this talk aims primarily to lay out our basic methodologies and approaches and to offer several examples of our ongoing efforts.

2. CORE PREMISES

In order to stay focused, we identified three core premises for our outreach:

- 1) People accept new things best in a low-pressure comfortable environment;
- 2) Collaboration amongst librarians, technologists and other campus organizations is key to presenting a clear vision that is integrated into the mission of the institution. In particular, outreach is most effective when technologists and librarians collaborate within traditional teaching development structures to present an integrated vision of information services to faculty. For example, we wanted to get participation and collegiality from the Office of Teaching Development, a faculty led organization with a traditional (non-technology) mission.
- 3) Faculty accept new information most easily from one another. This third premise is by far the most important. Most colleges and universities are consciously engaged in promoting both our first and second premises. Lateral and vertical peer

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mentoring is the most effective means of generating real enthusiasm for new teaching methods and tools. Lateral mentoring takes place between faculty at similar levels of technological complexity. Vertical mentoring opportunities present themselves to faculty who are using technology at a lower level learning from their colleagues who are using more sophisticated technologies.

3. VASSAR COLLEGE: BACKGROUND

Vassar's Technology and Library services are separate, both reporting to the Dean of the Faculty. Computing and Information Services (CIS) has gone through several re-organizations during the past several years, trying to find the best model that most effectively supports the community. We are currently organized into four sub-groups under directors in Academic Consulting, Administrative Information Services, Network Services and User Services: all reporting to an executive director.

4. CREATING THE VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION

The creation of such an ambitious program fell outside the credibility and responsibility of any single organization on campus. Luckily, we had an existing cross-organizational team on which to build. This team comprised of representatives from User Services, Instructional Media (now Academic Consulting), Library, College Relations, Foreign Language Resources, and faculty created the setting to begin these conversations on how to engage faculty in using technology more successfully. Effective and close collaboration across campus may not require such a virtual organization in some places, but at Vassar, the structured meetings provided the synergy that helped us to actively engage with a vision that might have seemed beyond the scope of any of our home organizations.

4.1 The Team

During the late nineties, under a Mellon-sponsored grant, the Campus Technology Initiatives Team (the Team) was formed to support the pedagogical initiatives and projects funded by the Mellon Grant for Teaching with Technology. This Team was originally conceived as the "support arm" of academic projects, thus the people involved were not faculty but technologists, media specialists and librarians. Since the Mellon grant expired, the Team has continued to function as a collaborative group meeting to discuss issues and ideas related to technology initiatives and projects across campus. The primary focus of most discussions at Team meetings is the support of, and location of resources for, faculty projects driven by two parallel ideals. First, the Team is a cross-organizational entity comprising representatives from all groups on campus involved in the planning, production, and maintenance of technology projects (Faculty, Librarians, Technologists). It does not "belong to" or represent any one group's views but rather aims to support projects as a whole. Second, the Team works collaboratively to advise and help groups like IMS (now Academic Computing), User Services, and the Media Cloisters (campus media center).

5. PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS

Together the team has implemented a set of interconnected programs based from the beginning on our three core premises. Each program addresses one or more of our core premises. Of course, in many instances hindsight shows us how a closer

connection to our goals could have been achieved, and adjustments to the programs are always being considered. In particular we wanted to focus on our final goal of creating peer-mentoring communities that involved interested faculty, technologists and librarians learning from one another. Encouraging the active participation of faculty in these communities remains the most difficult challenge.

While I do address the specific components of these programs, they are not, in and of themselves, the focus of my talk. A separate poster session addresses them in more depth. Rather I will focus on the creation of virtual support organizations and how our mentoring communities have developed both formally and informally.

5.1 Brown Bags

We had two separate Brown Bag series designed to bring faculty with common interests and needs together in a low-key environment where we can facilitate more than lead discussions. Our hope is that the informal discussions begun at the sessions will continue later in other venues. Both series usually involved librarians and academic technologists working together, and are thus an excellent example of how the Team has facilitated collaborative work in academic information support.

The first series is offered on topics related to the Digital Library such as digital papermills (e-plagiarism), e-reserves and copyright, ILL, and government documents. These brown bags were initially offered in the faculty dining area at lunchtime on Fridays, but will move to the newly founded Center for Learning and Teaching in the Library in the fall.

The second brown bag series addresses issues of technology skills development with topics such as using iMovie, dealing with SPAM, and digital slide shows. These sessions are held in the computer center in our Digital Media Lab, which is a U-shaped space that encourages interaction.

5.2 Tech Tuesday

"Tech Tuesday," a distributed training outreach program, brings representatives from three IT departments (User Services, Administrative Services, and Academic Consulting) to visit every office in a given building on the same day answering questions, offering advice and support. This help offered ranges from setting up email filters to contain SPAM to identifying colleagues and resources to help them with pedagogical or technology issues. In general, faculty are tremendously pleased to have a one-on-one visit to their office, and this particular program has generated a significant change in the campus attitude toward CIS in particular.

Our core goals are once again addressed. Faculty are approached in their offices in an informal way, but as often as not departments, friends, and those who share the same hall end up talking together with the technologists about common issues and concerns. Faculty who have already thought about issues or solved problems speak up to answer their colleagues' questions and are thereby identified as local resources. Our hope is that by offering the opportunity to begin such discussions in the "home office" environment that the discussions will continue after the technologists leave.

5.3 Teaching with Technology Forum

Our most successful program has been the Teaching with Technology Forum, a semi-social event where faculty take the lead in discussing their uses of technology in the classroom. This year

we recruited eighteen faculty to showcase technologies they were using in a particular class in the format of a poster session. The projects ranged broadly in technological complexity. For instance, there were faculty showcasing their various uses of BlackBoard as well as faculty who were using 3D animation in a team-taught, cross-listed Art and Computer Science course. Faculty and administrators from the Office of Development, the Alumnae Association, and College Relations were all invited to attend. At the event, held in the late afternoon/early evening and catered with wine and cheese, faculty went from table to table discussing technology in the classroom with their colleagues.

By removing the academic technologists as middlemen we encouraged faculty to engage each other directly and to learn about the technologies being used from a pedagogical rather than a technical standpoint. Our goal was to both identify technology leaders among the faculty so that they could form a peer community and to put faculty who were not using technology in touch with those who perhaps shared a similar pedagogical vision but were using technology to achieve it. The interest thus generated feedback to academic technology, the Media Cloisters and the Team in the form of increased requests for help implementing technologies they had seen at the forum.

5.4 Topic Driven List-Serves

Another program still in the planning phases is a topic-focused list serve to enable conversations across campus about particular resources, such as GIS, SPSS, Mathematica, Citrix/Metaframe, BlackBoard, and LaTeX. We believe that helping faculty to discuss dynamically their interests and to share tips and tricks with their local colleagues will help to open lines of communication cross-departmentally.

6. RETURNING TO COLLABORATION BEYOND TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION ORGANIZATIONS

While many educational institutions have identified rifts among librarians, technologists and faculty, and are working to overcome them, successful implementation of cross-organizational programs is still rare. Partnering across organizational boundaries within existing frameworks of teaching development both enables peer mentoring and builds trust and credibility. Creating a collegial atmosphere amongst faculty, technologists and librarians will eventually generate self-sustaining interest and cultivate growth in the use of new technologies. Building this trust is instrumental to setting the stage for more effective interpersonal relationships and mentoring opportunities.

Because we realize that intra-faculty dynamics (psychology, time budgets, preferences, modes of persuasion) are common to all institutions, carefully crafting virtual organizations recognizing these issues is a key to eventual success. The need to identify and partner with existing groups focusing on faculty development but not necessarily on technology is perhaps the most important lesson we have learned. Technology cannot be treated as uniquely separate from the rest of the activities of the faculty or the college in general.

6.1 Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Attendance at Brown Bag sessions has been met with mixed success, largely depending on interest in the topic as well as the ever-mercurial perception of the timing of the session within the semester. Both of these sorts of sessions are very informal with only a rough agenda. The topic leaders tend to follow the lead of the participants, which we have perceived as a successful approach. In the fall, we hope to modify our approach by recruiting faculty to lead these discussions—or at least to co-lead the discussions with a technologist or librarian as appropriate. We hope that this will not only provide yet another introduction to their colleagues as an information resource but will also help to increase the credibility of these sessions as a pedagogical resource.

Tech Tuesday, while originally conceived as a training and helpdesk outreach program was expanded to include the active participation of academic consultants. Because of the divergent nature of the subject matter, however, we believe that the outreach has been somewhat diluted. For instance, when a team of technologists with competing agendas descends on a building, faculty are confused about what issues are most important to discuss: is it that pesky virus software or is it integrating library reserve materials into Blackboard? We are thinking of separating the pedagogical and technical ends of the outreach by creating two distinct outreach programs that use the same methodology of point-of-need and personalized instruction at the individual's desktop. By doing so, we can integrate librarian outreach and promotion into the picture as well.

We learned several things from the first iteration of the Faculty Forum. Probably the most significant realization was that this sort of cross-campus collaboration can be hugely successful, although difficult to organize. There were, however, lessons to be learned. Presenters complained that they did not have the opportunity to go around and talk with their co-presenting colleagues. Next year, we plan to hold a dinner or luncheon the day after the Forum so that the presenters can talk with each other to actively engage in peer-mentoring and information sharing.

7. CONCLUSION

The programs at Vassar are still in the early stages. While we all feel that we are making great strides toward our end goals, the progress is gradual and cumulative. We are definitely hearing more from the broader faculty community regarding the implementation of technology into their daily class routines. This is evident in the growing numbers of faculty who use BlackBoard, web sites, discussion boards and require technology projects of their students. Our work is clearly not done, but only changing directions. We expect that the final goal will continue to be elusive. Integrating technology and information resources into the fabric of the college community is an ongoing and undoubtedly a long-term process. Our central goal must be to continually build trust and credibility so that technology cannot be treated as an isolated skill or function separate from the mission of a liberal arts education

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