Strength in Numbers: Making Connections on Campus

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Abstract

The Tech Team at the University of California, Irvine's School of Humanities fosters a collaborative environment that converts technology-reluctant faculty to the technology-receptive. We have created a culture of collaboration and free flow of information between staff and faculty in the interest of promoting the incorporation of technology with Humanities teaching and research.

Prior to the formation of the Tech Team, our efforts in the School were fairly disjointed and at times misguided. We are now able to provide better support and to implement new services based on demonstrated faculty interest and need. Working together on the School-wide instructional technology budget allows us to provide complementary resources on a departmental basis, so that our efforts coincide rather than compete.

We strive to redefine the computer lab as collaborative space by reinforcing the element of human communication. We will discuss lab design and management as means to achieve this goal.

The HumaniTech team has been a model for a variety of departments and schools on campus and for other universities to which members of its team have been invited to speak. HumaniTech's discipline-centered approach reaches faculty in ways that a central resource center cannot, and its staff team works in close collaboration with various campus-wide centers with the combined goal of responding innovatively to ever changing instructional technologies.

Background

The University of California, Irvine (UCI) is the ninth campus in the University of California system. Founded in 1965, campus enrollment has grown to over 20,000 students, with anticipated growth to just under 30,000 by 2010. The University of California system distinguishes itself from the California State University System in its mission as a research university. Ladder ranks

faculty teach upper division and graduate level courses, while much of the lower division course load is taught by graduate student Teaching Assistants and contract Lecturers.

Since the creation of UCI's Electronic Educational Environment (E3) in December, 1995, all students have been given email accounts, all classes have had access to web-based course administration tools, and training has been offered by a central computing unit to all instructors and students in the use of these resources. A campus-wide language requirement, as well as breadth requirements, ensures that most students at some point take classes in and make use of technology resources in the School of Humanities.

The School's computer labs are housed in the Humanities Instructional Resource Center (HIRC), and include two Windows-based labs, a Macintosh lab, and a drop-in lab with mixed platforms. The main labs are heavily scheduled for use by classes, and are also open for drop-in use when no class is in session. The classroom labs are all configured in clusters, rather than in rows. This setup was desired by the Humanities faculty when we established the labs, to create a more collaborative environment. This and other lab design issues will be addressed more fully later in this presentation.

The position of Coordinator of New Classroom Technologies (aka HumaniTech) was created in December of 1998. The Director of HumaniTech's background is more academic than technological, but she can speak the language of both the tech people and the faculty. Her charge is to work with faculty to apply new technologies to research and teaching. She acts as a liaison between faculty and resources ranging from technical support to librarians. HumaniTech offers workshops ranging from Web Design and PowerPoint to Navigating the California Digital Library. A lecture series is also sponsored by HumaniTech, which will be described in greater detail a bit later.

The Team

Soon after the creation of HumaniTech, the School of Humanities at UCI established a "Tech Team." This group consists of representatives from the computing staff, the Visual Resources Collection Curator, the Director of the Humanities Instructional Resource Center, and the Director of HumaniTech.

Convened by the Assistant Dean, the Tech Team's mandate is effective communication among the technology "experts", to

avoid duplication of effort and to facilitate pin-point problem solving and services for faculty and staff. Larger goals include evangelizing technology use among the faculty, and communicating and coordinating efforts with other units on campus. The Tech Team meets once per month face-to-face, with regular email contact in the interim.

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How do the roles of the individual Tech Team members complement each other?

I asked each member of the Tech Team, as well as one of our Language Coordinators, and the Assistant Dean who convened the Tech Team, how they would define success in terms of technology use. Responses included:

- increased communication and less duplication of effort;
- process improvements and other innovations;
- faculty response to outreach;
- faculty who are open to resources and opportunities, who think about classroom use of technology, and participate in collaborative digital projects;
- streamline processes for student access and for re-teaching the same material using pedagogically sound software;
- enhanced, interested, motivated, improved student achievement;
- more effective, more accurate research;
- becoming more prolific (time-savings, work faster, increased productivity);
- a technology renaissance: ideas, concepts flowing at a rapid pace;
- innovation;
- transparency of the technology, so that focus is on the content;
- awareness of technology's strengths and weaknesses;
- when interactivity doesn't simply reproduce something

you can do in the workbook but adds context, enhances meaning, work in multiple modes (listen/speak/visual/) to recreate or enrich context.

There is a great deal of overlap in the constituencies served by each of the Tech Team members, and yet none are identical. Between them, they address the interests of faculty, staff, students, lecturers and Teaching Assistants. Gaps are filled and efforts are not duplicated. When an event or policy is suggested for discussion, all constituencies are represented.

Each member also brings a different expertise to the table - technical, pedagogical, knowledge of copyright and intellectual property issues, years of experience at UCI, understanding of policies, processes and politics. We each subscribe to listservs in different, yet relevant, areas of interest, and forward information as appropriate to the group. We are therefore exposed to many more Communities of Practice. By sharing information, we are not only reducing duplication of effort, but also strengthening each individual's efforts beyond what they could accomplish alone. Our constituents benefit from this shared knowledge. As long as we recognize and support each other's constituencies, we can all assist each other to foster better research, teaching and learning at all levels. The connections we make among related fields is mirrored in the connections we have helped foster among the faculty, which has been one of our successes.

The Approach

In evangelizing technology use, several factors come into play: knowing our audience, using each team member's knowledge and strengths, identifying problems which technology can address, defining success in this endeavor and formulating a plan.

Since each of the members of the Tech Team represent different constituencies and have different foci, this can either help or hinder the process of diffusion of innovation among the faculty. As a team, we need to "focus on important problems, find and promote compelling value, organize for effective service delivery, and plan for success." (Parker, 1996)

In its first year, the Tech Team concerned itself primarily with assessing the current state of technology use in the School, and with promoting awareness of the resources (both technology and people) available. We established a database for our own

use in which we gather information about the faculty with whom we have worked individually. Each Fall, we present a New Faculty Orientation. At this event, new faculty are introduced not just to the Tech Team, but also to other key people in the School (Assistant Dean, Academic Personnel Analyst, Undergraduate Advisors, Humanities Librarians, etc.). This personal introduction makes it easier for the new faculty to approach us when they have a problem or want to discuss new ideas involving technology.

Approximately 75 faculty members have attended one or more of the workshops offered through HumaniTech, with many requesting one-on-one assistance either instead of or in addition to the workshops. Each class averages 8-10 faculty. Faculty attend these workshops who would not attend the campus-wide sessions because they are more comfortable with their "local" colleagues in smaller groups. And, although some graduate students and staff have also attended, these workshops are geared specifically toward faculty, and also toward the Humanities in particular.

Our approach is multi-pronged and humanities-centered to entice reluctant faculty. We have an integrated intellectual component, a lecture series by distinguished faculty on technology-related topics. The annual themes have Includeed "Multiple Literacies in a Digital Culture," "What does it mean to be human in a digital age?" and "Human Rights, Technology, and the Humanities." The series consists of a faculty panel discussion, a guest lecture, and a "fireside chat" between two representatives of the technological and academic worlds. Our first fireside chat brought together Henry Samueli of Broadcom with Katherine Hayles from UCLA. We have also featured Thomas Dolby, new wave rock icon, and George Lewis, professor of music at UCSD.

In terms of hands-on technology training, we do a lot of hand-holding and encouragement, yet with the overriding philosophy and goal of teaching the faculty "to fish" for themselves. We don't let them off the hook! They are learning that they are responsible for their work. This approach has also helped with our own professional development.

We encourage a culture of consultation by expanding our outreach through one-on-one project-based instruction. We work closely with the humanities librarians and other information specialists with an eye toward future projects. In

better budget years, HumaniTech has also offered mini-grants in the form of course release to junior ladder rank faculty who developed courses using new technologies. In exchange, they are required to demonstrate their projects in a teaching colloquy.

Just as faculty from different schools are often isolated, the same can happen across programs and departments within the same school. One of the most dramatic results of our collaborative approach has been the connections made between and among faculty across disciplines within the School of Humanities and even with other schools on campus. Our panels have included faculty from Engineering, Information & Computer Science, and the Social Sciences. A prior year's panel consisted of five professors, four from UCI and one visiting from SUNY who were asked to talk on the topic of Gender and Technology. Each offered a unique interpretation and perspective, ranging from etymological to literary to statistical.

Lab Management

My role within the school and as a member of the Tech Team is as a resource provider to all, and as the representative of the interests of language instruction.

Technology integration to language instruction has its own challenges, especially at a research university. Most technology-integration efforts are directed at ladder-ranks faculty, but at UCI all lower-division language classes are taught by graduate students and/or lecturers, who often fall between the cracks. I feel strongly it is an important part of our mission to fulfill this part of graduate student/TA professional development.

The needs of language instructors are also unique, as everyone here knows. However, language teachers also have a head start pedagogically, since the emphasis is on communication and interactivity rather than a straight knowledge-transmission model. There are still a few drill-and-kill holdovers, but their numbers are waning.

Unlike many (if not most) other university "language labs", we do not limit our clientele to language students. In terms of lab management and facilities design, we do our best to make our environment unique from the other labs on campus. In fact, we often have faculty from other schools tour the HIRC and ask where our teaching labs are. They are looking for computers in straight rows with the teacher at the front, and instead what they find are cluster-shaped tables with the teacher in the middle or at the rear of the room.

This design was the result of an earlier collaborative effort between the former HIRC Director and Humanities faculty. The writing instructors in particular wanted an environment in which students could work together, communicate, and share ideas. This philosophy sets us apart on campus, and even from other universities. For our most recent lab remodel, the computer labs manager and I designed a survey for instructors who regularly teach in the labs. The survey assessed what percentages of class time they spent on various types of tasks (individual student computer work, group or pair work, discussion, one-on-one consultations), and used this information when designing the space. The end result is one with which everyone is happy.

The collaborative approach prevents many problems before they occur. We benefit from multiple perspectives and varied experiences to anticipate potential issues and obstacles. Faculty involvement in the physical layout and atmosphere of the computer labs is a great opportunity to examine methodologies and complements the technology training and support provided by the Tech Team. The hardware, software, physical layout and pedagogy all support the same goal: support of the University mission of teaching and research. It also gives the faculty a sense of ownership of the facility and respect for the professional abilities of the administrative staff.

As faculty become more aware of and take advantage of the support we provide, they will think less about the mechanics and more about integration and the impact and opportunities for their students. As they grow more comfortable with the tools, and understand the design of the environment, they can focus on content and improve both their research and teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. ◆

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