



## Knowledge Collaboration in Higher Education

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## Abstract

*Enabling collaboration in higher education takes on many hues - particularly in the context of participant-focused global education. This paper discusses three instances of collaboration in support of idea sharing by practitioners and faculty, collaborative research on complex topics such as public education, healthcare management or marketing at the bottom of the economic pyramid, and sharing experiential reflections among the Harvard Business School community.*

## Introduction

In organizations, individuals collaborate on work when they share a common goal. In higher education collaboration takes on various hues – students collaborate on group projects, faculty seek the benefits of collective intelligence in the development of their own ideas as they explore their research programs, and staff collaborate on delivering products and services in support of research, teaching and learning. At Harvard Business School (HBS), and at many other business schools around the world, this means supporting knowledge creation from a global perspective. Harvard Business School has always had an international perspective, with the first non-US students attending in 1909.

What follows is a description of three knowledge collaboration efforts developed by the Knowledge and Library Services (KLS) team in support of HBS' mission to develop leaders that make a difference in the world.

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## Exchanging Knowledge with Practitioners

Teaching cases form the basis of the curriculum at Harvard Business School. They represent the fundamental principle of practice-based, participant-centered learning. Teaching case development requires field and information research and significant involvement by practitioners in order to establish the context in which students deliberate possible solutions to the business or organizational issue. Case writing involves working with organizations and leaders throughout the world, the ability to work in multiple languages, and the ability to write well in order to engage learners and position teaching points. The case is the primary instructional tool for the classroom.

At Harvard Business School, engaging practitioners in knowledge creation is a natural part of the faculty's research and course development program. KLS took this research approach one step further when it reviewed the editorial mission of *Working Knowledge* (<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/>) in 2005. The revised guidelines now focus the Web publication on the nascent ideas of faculty in order to engage its 4M readers from around the globe in a dialog about them.

The version of *Working Knowledge* launched in 2006 continued with the tradition of plain English for practitioners. However, it also focused on making it easy for practitioners to choose to read an executive summary, the full article, or the original research. It provides easy access to the faculty member's work and contact information. We also provide an easy way for the reader to forward the article to someone else, or to email the editor. It opens the possibility for dialog, for sharing ideas and experiences between faculty and practitioners.

Our experience indicates that busy professionals are not likely to engage in social networking forums with strangers unless there is a common interest or bond that ties them together. While executive education programs at the school use social networking forums for educational purposes, we took a more traditional approach designed to meet faculty members' requirements (i.e., ability manage the amount of interaction required of them on a day-to-day basis) and to provide ways for practitioners to share their knowledge and feedback with the faculty. This approach is best represented in the discussion forum led by emeritus faculty member Jim Heskett. The purpose of the forum is to posit a question that *Working Knowledge* readers comment on over a specific period of time. Once the forum closes, Prof. Heskett summarizes the comments and provides a concluding statement.

The Forum is one of the most popular features of the Web publication. Forums run for four weeks and gather comments from, on average, 60 readers around the world.

In general, faculty find this opportunity to deliver their new ideas to a broad practitioner audience very worthwhile. Often they are contacted by individuals who they would not have known otherwise, finding leads for future research as well as other ways of disseminating their ideas.

## Enabling eResearch

The sciences have conducted collaborative research for a very long time. The most famous case is the work done on the Human Genome project ([http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human\\_Genome/home.shtml](http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/home.shtml)), and of course the very recent work on the Haldron Collider (<http://public.web.cern.ch/public/en/LHC/LHC-en.html>). The virtual collaboration of many scientists contributing their knowledge and research in the effort to solve a complex problem is the very essence of what we mean by eResearch. eResearch can require a significant investment in underlying information technology – often known as a cyberinfrastructure<sup>1</sup>.

KLS sought to enable eResearch for two audiences: the students, and the faculty working on a School initiative. The first is represented by our Knowledge Center on Business at the Base of the Pyramid. The focus of the Knowledge Center is to support the course learning objectives by providing a focal point for a project and paper on the topic. Designed by KLS it provides an information context in which students can explore and develop their assignment thesis. Students are provided with a primer on the topic, access to selected information resources, and to data sets developed specifically to support course learning objectives. The collaboration between faculty and KLS in designing the Knowledge Center has led to several positive outcomes: many faculty now want to adopt this same approach for a part of the course design, students papers and projects are of a higher quality, and KLS has demonstrated that through the combination of education and information expertise they are now an integral part of the course development process.

With the Knowledge Center as a positive step forward, KLS now seeks to bring researchers and practitioners together in a broader context. How will we solve the challenges of healthcare management? Poverty? Leadership? These are difficult challenges requiring cross-disciplinary skills, and experts from around the world. Our next foray will be in pursuing something along the lines of the work enabled by Hub Zero at Purdue University (<http://hubzero.org/>) This \$20M infrastructure allows for a broad audience base to contribute research, educate students, and involve practitioners. It is a good fit for a knowledge-based exploration of a topic. Initial discussions have begun to engage faculty from various universities in the United States. Serious discussions around intellectual property rights, data management, and priorities will need to occur before a decision is made. Regardless of whether this specific instance is developed, the need for collaboration on management and leadership topics clearly exists. KLS sees it has a role in enabling this.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cyberinfrastructure* is a term originally defined in the Atkins report, **Revolutionizing Science and Engineering Through Cyberinfrastructure**, 2003. It refers to a comprehensive and integrated system of hardware, networks, software, and middleware, designed to support advanced data acquisition, storage, management, integration, mining, and visualization over the Internet.

## Connecting a Community

Creating collaboration spaces can be very purpose driven as described above in the examples on *Working Knowledge* and the Knowledge Center. It can also be more indirect – by creating the means within which collaboration can occur.

On April 8, 2008 Harvard Business School celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On the occasion of the Centennial the School was both reflective and looking towards the future. The HBS community of faculty, students, alums and staff was drawn together in as one group to celebrate the past and also to consider topics needing our attention going forward. For some time KLS has had an Oral History program focused on the great intellectual leaders at HBS. However, our experience tells us that the collective knowledge of the community can only really be understood through the expression of that experience by the members themselves. Certainly this inflection point in the history of our School was a perfect opportunity to engage the entire community.

The Institutional Memory program (<http://institutionalmemory.hbs.edu/>) includes four main components: the development of an interactive timeline highlighting key events and enabling user-contributed events; an in-depth multi-media exploration of four eternal questions in business education; a series of narratives captured in audio, video, and in text by alums, faculty, students and staff on a variety of subjects including leadership, business education, and their experiences at HBS; and a photo gallery where the School and users can contribute images. Program management involved a cross-disciplinary team from the School including faculty, administrative offices responsible for the MBA program, External Relations, the Dean's Office, Marketing and Communications, the Web and Intranet Services team (also part of KLS), and the IT team. Bringing this program to life required significant commitment on everyone's part - this was the common goal that held the program together. The contributions from the community have been tremendous – a perusal of the section on Community narratives testifies to their interest in giving back and connecting with others who are grappling with similar issues. Most of the contributions come from events held on the campus, but narrative has been submitted on the 1-800 number (global), as well as via email.

The next project for engaging the HBS Community involves running a Prediction Market at the October 2008 Business Summit. The goal at this event is to understand the Summit participants' perspectives on a series of topics as defined by the program of events. KLS is piloting a Prediction Market over the summer to remove as many kinks as possible from the support model required to successfully capture the collective knowledge of the Summit members during their three day event at the School. Working in conjunction with the faculty, this effort at tying practice and research together is another example of furthering the fundamental principle of business education and research at HBS.

## Conclusion

Collaboration occurs when individuals work on a shared goal. In Higher Education collaboration occurs within and between students, faculty, practitioners and staff. Harvard Business School's Knowledge and Library Services enables the exchange of ideas, expertise and information through various collaborative services and products including those described above: *Working Knowledge* discussion forums, Knowledge Centers, and the Institutional Memory program. While collaboration is between the actors in the collaboration spaces, it takes significant collaboration behind the scenes to draw the actors in – with direct requirements (as with students completing a project), with a commonly held value (as with scholars working to address a complex problem), or with indirect enablers (as with the HBS Community exchange on the value of business education). There is no formula for successful collaboration, yet there are basic elements to fulfill: actors must come together with a jointly held and it is important to understand up front what that purpose is; the design of the collaboration space requires a cross-functional team with strong project management skills, including a commonly understood vocabulary. Success is defined in terms of the original intent of the collaboration while also recognizing secondary results can also contribute significant value.