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The culture of cooperation

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Abstract:

Interlibrary cooperation has an increasingly important impact on what we as librarians and information professionals do on a day to day basis. This paper will define cooperation and give reasons for participating in cooperative activities. It will go on to discuss factors that limit and factors that facilitate cooperation. These latter factors can be said to create a "culture of cooperation" in which cooperative activities can provide truly beneficial results. Finally, there will be a brief discussion of the future of cooperation.

1. Introduction

In today's session, we will have the opportunity to learn a little about a few of the many cooperative projects that are presently underway in different parts of the world. There is a vast literature on library cooperation. One cannot help but be impressed by the number, variety and scope of cooperative projects. How can we look at these projects in such a way as to get a better understanding of what this world-wide phenomenon called "cooperation" is really all about?

A logical first step would seem to be to define the term "cooperation", in general terms and within the scope of library

activities in particular. After better understanding what cooperation is really about, we are then in a position to answer the question, “Why cooperate?” Since cooperation is neither easy nor inexpensive, it is important to understand why so many librarians around the world see cooperation as the one best way to work and to meet our commitment to our users.

If we accept the premise that library cooperation can be positive and effective, we must then try to identify those factors which limit and those factors which facilitate it. Having analyzed these factors, we can then conceptualize a culture of cooperation and speculate on the future of cooperation in general.

2. What is Cooperation?

In the business world, as Badu points out, “partnerships may be viewed as purposive strategic relationships between independent firms who share compatible goals, strive for mutual benefit, and acknowledge a high level of mutual interdependence. They join efforts to achieve goals that each firm, acting alone, could not easily attain. Each firm can benefit from the alliance without bearing all the costs and risks of exploiting new business opportunities on its own.” (Badu, 2001, p. 21)

But what does that mean in the library world? As Line explains, cooperation can involve shared ownership of a facility which is jointly funded and accesible to all members, or the mutual use of resources held by a number of libraries. To these might be added agreed systems or procedures, such as for interlending.

Cooperation can also take place on various scales: local, sub-national, national, supranational or global. Within each area, it can be sectoral—by type of library, by subject area, by type of material or by type of client. (Line, 1997, 66)

Cooperation, then, is working as a group so as to have access to more or better resources and thus improve our possibilites of completing our mission for our user community.

3. Why Cooperate?

Still, why should we cooperate? Isn't our objective to create libraries that are autosufficient and thus better able to comply with users' needs in a timely fashion? If we work cooperatively, don't we lose our independence to make the decisions that will allow us to meet our users' needs? If we cooperate, don't we risk causing the impression that we're not doing our job and have to rely on someone else to do our job for us? Don't we risk the possiblity of actually paying more for materials obtained through cooperative projects than through more traditional mechanisms? These are all, no doubt, legitimate concerns. After all, no one has ever claimed that interlibrary loan and document delivery services are cost-free for libraries. The costs of access to interlibrary loan include salaries, supplies, and equipment for the lending and borrowing library as well as any document delivery fees. As Kingma and Mouravieva clearly show, ownership itself also represents a significant cost. (Kingma and Mouravieva, 2000, p. 22)

Moreover, as Jackson points out, “collection development librarians have been traditionally hesitant to rely on other libraries to meet their users' needs, in part because interlibrary loan was viewed as too slow, inefficient and costly. Low fill rates, short loan periods, and restrictive and inflexible lending policies of some libraries have also contributed to the view that ILL is not responsive to user needs.” (Jackson, 2000, p. 81) But the bottom line is that we all know that no one library can provide its users with all required resources and services, especially when we take into account the

constant rise in the price of publications and the need to subscribe to or purchase more and more information in electronic formats.

An article in *American Libraries* makes the case for cooperation quite clearly, when it states that "campus users want resources quickly, easily, and without direct charge. Consortial resource sharing helps libraries to meet the demand while sharing and controlling costs." (*American Libraries*, 2000, p. 41)

Cornish takes an even broader perspective. He assures us that "education, health, social welfare, economic growth, defense structures, personal growth and democracy are all underpinned by good and efficient access to a wide range of information." (Cornish, 2000, p. 7) If we can best provide access to this wide range of information through participating in cooperative projects, our responsibility seems obvious.

4. Factors that Limit Cooperation

Before examining those factors that facilitate cooperation, it might be worthwhile to look at some of the limitations to cooperation. While no one can deny that there are objective limitations to cooperation which are not within our possibilities as librarians to change, there are factors which we ourselves sometimes create and can thus, to some extent at least, control.

As Cornish very clearly points out, "fears of loss, damage, financial commitments and inconvenience to the library's 'home' clients all contribute to an unwillingness to become too involved in interlending." Yet, he goes on to make the point that "financial burdens only become real in the net lender situation." (Cornish, 1989, p. 36)

In a similar fashion, Kisiedu attributes many problems relating to cooperation to what she refers to as "negative professional attitudes". These include "apathy and a selfish desire for local self-sufficiency." She also blames conservatism. (Kisiedu, 1994, p. 275)

In a study designed to assess the strategic nature of library cooperation and resource sharing in university libraries in Ghana and the United Kingdom, Badu found that the lack of coordination and trust, as well as problems with interdependence and defective communications between partners, were crucial factors that limited the success of cooperative activities. (Badu, 2001, p. 26)

Two general comments on limits to cooperation also deserve mention. Cornish points out that cooperation in many countries is based on personal contact, rather than on formal institutional agreements. (Cornish, 1989, p. 39) Of course, when the contact moves on to another position or institution, the cooperative activities that had been undertaken tend to die out rather quickly. In an even broader vein, Riggs comments that all too often participants in cooperative projects have not overcome limited experience with the outside world and deal with limited knowledge of other cultures, thus leading to a series of problems that can spell disaster for cooperative activities. (Riggs, 2001, p. 501)

5. Factors that Promote or Facilitate Cooperation

Most of us are aware of at least some of the many economic and political factors that promote or facilitate cooperation. Nevertheless, one general factor that should be mentioned is that there must be a perceived requirement for an ILL system or other cooperative activity. (Cornish, 1989, p. 35) Libraries, like many people, tend to cooperate not because they want to, but because they need to. Here are just a few typical reasons for interlibrary cooperation.

1. Need to maintain collections and services under adverse economic conditions and despite the rising costs of publications. (Badu, 2001, p. 23)
2. Coordinated acquisition policies help to reduce the cost of materials and/or permit the purchase of more or higher quality materials with the same funds. (Badu, 2001, p. 23)
3. Reduction of acquisitions due to coordinating purchasing policies reduces the pressure on space. (Badu, 2001, p. 23)
4. Networks facilitate the ability to implement information technology that can benefit library users. (Badu, 2001, p. 23)
5. Cooperation facilitates the production of union lists or catalogs, which in turn facilitate other types of cooperation (Badu, 2001, p. 23)

6. The “Culture of Cooperation”

But the fact that there are good reasons to cooperate does not in itself mean that any given cooperative project will be successful. All of us know of any number of projects that apparently started out well, but eventually either restricted themselves to severely limited goals or simply ceased to exist at all. It is thus not enough to just want to cooperate. To improve the likelihood of a cooperative project being successful, there must exist such objective factors as adequate planning, well-defined goals, clearly defined responsibilities, good organization, etc. These and other factors are well-documented in the professional literature.

But there seem to be other, more subjective factors whose presence are equally essential if a cooperative project is to be successful. These factors are not so well-documented in the literature, but a few authors do take them into account.

In a previously mentioned study, Badu cites several authors who concur with him in believing that partnership success depends, at least in part, on commitment, trust, effective communication behavior and conflict resolution techniques, which went toward joint problem solving, rather than domination or ignoring the problems. In short, more successful partnerships are expected to be characterized by higher levels of comitment, coordination, interdependence and trust as well as the availability of communcation infrastructure, library infrastructure and other physical resources. (Badu, 2001, p. 26)

In a similar vein, an article in *American Libraries* asserts that “OhioLINK’s success can be attributed to the cooperation and hard work of the library staff and an excellent working relationship with Innovative Interfaces in designing and creating the software that makes it all work.” (*American Libraries*, 2000, p. 38) This comment supports Badu’s emphasis on the importance of commitment, coordination, effective communication and good interpersonal relations in successful cooperative projects. These important personal attitudes and characteristics create what we might call a “culture of cooperation.”

7. The Future of Cooperation

As we have seen, cooperation is an increasingly commonly-used strategy to face the economic and other problems facing the library today. As O’Connor points out, “in this cooperative action, players are equal but they do not gain out of the cooperative activity equally.” (O’Connor 1999, p. 266)

If that is the case, it is not enough to just agree to cooperate. More successful partnerships can be expected to be characterized by higher levels of commitment, coordination, interdependence and trust. (Badu, 2001, p. 26) The ability to modify traditional concerns for decision autonomy and use joint problem solving as a conflict resolution mechanism are essential if a cooperative project is to be successful. (Badu, 2001, p. 24) If these attitudes and abilities exist together, they create what we have termed a “culture of cooperation”.

Riggs has asserted that “the greatest strides in cooperation will occur in the sharing of electronic resources.” (Riggs, 2001, p. 500)

Similarly, Line has stated that “the increasing use of electronic media for text and the direct access by the consumer that electronic access and storage make possible will have a profound impact on all document access and supply.” (Line, 1997, p. 67)

Line goes on to mention the following trends, which he expects to continue into the near future.

1. The Internet will continue to break down geographical barriers.
2. There is a general trend towards decentralization and at the same time a worldwide trend towards globalization.
3. Reduced library funding will continue to be a problem, which will affect cooperation in both positive and negative ways.
4. In academic institutions, there is an increasing convergence between libraries, computing and learning resource departments.
5. The shift from ownership to access will continue.
6. More services of many kinds that used to be “free” will be run on a commercial basis.
7. The private information sector is doing a number of things that libraries used to do, including the supply of catalog records and journal articles. (Line, 1997, p. 67)

The trends that Riggs and Line discuss are probably not news for many of us, since they describe the world in which we live and work. What is important to take into account, is the implication that we will need to cooperate more and more effectively if we hope to continue to run socially-useful institutions. In spite of budget limitations, our users expect us to have more resources and services, many of which are electronic and have high price tags. Moreover, it is not enough just to have these resources, the user must be able to utilize them at any hour, every day of the week, wherever he may be. He also expects us to receive orientation and help upon demand, and increasingly these requests are made via e-mail or other electronic modalities. The user wants on-line, full-text information and often doesn't care whether the source is a book, a journal article or a Web site. What's more, he increasingly doesn't want to have to bother to look at different search engines for different sources of information; he wants to be able to get at all relevant information through one transparent and user-friendly portal or search engine.

Our users “want it all” and it's our job to give it to them as quickly and efficiently as possible, often accompanied by some type of preliminary analysis. The only way that most of us can hope to face this challenge is through cooperation. Now, more than ever, we have to cooperate and create that

culture of cooperation that is essential to make effective cooperative activities more than ambitious plans written for internal use only.

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