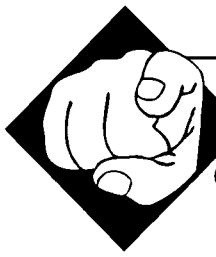

KEEPING CURRENT

Collaboration: From Myth to Reality: Let's Get Down to Business. Just Do It!

by Ross Todd

Scenario: Miss Congeniality and Collaborations in Crisis

Miss Congeniality has been the library media specialist at ABC High School for twelve years. She manages a successful library media program. A core group of twenty teachers bring their classes to the library media center for at least one major project every year. There are almost 700 classes in the library media center for sustained work annually. It is difficult to find an empty seat, especially during the three lunch blocks when students drop in to socialize, read magazines and newspapers, and use the computers for recreation. She receives good support from her principal, who has been her colleague for several years. She is concerned, however, that her instructional program seems to have reached a plateau. There is little faculty turnover, so she does not have many new teachers to recruit. The resistors continue to resist, but most are bringing their students for the Assured Experiences. The social studies department is the heaviest user; most 9th and 10th graders and about half of all 11th graders do at least one project every year. The social studies projects look like this: Project A—Choose a famous Renaissance person from the list. Research the life and work of this person. Create a "baseball card" that includes a picture of the person, biographical information, and his/her contributions. OR Project B—Choose a country from the list provided. Prepare a report on the natural resources, government, history, and geography, and include a picture of the flag. English teachers require students to research the historical periods relevant to the novels they read in class. Most science and math teachers do not use the library media center at all. The biggest concerns for this library media specialist are the quality of student projects and the level of most of her collaborations.

Miss Congeniality's biggest worry is past individual collaborations that have ended in disaster. She worked with an English teacher to plan and teach a unit on contemporary New England authors. They met frequently for about two weeks. Miss C created a webpage for the project with a bibliography of multimedia resources and the packet students used to organize their work (visuals, graphic organizers, guides for their interviews, the schedule of library visits, formative assessments including a proposal form for focusing the thesis of the paper, a rubric for the students' rough drafts, a peer review form, and bibliography charts). She even invited one of the famous authors, who is related to one of the students, to speak to the class. After all the planning and designing of Web-based resources, the teacher did not take advantage of Miss C's knowledge of databases, but chose to do

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just an adequate job of instructing the students herself in the library media center. She did not acknowledge Miss Congeniality's work and avoided teaching with her.

Her collaboration with a social studies teacher was even worse. The teacher failed to show up for the scheduled library time after all the preliminary planning and collaboration with Miss C. Another social studies teacher, who is retiring next year, schedules her classes in the library media center but never collaborates with Miss C and does not even drop her lesson plan off in the library media center at least one day prior to the class visit. Sometimes this same teacher doesn't even notify Miss C that she is not bringing her class to the library media center at the scheduled time.

When Miss C did finally succeed in collaborating with a science teacher, who is head of the department, the class was a disaster. The low-level students in this homogenously grouped class had difficulty reading the most basic articles from a database and caused discipline problems. The teacher has not brought a class to the library media center since that disaster. What can Miss Congeniality do to improve her collaborations? She also fears that if she cannot show that she contributes to raising the quality of teaching in her school she will lose her comfortable budget.

(Thanks to Dr. Carol Gordon at Rutgers University for providing this scenario.)

Does this scenario sound familiar? I would make a calculated guess that most library media specialists can relate to it in some way.

Collaboration is a pervasive force in school library literature and is on the minds of most library media specialists (at least the many thousands I meet and speak with each year). As illustrated in this scenario, however, collaboration emerges as a complex and polarizing notion. It is seen as a positive, enabling, and energizing approach to professional practice, and also as a negative, guilt-producing stumbling block to day-to-day practice. I will, in this article, provide some insights into library media specialist and classroom teacher instructional collaborations, with particular emphasis on strategies for building stronger partnerships resulting in realizing learning and achievement goals. These insights have emerged from a recent study undertaken to understand the dynamics of collaborative partnerships between library media specialists and classroom teachers through a systematic investigation of the partnerships established as part of the IMLS-Kent State University's Institute for Library and Information Literacy Education (ILILE) program over a three-year program from 2002-2005.

The ILILE program is based on the concept of collaboration between library media specialists and classroom teachers. Collaboration, a foundational principle, is the essential basis for the library media center's engagement in the learning goals of the school. While collaboration is certainly a complex and challenging concept, it has still been a pervasive concept in library media centers for at least two decades. The principle of collaboration is firmly embedded in school library literature and strongly endorsed and advocated by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). A statement from AASL indicates that the library media specialist "provides leadership... in bringing an awareness of information issues into collaborative relationships with teachers, administrators, students, and others" (ALA 1998). Within a broader framework of educational leadership, the concept of collaboration is often articulated in terms such as "school library media specialist as teacher," "partnerships," "partner-leader," and "teams." Role statements of various school library associations often state, implicitly or explicitly, that the library media specialist is committed to the process of collaboration and works closely with individual teachers to integrate information and communication competencies in information and critical literacies into curriculum content. The benefits of collaboration typically center on instructional effectiveness and creativity, increased levels of communication and improved collegial relationships, increased job satisfaction, the development of information literate students, and improved profile of the library media center and role of library media specialist in the school. Since the importance of school library collaboration has been discussed for at least twenty years, it could be naturally assumed that examples of collaborations are frequent and ubiquitous in schools. Certainly, it has been identified as an important dynamic in student achievement (*School Libraries Work!* http://www.scholastic.com/librarians/printables/downloads/slw_2006.pdf).

However, there is also growing research evidence that suggests collaboration is more an elusive dream rather than an established and seam-

less practice. Lau's survey of principals' perceptions of library media specialists found that while 80% of principals believe that the library media center and library media specialist play a role in the school, only 37% of principals said that the library media specialist made them familiar with current research of library programs and student achievement, and 35% were made familiar with current research on library programs and reading development. In addition, only 50% of principals saw their library media specialist working in the classroom; indeed, 50% of principals saw the role of the library media specialist to be that of library "caretaker" (Lau 2002).

A study by Todd in 2005 of all 154 public school libraries in Delaware asked library media specialists to identify the nature and extent of their instructional involvement in relation to Delaware's core learning standards: English Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics. Given the blurry understanding of what collaboration actually is, the following categories were used in this study to identify the level of interaction: Cooperation—The teacher and the library media specialist may communicate informally about a short term project but work independently; Coordination—The teacher and library media specialist may meet together to discuss a lesson/unit of study, however, the individual goal setting, learning experience design, teaching, and evaluation are done independently; Collaboration—The teacher and library media specialist jointly set goals, design learning experiences, teach, and evaluate a comprehensive unit of study.

This study found that cooperations were the predominant mode of library media specialist's interaction with the school community. The data on the number of coordinations indicate that many library media specialists do not engage in any level of formal interaction with teaching faculty on curriculum activities that involve the library media center. Compared to the number of cooperations and coordinations, the number of collaborations is low. Callison's findings from surveys of library media specialists in Indiana show similar results (2005). His survey indicates that 48% of high schools, 44% of middle schools, and 25% of elementary schools reported that some teachers and the library media specialist collaboratively plan and teach curriculum units.

Meyers' recent study found that collaboration "as a proven practice remains elusive" (Meyers 2007, 94). This study examined the nature of collaboration in six high schools in Seattle and involved extensive site observations to capture the full range of activities in each library media center. This involved over 100 hours of directed observations and interviews with library media specialist and classroom teachers. According to Meyers, the research team did not see "deep collaborative activity." While 81% of the teachers involved in the study expected students to undertake research for their classes, only 37% of teachers involved the library media specialist in the creation of this task (Meyers 2007, 105). Meyers concludes that higher level collaborative effort may have greater impact on teaching and learning, but poses the challenge that library media specialists might better serve the information literacy agenda by managing instruction rather than directly delivering it.

Overall, available data show that the concept of collaboration is more espoused than practiced by library media specialists. Should we then, as library media specialists, even bother with collaboration? Should it be a key professional directive? After all, the whole practice of collaboration seems to be built on the assumption that teachers as a whole want to do this, and that they were actually consulted in the construction of this professional platform! I can find no evidence of such research however, though we acknowledge that the idea makes sound educational practice. Do instructional collaborations enable students to achieve better and/or more than traditional instructional methods such as isolated library lessons not linked to curriculum content? Should library media specialists be held accountable for not meeting professional expectations? Is an instructional intervention the most appropriate mode of collaboration? These are challenging questions that the profession as a whole needs to confront and address. The new AASL *Standards for 21st-Century Learners* reiterates the importance of collaboration, suggesting that collaboration continues to be a key modus operandi for the profession: "School librarians collaborate with others to provide instruction, learning strategies, and practice in using the essential learning skills needed in the 21st century" (p. 3, http://www.ala.org/aasl/standards). Even though there are questions concerning collaboration as a professional responsibility, statements such as those found in the new AASL *Standards* indicate it will be around for some time.

The highly successful ILILE program centers on classroom teachers and library media specialists developing instructional collaborations (http://www.ilile.org/). Over a three-year period, 170 library media specialist/classroom teacher collaborations (340 participants) have been mutually established. These teams from elementary, middle, and high schools in the content standards areas of social studies, science,

language arts, and technology have engaged in integrating information literacy competencies into Ohio academic content standards, developing collaborative instructional units, and implementing planned instructional programs.

The ILILE program has provided a strong context for building a deeper understanding of collaborations: dynamics, processes, enablers, barriers; impact on perceptions of learning and instruction, effect on the nature of classroom practices; impact on learning outcomes, and the role in continuous improvement and school change. The research, undertaken by the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries (CISSL) in 2006-2007 on behalf of ILLE (a research collaboration!) gathered data from 130 of the 340 participants who completed the extensive ILILE training program. It involved 85 library media specialists (65% of sample) and 45 teachers (35% of sample). The participants had an average of 12.5 years of professional experience in school librarianship or education.

An online survey instrument was used to collect qualitative data on the participants' first instructional collaboration as a result of the ILILE training program. The survey instrument was in six parts. Part 1: Background information; Part 2: The class details; Part 3: Planning your collaboration; Part 4: Implementing your collaboration; Part 5: The impact and outcomes of your collaboration; and Part 6: The future of your collaborations. The purpose here is not to present a detailed summary of the findings but to present seven key insights and lessons learned from the participants who had, from their perspective, undertaken successful collaborations in their schools. The following seven insights focus on strategies for building successful instructional collaborations:

1. Get over helplessness and grab the opportunities to develop and implement strategic collaborations. Helplessness is learned. Participants highly valued the professional training that ILILE provided. They recognized the sheer complexity of establishing instructional collaborations, the time involved, and the often sensitive and diverse negotiations that were needed to establish and set in motion a working collaboration. They came to understand that there are struggles involved—control, team work, self-interest, and self-doubt. Most importantly, they saw the opportunities to learn and to develop the shared experience of collaboration through engaging in extensive training. Professional opportunities helped build successful instructional collaborations.

2. Where there is a will there is a way. The participants in the collaborations encountered many school and situational issues typically presented as barriers to instructional collaboration or as factors that prevent even the initiation of collaborations. These barriers or factors included finding time and scheduling time; questioning the workability and viability of collaboration set against the daily competing pressures of schools; questioning whether they would be accepted by their partners as equals in the collaboration; questioning the level of commitment; and wondering how they could maintain the momentum of the partnership. Sometimes they felt uneasy because of the "unknowns" when two people rather than one lead the learning. However, the strong belief in the importance of the instructional collaboration provided the momentum to find solutions to the challenges, rather than to give up.

3. Giving up is not a solution. Participants were encouraged to see challenges and solutions, not problems. It was evident that the collaborating teams worked for solutions when they encountered barriers rather than wallowing in the setbacks or giving up. Solutions included being flexible, establishing priorities, valuing discussion, building a good working relationship, rearranging out-of-school schedules to accommodate the necessary planning, and closing knowledge gaps by making sure they understood the context and constraints of their collaborating partner. Participants saw that the pressures tested their belief in collaboration—at times it was much easier to simply give up, but there was recognition that the "I have no time" argument is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Essentially they saw that there are two choices—either they constructed solutions or they gave up. They realized that giving up was not in the best interest of library media centers.

4. The sum of the parts is greater than the whole. Participants saw that a successful strategy of collaboration was identifying complementary expertise, connecting them, and building on them. Often the coming together of expertise meant being open-minded and prepared to learn new skills as well as being responsive to the environmental pressures and stresses to provide mutual reassurance, support, and feedback. For example, library media specialists welcomed the opportunity to learn instructional strategies, observe a range of different teaching styles,

and learn classroom management techniques from teacher partners. Teachers saw information literacy in action and saw the opportunity for deep and wider learning for students by connecting the two areas of expertise. The experience of working together in the same learning space provided a supportive environment for taking risks, multitasking so that needs of students could be quickly met, and enabling deeper interaction with students. Participants thought that characteristics such as divergent and convergent thinking, creativity, flexibility, openness to experience, and organizational skills facilitated the working process by both partners.

5. Plan with mutuality of intent. One of the key dilemmas that surfaced in the study was at times an apparent disconnect in motivations. Some of the library media specialists expressed that the primary motivation for being involved in the collaboration centered on marketing library media services, increasing their status within the school, and spreading library-centered collaboration in the school. Some of the teachers expressed that collaboration with the library media specialist was a natural extension of social dynamic of teaching and their primary motive was one of socialization and developing networks. Is this collaboration? I would argue that the primary motivation and intention of collaboration must focus on student achievement and instructional collaboration as a key pedagogical mechanism for providing the best learning opportunities for students. It is certainly fine to hope that the library media center and the role of the library media specialist might have a higher profile in the school as one outcome of the collaboration, but if that is what is driving the collaboration, then personal professional agendas, rather than learning agendas, take over and the real reason for collaboration becomes lost. There has to be a transcendent belief in collaboration as enabling quality learning outcomes. Instructional collaborations first and foremost are about learning and student achievement, not about boosting the role of the library media specialist. It is about the leading of learning and not authority-based leadership.

6. Plan with clarity of intent. The participants stressed the importance of careful and detailed planning before the instruction began: negotiating and formalizing the instructional goals, establishing the processes involved, and setting out the instructional sequence and structure. Such precision of planning, while time consuming, put focus on the team approach. It enabled refinement and reorientation, as needed, without stress and panic, and provided the necessary reassurance when spirits and energy lagged. Planning also involved anticipation of potential distractions and derailments, and having backup plans ready to go if needed.

7. Focus on collaboration as reflective learning. Acknowledge the complexity of collaboration and think through potential problems and potential solutions. Stay connected with the collaborating partner as the experience unfolds. Participants expressed the importance of taking the time to reflect, to hear their partner's expectations as the collaboration progressed, and to carefully consider the evidence of student progress. Collaboration is not a linear process, but a recursive one, where roadblocks mean backtracking not stopping.

Editor Note: These seven insights along with many other available resources can help library media specialists build collaborative efforts for school library programs. Many articles have been published in *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, as well as other journals, in books, and in pamphlets that can be useful in building collaborative practices. See "Use This Page" (page 2) in this issue of *SLMAM* for a list of resources related to collaborative practices. These resources can help guide the effort of getting down to business...let's do it!

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