



Building a Community of Practice in a Transnational University: The Collaborative Journey of Cross-Campus Librarians

Majorine Koshie Kitcher, Library Department, Lancaster University Ghana, Ghana

Bob Frost, Lancaster University Library, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

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Abstract

For years, cross-border universities continue to provide access to education worldwide through collaborative partnerships especially at the organisational level. The purpose of the paper is to explore how a five (5) year partnership between two librarians from Lancaster University Ghana and Lancaster University have developed to brought together other partners which has shaped academic success especially library services provision to Lancaster University Ghana from the ground level. Relevant literature review topics includes academic literacies as social practice, communities of practice in higher education, etc and adopts Wenger's (1999) Communities of Practice and social learning systems model as a theory to support the study. The study adopted an exploratory case study approach providing evidence of the collaborative journey between the two librarians, the activities, working structure, support systems and other members of the community of practice within the last five years. The lessons learnt revealed that sustained community of practice enhances social learning, enables timely professional support and access to information, bridges cultural barriers and fosters a sense of shared learning and experiences. It also provides valuable insights for building sustainable collaborations across culturally diverse and dispersed learning environments.

Keywords: Community of practice, collaboration, transnational education, libraries.



Introduction

Over the years, transnational partnerships in higher education institutions focused on strategic organizational level cooperation (Fehrenbach & Huisman, 2024). The collaboration usually facilitate access to higher educational opportunities spanning national, geographical, and cultural boundaries (Tran et al., 2023). However, Bordogna (2018) stated that such partnerships become purposeful and beneficial when both partners build a connection and network based on trust and commitment which can usually take place from the ground-level. Academic support service departments such as libraries are critical to strategies aimed at supporting learning development, information literacy, and research skills (Hadfield, 2023). Libraries and other academic support providers engage in collaborative professional engagements such as co-delivering workshops, shared professional development initiatives and aligning student learning activities as a way of contributing to institutional learning and academic support service provision (Loque, 2021).

This paper explores how collaborative partnerships in a transnational higher education occurred from the individual level. It reflects on a five-year collaborative journey between two cross-campus librarians Lancaster University Ghana (international partner university of Lancaster University) and the parent institution, Lancaster University, UK which has transformed into a community of practice.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (1999) propounded the social learning theory from which the concept of communities of practice emerged. Communities of practice seeks to involve participation in shared collaborative and social practices as aspect of the learning. Wenger (1999) posits that when mutual engagement among professional people with common interest and goals becomes consistently sustained, births a community of practice. Wenger (1999) argues that communities of practice have three key elements which are domain, community, and practice. **Domain** stands for representation or shared interest. **Community** involve interactions, relationships, and **connection** among a group of people. Practice refers to shared resources, tools, experiences, and professional knowledge. The Community in this paper is used to indicate the frequent meetings, conversations and chats via online between the two librarians. Domain was used to represent the shared goal of providing available and accessible Lancaster online resources and services to support teaching and learning. The connection construct of the theory was used to identify other members with similar interest in academic support such as research managers, digital librarian, learning developers etc



pooled into the community of practice. The practice aspect was used to indicate the constant sharing of knowledge, resources, professional development opportunities among members of the community to promote achievement of the goals of the transnational partnership.

Recent scholarship suggests growing relevance of communities of practice as a relevant avenue for knowledge exchange and sharing as well as professional development (McDonal & Cater-Steel, 2020). According to Beres and Janes (2023), in a study on virtual communities of practice found out that communities of practice improve engagement, professional development, knowledge sharing among staff in universities. In a study on transnational communities of practice among faculty members, Tharapos and O'Connell (2020) found informal collaborative engagements in transnational educational settings to enhance reflection and teaching effectiveness as well as seamless institutional integration.

The Collaborative Journey

The collaboration began when Transnational Academic Group and Lancaster University Ghana decided to partner and open a branch campus of Lancaster University in Ghana, West Africa. The partnership involves engagements between departments on both campuses in the delivery of higher education to students. Thus, the collaboration between the librarians from both ends of the institutions aimed at promoting accessible information resources and service delivery, professional development and support for staff and students.

With an introduction of both librarians by the respective heads of departments across both campuses, the two professional librarians agreed to hold meetings monthly named '*monthly catchups*' on Microsoft teams' video and chat to discuss and address challenges and new developments in library service provision. The decision to hold catchups monthly was to enable both librarians enough time to handle work schedules on their respective campuses. Sometimes emergency meetings are held before a monthly catchup to consolidate an institutional library information or address challenges that require immediate attention such as accessibility issues on the online library platform.

This arrangement forms the basis of the '*community*' element in Wenger's (1999) theory as explained above. Overtime, the meetings became a regular activity for both librarians. Discussions expanded to include everyday experiences with work, family, and professional training. These meetings provided an opportunity to share best practices, solve challenges, and offer support and guidance were necessary. The conversations extended beyond operational issues and evolved into reflective discussions about teaching, learning, and



academic support services. This formed a 'domain' for the librarians according to Wenger (1999).

The partnership also fostered cross- cultural learning leading to informal conversations on topics such as local delicacies from respective countries such as fufu, Barm cakes, weather conditions, festive seasons, and holidays etc. These exchanges enhanced mutual understanding and helped form a '*connection*' leading to the adoption of Ghanaian local name by the librarian from Lancaster University, UK which they use to address each other in emails. This provided valuable perspectives on how the three elements of Wenger's theory (1999) unearth partnership potential amongst two people from different geographical locations.

Evidence of the Collaboration

As trust and conversations became informal, the partnership expanded to include co-delivery of workshops for two years. For example, at the invitation to deliver an online library skills workshop for students on the Commonwealth Health Leaders Programme, held at Lancaster University Ghana campus, the librarians decided to co-deliver the workshop with one librarian presenting online from Lancaster University, UK while the other librarian was on-site providing practical support. Initially, both librarians in one of their monthly catchups have discussed co-delivering library orientation workshop for fresh students at Lancaster University Ghana where the librarian from Lancaster University UK, will take students through the online library resources while the librarian in Lancaster University Ghana will facilitate the physical access setup. Thus, when the request to hold a library workshop for the Commonwealth students was sent to the librarian at Lancaster University, UK, it was an opportunity to explore co-delivery of workshops across different campuses for both librarians. Furthermore, the presence of the Commonwealth students on Lancaster University Ghana campus presented an opportunity to practice collaborative workshop delivery from different locations at the same time. Through these engagement and experience, both librarians gained insights into different institutional contexts, professional practices, and approaches to co-facilitation of library sessions in real time.

In addition, during the second year of the undergraduate program for students, Lancaster University Ghana students get the opportunity to study abroad at the main Lancaster University campus. Thus, both librarians come together to co-organize library tour for the Year Abroad students, an innovative service which received positive feedback from some of the participants.



Also, to enhance academic experience and services to students, the collaboration expanded to include digital faculty librarians and Learning developers from both LUG and LU to meet every term and so far, more than three (3) meetings had been held with other academic support staff such as the Learning Development team, a Law Librarian from the Law department, digital Librarian etc. An invitation to attend the Library and Teaching Engagement departmental meeting led to invitation to attend future term meetings to share best practices, address academic support challenges and discuss new trends that will enhance academic services support for staff and students at Lancaster University Ghana.

Again, the collaboration expanded to referrals which included contributions by the LU Open Research Team in preparation of a conference paper for presentation at the *5th Biennial CARLIGH (Consortium for Academic and Research Libraries in Ghana) Conference in Kumasi, Accra Ghana* by the LUG Librarian. Hudson (2023) opined that library professionals within different geographical locations can respond more effectively to evolving learning needs and support systems during partnerships. Hadfield (2023) adds that academic support centres in higher educational institutions are pivotal in provision of research and study skills, learning development, critical thinking, and academic writing skills to students especially in global higher education environments. Sharing of knowledge on professional development and best practices led to support for LUG librarian to apply and successfully join the Advance Teaching at Lancaster Scheme (ATLAS) programme to who successfully completed and gain an 'Associate Fellow' certificate. Communities of practice that exists in academic libraires strengthens professional mentorship, development opportunities as well as service innovation (Loque, 2021).

Challenges

Over the years, some scholars have explored challenges of collaboration. For instance, Spencer-Oatey, (2013) in a study on managing interaction processes in international education, identified difficult intercultural differences as one of the factors that affect the success of a collaboration. Interestingly, cultural differences had no negative influence on this collaboration. discussions on culture and identity centred on food, tourism, peculiar cultural events and names. This led to an informal adoption of local names, sharing of local food recipes, and exchange of photos of Christmas decoration traditions, heritage sites etc which fostered cultural tolerance.



Poor internet connection due to bad weather conditions in either geographical location of the librarians affected effective communication and participation in real time meetings. An example is when using Microsoft team's app in full video. In stances when internet access is poor, the librarians used Microsoft teams chats where sharing of vital information can continue without distractions.

In addition, conflicting time zones due to different geographical locations affected meeting time. For example. one person may not be available at the scheduled time, or another join an hour after the meeting scheduled time because of miscalculation of time zone differences. It was a confusing period for a while for both librarians. To resolve this problem, when sending emails, both librarians learnt to indicate or set time using the respective time zone of each country to reflect the actual time in that country. Again, individual campus work schedules and expectations conflicted with scheduling monthly meetings. Thus, engagements are sometimes held spontaneously.

Lessons Learnt

Sustained Interactions through regular catchups overtime created a collaborative support space for learning, support, and reflection. This partnership enabled coordination and timely provision of innovative library services and academic support to satisfy student's information needs especially at Lancaster University Ghana Library. The referrals, follow-ups, resource sharing, and exchange ensured a comprehensive assistance and support which improved response time to academic support and library services. According to Wenger (1999), community of practices offers space for learning where professionals come together to collectively address shared challenges and share expertise to enhance academic support.

Again, the collaboration-built trust and an avenue to share professional ideas and knowledge creating what both librarians called a *"willingness to share and willingness to learn"* environment which enhanced achievement of goals, feedback, training opportunities, and best practices.

These informal monthly meetings and dialogue sessions with other colleagues, led to timely response and feedback on challenges and queries thereby improving academic experience especially library and learning support services across both campuses which contributes to achieving the institutional goals of providing an excellent higher education academic experience irrespective of its campus location. Wenger (1999) posits that community of practice a socially negotiated space for shared learning and participation.



An important aspect of the collaboration is the enrichment of cultural learning and relationship building. The collaboration opened opportunity to gain experience about each other's cultures, local educational contexts, and structures as well as best institutional practices. Thus, shaping individual cultural tolerance, empathy, and intercultural understanding for stronger professional relationships especially in transnational higher education institutions.

Conclusion

Overall, it is evident that when there are sustained engagements among professionals with common goals especially in transnational higher educational institutions, it can evolve into a community of practice. When departments work together, it can create a collaborative support system leading to knowledge-sharing, relationship building, peer-learning and timely professional assistance to enhance the provision of academic support services in transnational higher educational institutions. Both librarians expect this community to grow to include other librarians from other Lancaster International campuses in China, Germany, Indonesia etc. This paper highlights how a simple introduction of two library professionals across different geographical location has developed into a cross-campus community of practice fostering and strengthening ground-level partnership and collaboration in a transnational university.

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