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Beyond Assessment: Transcending the Tragedy of the Commons

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Russ Bailey, “Beyond Assessment: Transcending the Tragedy of the Commons,”
pp.205-210, in *The Information Commons Handbook* by Donald Beagle, et al, 2006.

The Information and Learning Commons have enjoyed a growing presence and profound impact on the quantity, quality and variety of effective informational services and opportunities provided to patrons over the last fifteen years. Yet the volume of qualitative and critical validation also corroborates that the potential of the Information and Learning Commons models can be threatened by certain tendencies in human nature and society. These are related to issues raised in Garrett Hardin’s article and subsequent commentary which brought the notion of a “Tragedy of the Commons” into widely held intellectual parlance.⁷ The most consistent and obvious threats (or “Tragedies”) are:

1. Resource depletion, degradation and dilution - Lessig describes this as resulting from “rivalrous” tendencies in the Commons, competing for apparently finite resources.⁸ We know from experience that

[left] unmonitored some patrons would abuse resources to the point that they were **depleted**, ...and made insufficient for patron needs. One can take certain steps to monitor and apply resources in an appropriate and efficient manner...One implements “pay-for-print” to stem the flood of patron printing. One can lock down access to computer profiles and segments of the drives and network and can implement self-re-ghosting (re-creating the computer’s image) or use self-cleansing software (e.g., Fortress’ Clean Slate [DeepFreeze]) to prevent downloading of software (resource pollution), purge unwanted files, etc., as a means of ensuring the most efficient and equitable use of resources. Only certain patrons (institution’s students, faculty and staff) are authenticated to use proprietary databases. These are common steps to transcend this particular tragedy in the Commons’ information environment.⁹

For example, staff might encourage patrons to use the most appropriate form for saving and moving work (floppy disk, zip disk, readable CD, or e-mail attachment instead of printing). This approach saves paper, toner and other printing resources. These steps should be part of an articulated program of consistent, ongoing training and education of staff and patrons. Formal education, training and cross-training sessions for all (sometimes required, sometimes voluntary), as well as informal, peer-to-peer (student-to-student, student-to-staff, staff-to-student, staff-to-staff), incidental education and training: at the teachable moment. Often the education and training are **upward**: student assistants are the “experts” teaching full-time staff, or para-professionals are the “experts” teaching professional staff. Web-based education/training modules having proven effective in many Commons environments – the University of Arizona has implemented Web-based education/training modules in a well-articulated and effective manner.¹⁰

2. Resistance (to change, etc.) – It is far too common for an individual or group to proscribe participation in the provision of a service, which is “not in my job description”. An example of this **tragedy of resistance** is when a technology/software support staff in the Commons responds to a basic reference question by saying “I don’t do that - that’s a Library question.” If this staff were educated and trained to provide basic-level reference assistance, this staff could instead take time to “interview” the patron, respond immediately, or research a helpful response, or refer the question to someone more expert. It weakens and at times debilitates the effectiveness of the Commons concept, when services are segregated in terms of responsibility or authority.

Some resistant staff can be lured informally or incidentally into other areas of new responsibility outside of their areas of “official job responsibility”, into sometimes refreshing and energizing areas of activity. Education and training can defuse resistance and transform the impasse into possibility.

3. Chauvinism – The *chauvinist culture of expertise* can sometimes emerge among “professional” staff, who feel that only they and their similarly credentialed “peers” can provide the particular service at a quality level; all other provision of the service is “diluted” or “dumbed-down”. An example is when a high-end graphic specialist (or a chemistry reference librarian) wants *all* queries related to graphics (or to chemistry) sent to her/him to avoid *diluted, dumbed-down* or *wrong* responses. The successful implementation of tiered-services (e.g., levels 1 through 10, from lesser to greater complexity) reveals that it is neither sufficient in meeting patron needs nor cost-effective to require the most *expert* (and usually most expensive) service provider for all levels of complexity in queries. Many institutions train and use student assistants (freshman to graduate students) to provide “peer assistance”: information, technology and reference. Para-professional/classified staff are often very successful when trained and cross-trained to provide service in virtually all areas, often at relatively high levels of complexity. It is regrettable that often the “chauvinist experts” are slowest and least willing to relinquish control and welcome para-professional and student colleagues onto the service team.

The idea that only an expert should be allowed to respond to any query in her/his area has been questioned and at times countered in practice and studies of computer labs, libraries and schools (peer tutoring and counseling) for some years. ...Concepts such as cross-training to provide first-response and to clarify the valuable role of informed referrals to areas or staff with expertise (be it for chemistry databases, PhotoShop capabilities or accurate rendering of diacritics from another language) can be very helpful in transcending this tragedy of chauvinism, when these concepts are integrated into the Commons culture.¹¹

At times, ironically, it is budget-cuts and restricted resources which *force* chauvinist experts to relinquish control and accept productive collaboration. Education, training and cross-training provide opportunities to soften or transform inveterate chauvinism.

4. Success - punished for success – In 1999 Steve Gilbert, then president of the TLT Group, the Teaching, Learning, and Technology affiliate of the American Association for Higher Education, published a short series on the “support services crisis”, which he referred to as the providers being “punished for success”¹² Technology resources had become so popular and widespread in higher education, their use had become so successful, that requests for more and better resources and support escalated at an unsustainable rate: IT resource and support providers were being “punished for success”. This is the case as well in the Commons environment. Cross-training of professional, para-professional and student staff has proven to be effective in helping alleviate this problem. As Gilbert points out, the greatest, most constant supply of savvy IT support is that of student assistants:

These students can recruit, train, supervise, and evaluate other students; although it is essential to provide skilled professional management overseeing the full complement of student assistants. These student assistants can help their peers and the faculty and every category of support professionals (library, faculty

development, disabilities, etc.) As students gain the knowledge and skills needed for these more varied roles, they have more opportunities to become more active in shaping their own education.¹³

5. *Either / Or*—Many more-traditional service providers argue that high-touch, paper-print service is superior and deserves most if not all resources. Other, more-technology-savvy and –expert service providers emphasize a preference for high-tech, remote-accessible, asynchronous services; when in fact the greatest successes and effectiveness are not *Either / Or*, but rather *Both / And* – high-touch and high-tech are mutually inclusive, and various amalgams of the two are selected, as appropriate to the task at hand. The same is true for the false dichotomy of patron needs vs. staff needs: while patron needs are certainly central to Commons work, effective provision of value-added services to meet patron needs simultaneously allows great value to accrue to the staff, not the least of which are job security, job satisfaction, and greater assurance of resource funding. What proves to be good, valuable and effective for the patron is *also* good, valuable and rewarding for the staff. Education and training help soften the simplistic *Either / Or* dilemma.

6. *Dogmatism* – While libraries and librarians have developed and long employed extensive and complex structures, rules and regulations for organizing, cataloging, placing, providing authority control for, and safeguarding information and informational resources, there is a point of diminishing returns when librarians prescribe the correct ways and proscribe the incorrect ways. We librarians have seen patrons indicate their opinions and *vote* with their time and money to abandon the library and go elsewhere for their informational needs, to those providers who study and understand customer and patron needs and preferences. As the authors have described and discussed above, it has become ever-clearer since the late 1980's that the nexus of technologies, increased variety and speed of access, resultant learning styles and preferences all demand non-dogmatic approaches to library information and technology resources and support to meet these demands: if and when we do not evolve to meet these demands, someone else will. As with the Tragedy of chauvinism, it is sometimes budget-cuts and restricted resources, which *force* the dogmatists to relinquish control and accept productive collaboration. Here as well Education, training and cross-training provide opportunities to soften or transform inveterate attitudes.

7. *Professional identity* - Librarians as professionals, who demonstrate self-respect and respect for professional behavior in para-professionals, engender respect and create a culture of respect and professionalism. However, this means recognizing and appreciating real professional competence, behavior and relative expertise wherever it is demonstrated, irrespective of degree (Ph.D., MLS, college-degree or not), age, or other characteristic. Professional identity based on anything other than these valid criteria only enervates and squanders potential and prevents the potential for professional growth and the creation of a true and inclusive culture of professionalism. This is a long-term concern in schools of library and information science and can best be dealt with in the graduate curriculum.

8. *Symbiosis* - creating a culture of dependence (vs. personal control). A tendency among library staff is to serve as the keeper and protector of information and knowledge, to create among patrons a sense of dependence on the expertise of library staff to provide access to the best information, the “correct” information. While an

expert, a sage-on-the-stage, has clearly unique value, study after study (e.g., LibQUAL+ and the OCLC Environmental Scan 2003) has revealed that our patrons want to be and to feel independent and self-reliant. Self-control / informational control is consistently perceived as the most important service domain by our patrons. They reject service providers who tend to create patron dependence on their expertise, especially if the patrons senses that such dependence serves a symbiotic need. As with the Tragedies of chauvinism, dogmatism and professional identity, counter-productive symbiosis best mitigated or resolved through Education and training – here based on our knowledge that *information control* (not dependence) is of utmost importance to the patron. We can also help by teaching staff to respond simply: “no, I’m sorry, that is not something I can help you with” and referring them to a more appropriate office or simply reminding them that some problems (e.g., computer incompatibilities, ISP difficulties, etc.) are not the responsibility of the Commons staff.

In his writings Gerald Hardin reviews options for resolving and transcending tragic problems in the Commons. Among the strategies reviewed, he discounts internal self-monitoring, self-control (conscience-control) as being unrealistic and unworkable. To the extent that Hardin’s view is valid, the most effective strategy may be to use, in addition to conscience, a framework of external locus of control - simply Education, and what has often been called staff development, within a framework of opportunities and incentives along with guidance and mentoring. In the Information and Learning Commons environment, user education and staff development can be designed and implemented as a sort of “Curriculum”: a set of parameters and guidelines (rules and regulations, technological systems and fixes, and, at it most extreme: disincentives for breach of the common good). The effort will be most effective if it is implemented and pursued in an ongoing way, rather than as a one-time, one-session, one-lesson phenomenon. This Educational Curriculum has a *cognitive* component, with prescriptions and proscriptions based on logical reasoning, and an *affective* component aimed at developing an awareness that maintenance of the common good requires and needs communal attitudes and behaviors infused with good will and humor from all staff and patrons.