Building and Maintaining a Team Approach in a Rapidly-Advancing Area of Research and Development

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Context – Part 1

- Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work is becoming an important part of research, particularly in large-scale projects in Digital Humanities
- Collaboration between content experts in English, History, Fine Arts, Geography and others areas, librarians, programmers/developers, research assistants and other individuals.
- Benefits include increased quality, depth, and scope and often achieves what an individual cannot.
- Challenges exist including coordination and tensions between various professional subcultures due to differing academic languages and research methodology, and necessity for new skills in communication, negotiation, coordination, problem-solving and others must be developed
- Additional challenges when working in a rapidly changing research field,
- Creates a need for increased coordination and collaboration with a balance in flexibility

Context – Part 2

- Case Study – Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE)
- Large multidisciplinary research project with 35 active researchers across four countries
- Focus on e-books
- Partner and stakeholder organizations
- Budget of approximately $13 million
- 7 year time frame

Context – Part 3

- Different Stages of Planning and Coordination
  - Pre "real work" – project development stage (Grant writing)
    - Often project is conceived for purposes of purposes of securing funds and approval.
    - It does not address all aspects of the research process nor working relationships
    - Often "if we are successful, then …."
  - Project Implementation (Right after getting grant)
    - More detailed articulation of working relationships, tasks, deadlines, and other issues
  - Project Implementation (Undertaking the "real work")
    - Enacting the work plans and relationships and ensuring accountability
- Supporting Tools
  - Face-to-Face meetings – formal and informal
  - Regular conference calls
  - Email listserves
  - Project planning spaces
  - Project Charters
  - Time

INKE Experience

- Joint Grant Writing
- Ongoing Collaboration Processes
- Governance Documents
- 2 years of research under the framework of the grant

Joint Grant Writing

- Articulates the research direction, methodology, project objectives and key tasks
- Creates opportunities to discuss roles, expectations, authority, decision making and other issues in advice of "real work"
  - Reduces the potential for conflict later
  - Creates a common understanding of project goals and roles, reinforced by joint writing
  - Face-to-face meetings to negotiate differences and establish new working vocabularies specific to the project
  - Often a slow process

Ongoing Collaboration Processes

- Regular face-to-face meetings
  - Formal planning sessions and informal meals with discussions of research interesting and areas of collaboration
- Regular communication through variety of channels
  - Verbal, email, electronic project space
- Annual planning, implementing and reporting cycles to support the overall research objectives

Governance Documents

- Development of Governance Documents
  - Articulated working relationships between various levels within the grant
    - Positive relationship while anticipating potential problems and/or changes
  - Co-written by Administrative Committee
    - Updated as required
    - Reviewed annually
  - Written and approved before any research was undertaken
  - Researchers, RAs, post docs, and others signed as sign of commitment to the project
    - Must be signed before money flows to an individual
  - Living document over the life of the grant
    - Language is added, deleted, modified as changing circumstances necessitate

Governance Documents

- Topics
  - Process for inclusion of new associate partners and researchers
  - Authorship convention (with INKE Research Group)
  - Intellectual Property clause
  - Processes for planning and resource allocation, decision-making and quorum, dispute resolution and succession planning
  - Protocols for data and document storage, communication and reporting, and leaves
  - Clear relationship between planning, agency and accountability
  - Refined project charter ("spirit of the relationship")
- INKE Administrative Omnibus Governance Document http://conferences.uvic.ca/index.php/INKE/inke2009_october/paper/view/49/18
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Understanding the Collaboration Process – Part 1

- Building on research on the collaboration within this project
  - Allows individuals to accomplish more than possible by individuals
  - Accomplishes certain outcomes
  - Requires specific set of skills and perspectives
    - Interpersonal, planning, patience, flexibility, ability to "see the world in other terms" (AL#1)
    - Negotiation, rather than something tightly controlled
    - Difference between a soloist and the chorus (blending of voices) (R#1)

Understanding the Collaboration Process – Part 2

- Advantages:
  - Creation of larger community
    - Both within the research team and the larger community of practice
    - Ability for GRAs to interact with many of the leaders in the field
  - Ability to learn from each other
    - Content, skills, new ways of thinking, collaborative writing
    - Pooling information and expertise
  - Creation of supportive environment at all levels of the collaboration
    - Planning together, talking about challenges and ideas
    - Iterative Process – Receive positive signals when collaborative, then more likely to collaborate
  - Academic training for GRAs
    - Conference planning cycle, research planning, connections to the larger field

Understanding the Collaboration Process – Part 3

- Challenges:
  - Many of the typical challenges
    - Integration of disciplines, geography, interpersonal issues
  - Level of workload and travel
    - Paperwork associated with accountability to team and funding agency
    - Associated travel of meetings
    - Impact on other research projects not connected with INKE
    - Post docs are the only ones able to devote 100% time to project
  - Structures and systems
    - Not having research infrastructure or framework to understand big humanities research
    - Necessity of cooperation from other parts of campus and across campuses (research offices, human resources, IT computer support)
    - Reward structures that favour individual work over collaboration
    - Lack of vocabulary for collaboration in the Humanities
      - How to articulate what is needed from other research areas and what can be contributed to other research areas
  - Collaborating within a quickly changing field such as e-books
  - Flexibility versus control/accountability

Lessons learned thus far

- Joint writing activity of grant application and governance documents created deepened collaboration and work relationships and buy-in and commitment
- Realized that planning and coordination is an act of faith that should pay dividends later
  - already finding this as we move into the third year of the research
- Governance Documents
  - Kept the research front and centre for researchers
  - Prevents slippage
  - Signals to GRAs that this was "serious academic research"
  - Made visible the often "invisible" administrative work
  - Provide a foundation upon which conduct research in a rapidly changing field
- "Vibe" within the environment
  - Supports the individual and the collaboration
  - Needs to be maintained since it can be fragile and easily disrupted by individualistic behaviour
- Need to plan on a yearly basis given the changes in technology and the potential in the technology

Conclusions

- Large scale multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration creates benefits and challenges for researchers
- Processes are needed to create, support and manage collaboration in this context
- Collaboration takes time to develop and maintain
- Define the long term research goals and plan the research on a yearly basis