

# INSTRUCTOR COLLEGE VIRTUAL SWAP MEET: A MODEL FOR DEVELOPING AN INSTRUCTION COMMUNITY

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## INTRODUCTION

Many library instructors, newcomers and veterans alike, find themselves facing the same problems as their students: there is an overabundance of helpful information available, and knowing where to start can be overwhelming and disorienting. To address this problem, many new instructors are often directed to an institutionally curated repository of resources designed to orient them to their duties and work environment. In an attempt to make a repository of instruction ideas that is dynamic, adaptive, and useful, the University of Michigan's Instructor College has created an online learning community to facilitate professional development in this area. This paper will explain the history of the Instructor College's efforts and provide a model for other institutions to develop the next generation of professional development tools.

## INSTRUCTOR COLLEGE AT MLIBRARY

Launched in 2001, MLibrary's Instructor College is a specially focused staff development initiative of the University Library. The goal of Instructor College is to strengthen the instructional skills of MLibrary staff. Serving a campus of over 41,000 students, MLibrary instructors taught almost 2,000 sessions in the 2010/2011 school year ranging from curriculum-associated sessions to open workshops to campus outreach sessions and many other categories. Instructor College is an effort to support the diverse professional development needs of

library instructors. Currently the Instructor College Steering Committee (ICSC) provides programming and educational materials to library instructors throughout the library system. For more details about the origins of the Instructor College, see the 2001 LOEX Conference Presentation entitled "Instructor College: Staff Development for Library Instructors."

## INSTRUCTOR COLLEGE AND ITS ROLE AS A REPOSITORY

When the Instructor College Task Force (now the ICSC) was formed, the group created a physical space where library instructors could engage with instruction. Called the Instructor College Resource Center, this space provided common professional development tools such as a digital video camera and a practice space. It also included a small library of selected books and articles on instruction. Over time, the Task Force would engage graduate assistants to collect materials and develop programming for the Resource Center. The Task Force also engaged interns to design a reading club which met for a semester to discuss instruction articles. Various interns were hired over several summers to collect instruction materials on assorted topics such as teaching portfolios and core competencies. The goal of these efforts was to promote both conversations around instruction as well as to provide a repository of instruction materials.

These instruction materials were kept in the physical space of the Instructor College Resource Center in the Science Library. Materials were also collected on shared drive space as well as on course management sites in order to make them more available outside of the Resource Center. Some of the materials were eventually included on the Instructor College portion of the library's web site. This served to make some of these materials more accessible to the many library instructors

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outside of the Central Campus library complex.

Organization of the instruction materials through the website proved to be awkward as systems for grouping or cataloging these items did not always foster searchability. To address this problem, a subcommittee within the ICSC developed a partial list of support materials for instructors and stored them in Reference and User Services Department's reference wiki. While searching the wiki for instruction materials was more successful than searching within the large confines of the web site, the wiki materials were incomplete and did not generate the opportunities for conversation on instruction that once could be facilitated in the Instructor College Resource Center. Furthermore, the Instructor College Resource Center's physical space was re-purposed in 2003 to satisfy an increased need for office space in the library. There was no longer a physical space for instruction conversations and an instruction material collection, and the ICSC was dissatisfied with the virtual space that had been created to fit those needs.

## **INSTRUCTOR COLLEGE AND THE 2011/2012 ULA SECOND YEAR PROJECT**

In an effort to create a viable solution, a collaborative project was proposed by an MLibrary University Library Associate (ULA) (see <http://www.lib.umich.edu/library-human-resources/university-library-associates-ula> for more information about this graduate student assistant (GSA) program). ULAs serve a half-time commitment at MLibrary that is integrated with the information science curriculum at U-M's School of Information. This half-time commitment requires all ULAs to complete a project that satisfies a library need during their second year of service. The proposed project originated from the ULA's interest in instruction and his experiences with learning library instruction skills. The ICSC's need for a sustainable information repository and the ULA's interest in web-based technologies seemed complementary, and the proposal to create a virtual space that paralleled the functions and purpose of the physical Instructor College Resource Center was accepted.

### **INSTRUCTOR COLLEGE CAFÉ – DESIGN STAGE**

In preparing for the creation of the formerly entitled Instructor College Swap Meet and now called the Instructor College Café, one ICSC member was assigned to work with the ULA through the development, creation, and implementation of this tool. This librarian and ULA met regularly to explore various issues including

- What is the goal of the Café?
- What kinds of content would be included the Café?
- Who would be using the content and how would it be organized?
- What kinds of social media features should be included to foster online discussion?

- What platform would best suit our needs?

The goal for the project was to create a tool that would foster both an instructional repository and interactive engagement with instruction materials in our library environment. It also seemed ideal to create a tool that might be used by librarians outside of the MLibrary system. The project's initial phase involved collecting materials from various sources that could serve as content in the Café's repository. Pertinent material was gathered by the ULA from graduate level library instruction courses, searches in listservs, and through interviews with librarians on various instruction committees at MLibrary. These librarians also gave input on how they would like to see the content organized. To assist with the coming design phase, user personas were created that described typical people who would benefit from using the Café and how they would interact with it. Common social media features like comment and rating systems seemed like a good fit for the tool. It was hoped that a platform that was content-agnostic to allow for the uploading of many different formats could be found.

It soon seemed clear that the choice of platform might drive how the project could be implemented. While both the librarian and ULA had some experience building web tools, they realized that the platform needed for this kind of tool would be more sophisticated than what they had used for prior projects. Interviews with the team leader of the library's User Experience Department and the Web Systems Manager offered insight as to the types of platforms that might work for the project. Questions about platforms were also asked of librarians on various instruction committees. Of all the technological platforms considered, Drupal and BuddyPress emerged as leading candidates with which to build and host the Café. However, both platforms had intrinsic costs and benefits. MLibrary's web site is built with Drupal, and the User Experience team leader and Web Systems Manager were concerned that the amount of training necessary for the ULA to work in Drupal seemed prohibitive. The ULA studied BuddyPress, a self-hosted, out-of-the box social network platform as a strong candidate for the Café. In the end, the library's web team felt that hosting an additional platform like BuddyPress would complicate library server maintenance.

In general terms, it was determined that a suitable platform should meet these criteria:

- **Ease of use:** The platform should present a user-friendly interface with simplified inputs and features.
- **Sustainability:** The platform should be easy to maintain and modify to meet the changing needs of the library's instructors.
- **Functionality:** The platform must satisfy as many design requirements as possible, or be adaptable in meeting those requirements.

Finally, during the lengthy platform exploration period, the Web Systems Manager suggested that building the tool with Drupal would allow the Café to work well in the

library's web environment and could be adapted for outside use by non-UM librarians with the use of university's friend accounts. Furthermore, using Drupal also would simplify future upkeep and upgrading scenarios because MLibrary's website is currently built with the Drupal platform and the library's IT specialists are very experienced Drupal developers. Conversely, implementing the BuddyPress platform would require a WordPress installation on the library's servers, which would introduce a new technological requirement for library's IT specialists. Drupal also allows for the implementation of many social media features that could extend the functionality of the Instruction Cafe. To address the steep and possibly prohibitive Drupal learning curve, an MLibrary Web Developer offered to closely mentor the ULA and monitor the project's process. The ULA and the librarian created sketches of Café web pages and began the construction phase.

### **INSTRUCTOR COLLEGE CAFÉ – CONSTRUCTION**

Building the Instructor College Café involved several phases that drew on the ULA's School of Information curriculum and experience working between different units in the library. Chief among the first steps, given the complex nature of working with a content management system like Drupal, was setting up multiple development sites for learning the system's core functionalities. A development site was established on the School of Information's servers, and served as a secure sandbox for self-paced learning and experimentation with Drupal. Parallel to this School of Information development site was a development site on MLibrary's servers, which served as a safe but more regulated environment. The library development site contained the overall structure and theming of the MLibrary website as a whole, and therefore required a more structured approach than the comparatively unstructured School of Information site.

Once the ULA became familiar enough with Drupal's core functions, the next phase was to consult with MLibrary's IT specialists about properly implementing the desired specifications within the Library's web framework. This was achieved by matching the Instructor College's desired specifications to modules and themes that were available in Drupal. Many of the desired specifications could be easily met by combining various Drupal modules together. To identify the best modules to use, the ULA consulted with MLibrary's IT specialists, the Drupal online community, and available reference material. This phase presented many challenges because some of the jargon and vocabulary was unfamiliar, but the effects of these challenges were mitigated with careful guidance by MLibrary's IT specialists.

Once the desired specifications were compiled together into what represented a suitable beta-model of the Café, the final debugging and site simplification phase began. This phase involved applying minor adjustments in terms of add-ons and core functionalities in order to make the Café work more seamlessly with the overall Library website. This phase is understandably an on-going project, given the complex design of the Library website and the changing preferences of the

Café's users.

### **INSTRUCTION COLLEGE CAFÉ – BETA LAUNCH**

The Instructor College Café is currently in its beta stage. The ICSC members and a few librarians have been working toward populating the Resources section with instruction materials such as locally created lesson plans and activities. The Forum section is also currently being tested.

### **INSTRUCTION COLLEGE CAFÉ – NEXT STEPS**

Over the summer of 2012, various actions will be attempted to create a more vigorously-tested and complete Instructor College Café.

- Beta testing will continue.
- Content from the Reference wiki will be moved to the Café.
- Documentation of the project will be presented to the ICSC and the plan for its maintenance will be codified.
- Training materials are hoped to be created in order to create best practices for using the Café.
- The Café will be formally presented in a variety of library environments in order to publicize its existence and encourage its use.

### **DISCUSSION**

The ICSC and ULA offer several pieces of advice to those who plan to undertake their own version of the Instructor College Café including information about platform choice, local considerations, naming the project, and project management.

Deciding on a platform for an online community such as the Café is a big step in the process. Take your time at this stage and solicit advice from many experts. There may be aspects that you may not have considered. In the end, a platform that allows for local management and that works well with other parts of the library organization was desirable for MLibrary. Drupal is an open source platform that has an active learning community supporting those who use it. MLibrary also has a local community of learners who were willing to offer advice on the project. Local help with the platform was important to the team because there were certain aspects for which we knew we would need help. Decide what aspects of the project are most important for you and base your decision on those factors.

It took the team more time than was originally planned to create the tool. There were a few roadblocks that affected the time table. For example, the platform exploration stage took more time than was originally planned. Additionally, design and development of the Café occurred concurrent to unrelated projects, requiring careful spacing out and adaptation of deliverable dates.

The name of the project was consistently changed. Several conversations were had in an attempt to arrive at a name that describes all aspects of the Café. It was difficult to create a name that conveyed both the static, repository aspect of the project as well as the social media nature of the tool. Presenting the project to different groups of librarians was helpful because we could solicit feedback about the name. For example, the team created a name and later found that that name was associated with another resource that veteran reference librarians used in another context. In the end, the team was glad that we asked for feedback about names because we avoided the duplication of terms used in other contexts.

Finally, the Café was created with the user in mind. At the design stage, articulating user needs helped the team present the project to the various programmers and developers as we asked them for advice. Keeping our focus on what we thought our library instructors would need helped when it was obvious that the project could go in many directions. The team members asked many potential users for their thoughts and presented the project to many librarians at various stages.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Instructor College has created a model for an online instruction community. The value of this model can be found within its content and is extended by the members of the library community themselves. Online features that allow for social interaction on instruction ideas provide opportunities for ongoing professional development and community building. When combined into a single tool, the ability of the Instructor College to meet its mission is extended into a space that is dynamic and changing as the job of teaching itself.

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