

Towards Training Librarian 2.0: A Community-based Participatory Teaching Approach

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Introduction

Library 2.0 model has attracted a lot of research and practice attention in Library and Information Science (LIS) discipline. Library 2.0 emphasizes the importance of user participation in creating and evaluating services that libraries provide both physically and virtually (Casey and Savastinuk, 2006). Moving towards Library 2.0 model, LIS professionals are challenged to start becoming “Librarian 2.0” – a term first proposed by Stephen Abram, vice president of Innovation at SirsiDynix (Abram, 2006). Since then, there have been numerous discussions about what the skills and knowledge that LIS professionals should have in order to provide Library 2.0 service. In spite of the various lists of librarian 2.0 skills and knowledge, all agree that Library 2.0 is about a user-centered approach to provide and improve library services, and a librarian 2.0 needs to be able to take that approach in his/her daily practice. For example, Stephens listed six key traits that he believed were necessary for Librarian 2.0 with the first key trait as librarians 2.0 plans for their users (Stephens, 2006). Cohen published her much cited work *The Librarian’s 2.0 Manifesto* (2006) where nine out of the seventeen principles were about users, the need of using users’ needs, and involving users in library practice.

There have been practices about using community-based projects in teaching LIS courses. In these practices, the emphasis has been on providing students authentic learning experiences and encouraging or requiring students to participate in the community-based projects and/or activities during the course study. In other words, community groups are mainly viewed as just stakeholders of the projects providing real world context for the students.

This paper reports a community-based teaching practice that focuses on training LIS students about the user-centered approach towards Librarian 2.0. In this practice, a user-centered approach is considered not only about using technologies to reach the users such as the use of Twitters to collect users’ feedbacks, but also about how to encourage and foster active user participation and integrate users’ needs into the processes of planning and design in library space. Different from the existing community-based teaching practices, the proposed teaching approach puts an emphasis on encouraging the community partners to participate in the project-related activities. That is, community groups are active players in the students’ projects. This

emphasis is expected to support students to practice the process of engaging and facilitating user participation in their projects, which is a key soft skill of Librarian 2.0.

This paper reports a case study of how this community-based participatory approach was practiced in a database management system (DBMS) class. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the class context is first presented including the class' community partners, the database projects, and the evaluation mechanisms. Then the data collection and analysis methods are described for probing the effectiveness of the community-based participatory approach. Next the findings and lessons learnt are discussed for future teaching practices that adopt this community-based participatory approach.

A Database Management System (DBMS) Class

The DBMS class was offered to the students of MLIS program at a major Canadian university. This program in general entails three terms of coursework in which DBMS course is considered an important technology course.

In fall of 2010, the database class consisted of ten students. Three non-profit community organizations worked with the class for their database development projects. The class created three databases for these organizations including: a volunteer database to help one organization better manage its volunteers and schedule volunteers for activities, a visitor database to help one organization manage visitors' information for quarterly report, and a collection database to help one self-organized group to archive and share useful information about the collection. Three student groups were formed by the instructor according to the students' technical background, group work and leadership history, schedule for group meeting, and preferences on the database projects.

The student groups were required to engage the community partners in the project and foster active participation of the community partners. This was manifested by requiring the students to collect and document the community partners' feedback on the students' activities at different stages. The students were also required to write reflective journals about their learning experiences which included not only their reflections on the database concepts and the database design and implementation issues, but also their feedbacks on the non-technical challenges they ran into in the group project.

Data Collection and Analysis

All the three representatives of the community groups chose to participate in the study. They were interviewed about their experiences of working with the student groups. Eight students chose to participate in the study. Four of them chose to be interviewed about their experiences of working with a real user in the project and their experiences of working with the other students in the group. Three interviewees were from the same group. The interviews were semi-structured. All interviews were conducted close to the end of the group project. They were conducted in a face-to-face setting and lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The participating students' coursework was also collected as part of the research data. This includes their background survey used for forming the groups and their reflective journals.

Findings

The interview data suggest that the students not only learned about database concepts and database technology but also appreciated the opportunity of working with real users and gained

experiences of how to take their perspectives into account and integrate them into the database design. One group was assigned to create the collection database. The collection included published articles, books, etc. At the beginning of the project, the students thought they would develop a library catalogue for the collection with bibliographic data like authors, publication year, publisher, etc. An interview with the representative totally changed the group's view. One member reflected on this and said, "*Working with a client is really interesting, and the project that we got, the cataloguing of resources...we have to be a little bit creative in how we approach the project because...he wants it to be place where people can come and quickly find resources without having to type in search words.*"

The community partners also appreciated the active participation process. They were pleased that the students took the organization's perspective seriously in the design process. One representative said: "*They do not come in with preconceived ideas of what should be done, what needs to be done. They listen to what I have to say... And I think that's the right way to do it, it's not being reactive...I've seen some professional consultants that aren't as well prepared and as thorough as this group is, so they've been very good*". He further commented that, "... *They do care about an organization they've had no connection to. That's...something that don't always get with the consultant that looks at it you know, this is a business project one off then I'll move on to something else...*"

One representative was happily surprised when he found he was empowered to offer feedback during the design process. Reflecting upon his "learning experience", he said, "*I hadn't realized...that you don't just turn something over to people and say do it. They're gonna come back with questions, and they're gonna force me to think about...And so it's not a matter of, 'Oh here's a bunch of stuff. Go away and have fun with it.'* It meant that I had to think about what this...database was for, and it meant what people would want it for, and I had to clarify my own thoughts about it. And...that was a very interesting experience..."

The case study presented two challenges of practicing the approach in classroom teaching: solidifying project vision with the community groups and alleviating the students' pressure about real impact of the project. Several suggestions are made to address these challenges. First, the instructor develops an agreement with the community groups on project expectation: the community groups are not obligated or anticipated to adopt the project outcome but understand that the project outcome has the potential benefit to the groups. Second, the instructor requires the student groups to develop a user need document together with the community groups as a way for both parties to identify the shared project goals and specify the community groups' needs. Third, the students are educated about the culture of non-profit community groups to help the students better position their roles in the community groups' practice.

References

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