"The MITC Fellowships: An Experiment in Collaborative Professional Development"

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Seven instructional technologists and librarians from six Midwestern liberal arts colleges have completed a year as fellows in a pilot program. The MITC Fellows Pilot Program brought together this group of professionals to recognize their achievements and to provide an opportunity for enhanced professional development. This paper, to be presented as a poster during the 2006 Campus Technology conference, will discuss the history and origin of the fellows program, define the purpose and the structure of the fellowship, introduce the fellows and their projects, discuss the challenges and benefits of the program, and conclude with suggestions for the future of the program.

History and Origin

MITC (Midwest Instructional Technology Center), one of three regional centers that have merged to form NITLE (National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education), offers workshops and conferences that bring together instructional technologists, librarians, faculty members and campus technology leaders to teach technical and pedagogical skills and provide an opportunity for development of multi-campus collaborative projects. Noticing the exodus of several talented instructional technologists from their institutions to other sectors, Alex Wirth-Cauhcon of MITC developed the MITC fellows pilot program. The fellowship, as proposed to the MITC advisory board, responded to the need to reward and recognize the work of instructional technologists at liberal arts schools and to serve as a next step beyond technical training in the professional development process for instructional technologists.

In the spring of 2005 the Dean or CIO at each of the 26 MITC member schools was invited to nominate one candidate to apply for the fellowship. Nominees were to be in positions that support the use of technology in teaching and learning, but were not limited to instructional technologists. Nominees could be instructional technologists, librarians or members of the teaching faculty. Each nominee proposed a project to be completed during the yearlong fellowship that would benefit his or her home institution. MITC highlighted certain areas of interest for projects, including but not limited to digital images, course management tools, social software and projects that support students. Each fellow was given funds to support their project. The funds were supplied in part by MITC with matching money provided by the home institution. Together the fellows would manage the funds. A committee made up of a CAO, CIO, library director, director of
academic computing, director of instructional technology and a professor reviewed the applications and awarded six fellowships for 2005-2006.

Fellows and Projects

The fellows included seven participants from six liberal arts institutions:

Nedda Ahmed, Fine Arts Librarian, and Christian Faur, Digital Media Technologist, at Denison University served as a team. Their project supported the digitization of the art history department’s slide collection. Together they implemented CONTENTdm to house the images and metadata.

Brooke Cox, the Visual Resources Librarian at DePauw University sought to create a streamlined system for promotion, training, presentation and assessment of various digital image collections used on her campus. The purpose of the project was to give users easier access to the various image collections provided by the library.

Arno Damerow, an Instructional Technologist at Beloit College, facilitated the adoption of MOODLE, an open-source Learning Management System, to students, faculty and staff during the 2005-2006 academic year.

Doug Foxgrover, Academic Computing Coordinator for the Natural Sciences at Carleton College, sought to gather and disseminate resources to assist in generating meaningful visual displays of information. His goal was to help make it easier for faculty and students to see what their data have to offer.

Barron Koralesky, the Associate Director for Academic Technology Services at Macalester, began work with the information services departments to help Macalester find a solution for digital asset management that allows for effectively storing, finding, and using images, text, and the multitudes of other digital formats of data that are used at the college.

Melinda Kraft, an Instructional Technologist at Albion College leveraged the popularity of portable digital music devices, such as iPods and Mp3 players, to give students more learning opportunities and help faculty discover how they might use the technology to enhance their course delivery.

Purpose and Structure

The fellows first met at the June 2005, ITLAC (Instructional Technologists at Liberal Arts Colleges) conference sponsored by MITC and hosted by Denison University. During this first meeting the fellows discussed how best to stay in contact during the year. Wirth-Cauchon served as the facilitator for the group during the year. He scheduled conference calls, made arrangements with invited speakers, and helped the fellows with their projects when needed. The initial structure of the fellowship included twice monthly conference calls. The first monthly call focused on questions and issues raised by the fellows in regard to their projects or more generally related to their jobs. These calls
included discussion of readings as selected by the fellow assigned to lead the call. The second call was with an expert in the field as identified by the fellows. The fellows complied a list of questions, via e-mail, for the invited speaker. Speakers came from a variety of backgrounds and professions. Each had a unique perspective from which to discuss information technology and the role instructional technologists play in shaping the field.

The speakers were:

Jim Schwartz, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dean of the College, Professor of Chemistry, Grinnell College. Vicki Goldsmith, 2005 Iowa Teacher of the Year, Roosevelt High School, Des Moines, Iowa. Frances Maloy, 2004-2005 President of ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries), Division Leader, Access Services, Emory University Libraries. Todd Kelley, University Librarian and Associate Provost for Information Technology Services, Sewanee: the University of the South. Cyprien Lomas, Director of the Learning Centre at University of British Columbia and ELI (EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative) Fellow. Bill Ying, Chief Technology Officer, ARTstor. Carol Smith, Associate Chief Information Officer, DePauw University

To maintain a connection between the fellows, several methods of communication were used. In addition to the twice-monthly conference calls the fellows communicated via an e-mail mailing list. Usage of the list was low. Most messages were sent to solicit support for funding requests and to collect questions for speakers. Near the end of the fellowship other methods of staying in contact were explored. This included establishing a Moodle site to begin compiling notes from past calls and to provide a shared space for developing this paper and subsequent poster.

The fellows also began to use Marratech, an online web conferencing tool. The fellows continued to use the conference call for audio, but with the addition of web conferencing also used video to connect with the other fellows. Marratech provides a white board space that can be used simultaneously by multiple users. This allowed the fellows to compile notes from the calls. The text from the white board was copied and pasted into the Moodle site at the end of the call for archiving and to allow fellows not present during the call to read what they missed. This proved to be an effective way of communicating. Adding video seemed to make the connection between fellows stronger.

In the end the fellows were holding weekly conference calls to discuss the fellowship and their projects. These weekly meetings, though not attended by all fellows, proved valuable in keeping the discussion of the fellowship and projects moving forward and helped foster a sense of community. Many of the fellows agree that making the calls a weekly occurrence was the most positive change in the fellowship.

Challenges
Time was the biggest challenge in keeping the fellows engaged in the activities of the fellowship. The fellows work in service-oriented positions where they must answer the call for help from students or faculty at any and all times. This often pulled fellows away from their desk during the scheduled conference call times. Finding a common time to schedule calls was nearly impossible. Near the end of the fellowship when calls were taking place weekly more of the fellows were able to participate in the calls. Whether this was the result of a lighter workload at the end of the semester or because the calls were becoming routine was unclear.

Finding the best mode of communication was also difficult. Conference calls worked, but often times one or more participants had a low quality connection that made their participation in the call difficult or impossible. The particular system used for conference calls required the call to be initiated by a third party; though usually not a problem, this on occasion did delay the start of calls as the fellows waited for the call to be initiated.

Another challenge was maintaining a feeling of connectedness and engagement with the other fellows. The addition of video and white board note taking on Marratech helped alleviate some of this feeling by allowing participants to more actively engage in the call.

Benefits

Despite challenges in keeping all participants engaged there were many benefits. Having a network of colleagues to call on for assistance or just to bounce ideas off of was helpful. It provided an opportunity to take on broader issues affecting the work of instructional technologists and allowed an opportunity to step away from the day-to-day tasks of upgrading software and trouble shooting printer problems. While many of the fellows started the fellowship focused on their projects, the fellows now realize that the networking was among the biggest rewards.

Having the chance to talk with experts in the field provided an opportunity for the fellows to look at instructional technology and what it means to be part of the profession in a new way. The speakers helped broaden and deepen the network of contacts available to the fellows.

Being recognized by the fellowship was of great reward as many of those involved are not in positions generally rewarded for the work they do. Instructional technologists are often part of successful faculty projects but do not receive the praise for the completed project. The fellowship serves to reward the work performed by those professionals.

Conclusions and Future Work

The MITC fellowship program can serve as a model for successful collaborative professional development. It can be expanded to include professionals who are spread across a wide geographic area. The fellowship provides an opportunity for instructional technologists to engage in professional development activities otherwise unavailable to
someone in a small department or from an institution that cannot provide resources to allow for professional development outside the institution.

As we, the fellows, look to the future, we will continue to rely on this network of colleagues to enhance and strengthen the work we do on our campuses. We recognize that the success of the fellowship pilot program would not have been possible without the support of our home institutions, the funding provided by NITLE, MITC and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation or the support of the other fellows. While the 2005 fellowship officially ended in June 2006, the value of this experience to this group of fellows and to NITLE has just begun.