

Collaboration Contexts: Framing Local, Group and Global Solutions

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Introduction

The LAM (library, archive, and museum) workshops held by OCLC Research at Princeton University, the Smithsonian Institution, the University of Edinburgh, the Victoria and Albert Museum and Yale University intentionally focused on collaboration within a single institution. In these workshops, we expected that we would be able to find, as well as catalyze, deeper collaborations under an institutional umbrella than among institutions that don't have an administrative structure in common. The projects the workshop sites committed themselves to bear out this assumption and are described in the report, [*Beyond the Silos of the LAMs: Collaboration Among Libraries, Archives and Museums*](#) [pdf].

With the forum "[Yours, Mine, Ours: Leadership Through Collaboration](#)" that will take place at the Smithsonian Institution, 20-21 September 2010, we are intentionally broadening the conversation. While we continue to be passionate about library, archive, and museum collaboration, we'll now place the emphasis more on "collaboration" and just a tad less on "LAM." Good collaborations in cultural heritage don't always require all three of these parties to be present, and they often require additional parties (such as IT or public/private partners) to succeed.

In addition, we are expanding our investigation beyond institutional boundaries to look at collaboration in the broader landscape. Collaborations can form in different settings: local (within a single institution), in a group setting, or in a seemingly unbounded environment that we'll call "global." These collaboration contexts provide the scaffolding for our "Leadership Through Collaboration" forum, which will feature panels exploring each of these contexts in greater depth. What follows here is an attempt to sketch out the benefits and limitations inherent in each of these settings as a high-level guide to the trajectory of our event, as well as a resource in its own right for assessing collaborative activities.

Local Solutions—Common Administration

"We work together because we have the same employer."

From the perspective of a large institution (e.g., a university campus) with many units (e.g., libraries, archives, and museums), incorporating collaboration into the underlying work culture is foundational to realizing that institution's potential and achieving its mission. When

ideas, data, and services flow freely, new solutions emerge, and new knowledge is created. From the perspective of individual units, collaboration allows them to thrive when times are good and survive when times are bad. Deep and pervasive service and data relationships with other units provide a compelling argument for continued or increased funding, whereas isolation calls into question the value provided to the institution as a whole.

In highly distributed environments, deep collaboration requires conscious effort and leadership. Since both the institution and its constituent units directly reap the benefits of local collaboration, the context of *common administration* offers a straightforward environment for engaging in joint work. In the sphere of local solutions, we currently see activities such as cross-collection search, shared digitization and digital asset management, and shared conservation facilities.

On the other hand, contemplating collaboration solely within the boundaries of your own institution is arbitrarily self-limiting. While there is no shortage of issues that beg to be addressed at the local level, some aspirations are simply beyond the reach of individual institutions acting alone.

Group collaborations try to address that which transcends any single institution. Don't try it abroad if you haven't done it at home—in many instances, collaboration at the local level is likely to be a prerequisite for entering into meaningful collaborative activities centered on *common interest*.

Group Solutions—Common Interest

"We work together because we have common interests."

Moving beyond the single institution, collaboration across organizational boundaries occurs when there is a *common interest*. A group of motivated individuals or institutions bands together to work on an issue they would have found difficult or impossible to solve in isolation. Many collaborative grant-funded projects fall into this category: a finite number of players tackle an issue that vexes participants in their own local contexts. Because the local benefit of this type of collaboration can be readily perceived, *common interest* collaborations are generally accepted as a way to achieve broad outcomes. In the sphere of group collaborations, we see activities such as open-source software development, subject-based data aggregations, and shared technological platforms such as HathiTrust.

On the other hand, group collaborations around a *common interest* have a high management overhead for setting and managing expectations, dividing up the work, coordinating outputs from different groups, and staying on track. Different work cultures among a group's participants can pose a serious threat to the most rationally conceived projects. Furthermore,

participants' interests may evolve in different directions; commonalities may dissipate over time.

Since *common interest* collaborations rely on direct contact, meetings and constant negotiation, they are challenging to mount and manage at scale. Once these collaborations mature, they often require the creation of new organizational structures such as governing boards or foundations.

Group Solutions—Common Values

“Things work at scale because the community subscribes to the same values.”

In local and group collaborations, institutions and their interests are at the forefront, and the collaborative activity is predicated on the direct local benefit reaped. A collaboration guided by *common values* introduces a notable paradigm shift. It does not put the institutions first, but rather focuses on the intended audience and what that audience expects us to deliver.

While any type of collaboration can be fueled by *common values*, including those circumscribed by institutional boundaries or specific group interests, value-based collaboration emerges as a survival strategy in the global networked environment. Ultimately, we all serve those who want access to our information, increasingly in digital form. Collaboration around values is driven by a shared vision which allows an entire community to respond to challenges in a consistent manner, and invisibly aligns all of us in an effort to realize a shared vision. In this context, the emphasis shifts from managing the collaboration to addressing the shared values. The sphere of *common values* collaboration includes standards, policies for copyright and data aggregation, the commons and open data movements, and the vision of Linked Data.

While *common value* collaborations may have the lowest direct overhead (parties do not have to remain in constant and carefully orchestrated communication to remain in sync), they may also be the most difficult to sell to parent institutions, which generally pay their employees to work on local issues. The institutional benefit of such collaborations is less tangible since they raise all ships. As a matter of fact, in some instances *common value* behaviors may be perceived as threatening local goals, such as policies and technical protocols for making institutional content freely and openly available in many different venues.

At best, applying global values that make things work in a larger context to group and local settings ultimately prepares those institutions for the opportunities of the networked environment. There's benefit in thinking globally and acting locally.

Collaboration Continuum

It is important to remember that none of the collaboration contexts (local, group, or global) is inherently better than the other. Each provides the appropriate framing for solving different types of issues. Within any of these three contexts, the collaboration can be very shallow or very deep.

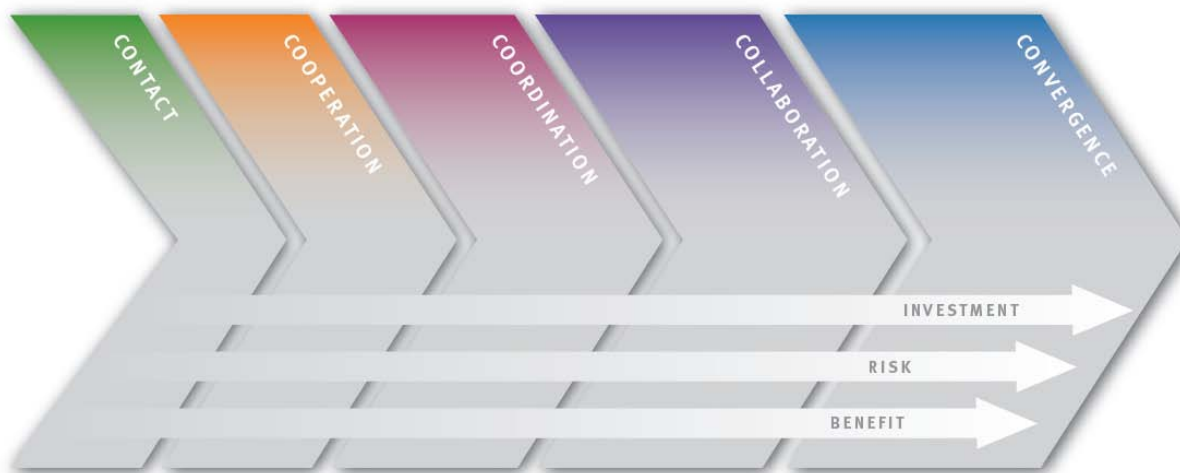


Figure 1: The Collaboration Continuum. (Originally published in *Beyond the Silos of the LAMs: Collaboration Among Libraries, Archives and Museums.*)

Moving along the collaboration continuum, collaborations which express themselves as contact, cooperation or coordination are additive; they foster a working relationship among partners, yet remain distinct projects easily separable from the core functions and workings of the institution. Such collaborations do not impact how an institution organizes itself and its workforce. Deeper collaborations trend toward convergence, a transformative process that eventually will change behaviors, processes and organizational structures, and leads to a fundamental interconnectedness and interdependence among the partners. In transformative collaborations, participants find efficiencies that free up time and resources to focus on the things they do best. At the extreme end of the continuum, convergence in a specific area may turn into infrastructure: a service that is so deeply embedded into our everyday life that it becomes visible only when it breaks down. You only think about who hosts your e-mail, or where your electricity comes from, when the service is interrupted.

Conclusion

The stages of contact, cooperation and coordination on the collaboration continuum are likely the prerequisites for reaping the benefits of deep collaboration and convergence. Within each of the local, group, and global collaboration contexts, additive or transformative relationships can emerge. For both the collaboration contexts and the stages of the collaboration continuum, each setting provides unique benefits and drawbacks. Finding the appropriate collaboration context for a given challenge, and building relationships along the continuum so all parties derive the maximum benefit, are hallmarks of successful long-term collaborations.