Seeing the trees through the forest: Centralising collection management at academic libraries in Hong Kong

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Seeing the trees through the forest: Centralising collection management at academic libraries in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, academic libraries are no stranger to the concept of collaboration. In many aspects of library resources, the 8 academic libraries that form the Joint University Library Advisory Committee (JULAC) have formed a cohesive representative unit. We share the same Integrated Library System and its vendor. We share the same approval plan vendor and distributor of English language monographs & have formed purchasing blocs of ebooks from vendors. JULAC has also shown significant interest in establishing the Joint University Research Archive (JURA), a high-density storage facility to house print materials drawn from all 8 universities. However, when it comes to collaborating to face challenges from more than one entity, sharing of resources becomes significantly more limited. This paper will explore where collaboration ends in collection management and development in academic libraries in Hong Kong—where obstacles lie for further cohesive collaboration in collections and explore specific and strategic areas and methods for further collaboration in the future.

REVIEW OF CONCEPTS IN COLLABORATIVE COLLECTIONS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

A selective review of prevalent themes in sources of collaboration in collection management & development begins with the theory that self-contained ownership of all published material was not effective for two reasons: First, the rise in the sheer amount of published material as well as the rising costs of published material made comprehensive collecting on an institutional basis less and less attainable (Mosher & Pankake 1983), and second the realisation that use of this model did not specifically meet users’ needs--a 7 year study in the 1970's, found that only 1 in 2 of the University of Pittsburgh's books had ever circulated (Kent 1979). The other significant factor is the role technology played, first in automation and making institutions' print holdings visible, and second in adoption of the electronic format as a means to produce and store scholarly material. In questioning the wisdom of owning a comprehensive collection, it was noted that in collecting, librarians would need to focus on service and increase responsiveness in the collections (Osborn 1979). Commenting on the comparative efficiency of collaborative collections as a better alternative to comprehensive collecting, a prediction of four trends that would accelerate this need was made:

1. Radical changes in the structure of information sciences and scholarly communications.
2. Local print collections losing their supremacy.
3. The creation of provision centers to serve specialized regional or national collection needs.
4. The challenge of managing local access to global collections (Branin 1998, p. 12)

These changes in the structure of information sciences and scholarly communications, were described, were seen as a struggle between non-profit libraries and for-profit publishers (Atkinson 2001). Regarding the challenge of managing local access to global
collections, Frazier coined the term "big deal" to describe a large package of publisher-selected e-content for a more reasonable price (Frazier 2001). While not disagreeing with the concept of consortial purchases by libraries, his essay was an admonition to libraries not to fall into the trap of disintermediation—or over-extensively acquiring content from aggregators, who owned and sold content, leaving libraries with no other party to negotiate with.

Countering this view, the use of the big deal at OhioLINK was said to be not only cost-effective, but also more efficient from a user-perspective in fulfilling access to more content thus increasing users' profile in collection development (Sanville 2001). Sanville and Kohl later defined increased cost-effectiveness through collaborative collection development in four key areas:

1. Sharing Books in a Cost Effective Manner
2. Storing Books in a Cost Effective Manner
3. Expanding Access to Articles

A recent review of the collection development and management literature during the years 2009-10 found that collaboration was one of the most common themes among the professional literature (Thomas 2012).

Within those recently reviewed pieces on collaboration, several focused on the definition and meaning of the term collaboration in itself. Chadwell, considering the elements, which are necessary for collaboration, grew intrigued by the definition of the term by analysing the literature of sociology, and internet service technology companies for their description of the term and its meaning, summarising several key elements including:

- trust
- exchange
- expression
- history (Chadwell 2010, p. 153)

O'Connor and Smith found it useful to examine an earlier definition of collaboration in planning OhioLINK's future (O’Connor and Smith 2008). Evans states, one of the fundamental necessities for successful collaboration is the existence of trust at the local level. In his case studies of library collaboration, unsatisfactory or satisfactory attributes in the following elements make or break collaborative collection projects:

1. institutional
2. legal/political
3. technological
4. people
5. knowledge
6. physical space (Evans 2002, p. 276)

As recent as 2000, however, cooperation was still not the active model in academic libraries in the larger Asian region (Gorman and Cullen 2000). Impediments to sharing information libraries in China were described as a lack of internal motivation & external demand for sharing information, as well as isolation of administrative units from each other (Wei and Sun, 1998).

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT IN THE HONG KONG CONSORTIUM

So where are we now in Hong Kong? The most obvious benefits described in the existing literature on collaborative collection development focuses squarely on the financial benefits---from a North American perspective, shrinking budgets year after year are a prime driving force for collaboration. However, compared to our North American colleagues, our financial situation is comparatively healthy in Hong Kong—total expenditure at the 8 JULAC universities increased by 37% between 2006 and 2012 (University Grants Committee 2012). However, even a comparatively rosier situation in Hong Kong must still face the reality that the cost of serials continues to rise at an alarming rate worldwide. Serials expenditures at ARL libraries have increased by over 400% between 1986 and 2011, roughly 4 times the consumer price index (ARL 2012). The problem is not that we do not collaborate in Hong Kong, it is that we do not do it in the two areas, which require the most attention in our local situation:

1. serials prices continue to rise at alarming rates.
2. land and space in Hong Kong is scarce.

JULAC has two committees responsible for pooling cooperative acquisition of electronic materials: Consortiall is a committee for electronic serials and databases and the Electronic Resources Academic Library Link (ERALL) purchases ebooks. These committees are quite successful in accomplishing cost savings. Electronic serial database purchases through Consortiall are a welcome opportunity at collaboration at my university. Indeed 44 eresources were acquired by HKBU through Consortiall with an estimated savings of at least HK$3 million during 2012. Barriers to increased benefits from collaborative purchases of serials include no central allotment of library budgets to go specifically for Consortiall purchases as well as individual autonomy for member institutions. Consortiall's guidelines maintain several clauses meant to give institutions an opt-out:

- If there is no cost, content or material benefit, then a consortial opportunity will not be pursued.
- Once a consortial interest is identified, individual libraries may still communicate with the vendors about their own libraries’ needs (Consortiall 2010)

In the above setup, the individual institutions are guaranteed to only reap gains through a consortial contract, and sacrifice very little if anything. Further centralisation of collection development of electronic resources would necessitate overcoming two basic
barriers to collaborative collection development: first, sacrifice of autonomy and second, risk aversion (Burgett, Haar & Phillips 2004).

Significant cost savings have been achieved through cooperative ebook purchases through ERALL. However, these group purchases are annual exercises of what is essentially a large group of firm orders, negotiated with a single ebook vendor. As of yet, the potential of reaping benefits by doing coordinated and strategic purchases through the 8 libraries' single approval plan vendor is absent. So our purchases whether ebook or print, single-user or 3 person license remain uncoordinated. The result is often a print and digital holdings pattern that is often accidental.

COLLECTION MANAGEMENT IN THE HONG KONG CONSORTIUM

Cost of print material storage should be a significant motivator for further collaboration. The Joint University Research Archive (JURA) marked an early effort in collaborative print collection management in Asia. However, the timeline and planning process for has been stalled indefinitely by delays in procedures for incorporating the entity by the Regional government. Thus Hong Kong university libraries are left in a curious position in the beginning years of the second decade of the 21st century--just as their physical facilities are exceeding their planned collection capacities, collection budgets, thanks to healthy government revenues, are stable in comparison to academic libraries in North America. So ironically, HK's need for collaborative collection development comes from a need to utilise its physical space more effectively, and not solely because of financial pressures.

For JURA, the first benefit would be liberation of local library floor space. When deciding what materials to relocate to the remote storage space, it became clear that this physical collaboration in storage would be a logical lead to deduplication of print materials. If print journals could be stored in the facility and scanned when requested, there would be little motivation for individual institutions to retain local ownership of their legacy print journal collections. Suddenly the JULAC academic libraries analysed their print journal collections for duplication like never before. The consortium ILS also offered easy analysis of monograph holdings. The prospect of an enormous storage facility gave libraries a new way of looking at monograph holdings in the HKALL (JULAC unified) catalogue. For every volume held by a few other JULAC libraries, it starts the collection management librarian thinking--can we do away with our copy?

However, the active collaboration of sharing collection management information dried up once the storage facility delay set in. However, regardless of the status of JURA, I believe the 8 JULAC libraries need to have a conversation about what sort of materials they are comfortable merely relying on access to instead of the certainty of ownership.

COLLECTION MANAGEMENT WITHOUT JOINT STORAGE

With JURA stalled, the immediate and concrete motivation for sharing collection management theories and priorities was removed. At my institution, collection
management that looks beyond our institution, even without JURA is an urgent necessity. Our print collection has far surpassed the capacity of our 8077.91 sq.m. facility. According to the University Grants Council's calculation ratio, HKBU had 5155 FTE students in 2012. However, our circulating open-stacks collection in summer 2012 numbered 858,110 volumes, meaning that HKBU Library stands at 166.46 vols. per FTE compared to similar sized institutions’ 53.9 print volumes per FTE enrollment. We have no other choice but to rely on access to information beyond our institution's own spatial and monetary limitations.

As a result, we are concentrating on what print volumes we are comfortable having to through the consortial borrowing programme, HKALL. In the past, deselection has been carried out as an annual project method, identifying a collection and selecting criteria for the Library board to approve. The Collection Management librarian would then review titles and supply a list for faculty to approve or reject. Each project had its own criteria, which usually did not consider other JULAC holdings. The library Collection Management Plan does not specify any criteria by discipline, age, locality or institution. If my institution is going to reduce our print collection, but does not have a collaborative high-density storage facility, we need to concentrate on what holdings we'd like to have access to through collaboration and what materials we want to maintain nearby—in other words we need strategy, and we need to know what our partners think.

Last year, when instituting a continuous deselection workflow, I began to consider the implications of JULAC holdings. In many instances, the book in my hand was the last copy in the 8 libraries. In some instances, there were only 2 or 3 copies including mine. I began to realise that we have no communication apparatus among the 8 libraries for who will keep the last copy, or even who is engaging in weeding in a certain subject or collection area. Pressure to complete time-consuming weeding projects in a timely manner means that frequently when examining our joint holdings, I do a fair bit of guessing.

After a title meets my local criteria for removal, I examine the holdings of the 7 other Hong Kong academic libraries. Over several years, I have inadvertently stumbled on to the following holdings scale, which I frequently adhere to:

Table 1: An on-the-fly collection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of member libraries own the item</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
<td>KEEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>further examination</td>
<td>discard</td>
<td>discard</td>
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<td>discard</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If I see that all 8 libraries hold a title, the likelihood that this is a core title and should retained, regardless of local criteria, is high. Similarly, if I see that my institution holds the last copy, I will retain the copy, even though it meets the discard criteria. When holdings are between 5-7 libraries, I don't believe the pattern of library holdings should
influence the retention decision—the decision should consider local conditions. The title may be a core title with no use, or it may be a superseded volume no member library has gotten around to weeding—content and currency is primary here, not holdings. However, I usually found if there is a title under consideration for discarding and 3-4 institutions hold it, this is likely the best situation. If only 3-4 hold the title it indicates:

- an obscure title, that not many institutions considered necessary
- was once a widely held title, that other institutions have already discarded

The most precarious withdrawal situation is when it is down to your institution and 1 other holding an item—this is where you have to wait and tread carefully. One of these copies should likely be preserved and it will take some real communication to find out who will shoulder that responsibility and cost. Without effective communication between the neighboring libraries, collection managers, who have no choice but to be actively deselecting parts of their print collection due to acute space constraints, are engaging in solo deduplication on behalf of the partner libraries. Obviously, this is not the most effective method in collection management. However real collaborative collection management is easier said than done. Real collaboration would require, not only communication, but agreement on criteria, governance and distribution of responsibilities.

THE WAY FORWARD: COMMUNICATION

Are the obstacles and drawbacks to further collaboration in collections too numerous for JULAC? The most successful aspects of JULAC collaboration have been in situations where there is necessity to negotiate with one obvious vendor, such as OCLC, III, YBP and ILLiad. These arrangements have led to improved library interfaces, a mutual print borrowing agreement and a very efficient electronic journal delivery service. The collaboration in collection management and development has achieved modest success in cost-purchases, these projects have not really gone beyond the trust threshold necessary to go from cooperation to collaboration.

Collection management’s, and specifically the deduplication of JULAC print materials, barriers to collaboration are:

- a lack of open access to information regarding collection management
- a lack of communication between those involved in collection management

In my home institution, we are effectively performing JULAC deduplication of materials on our own, or engaging in cowboy collaboration. I would argue that in collection management of print resources, centralisation is an imperative due to the strains of limited physical space that is increasingly necessary for repurposed uses and not inefficient collection storage.
Before getting carried away, it is worthwhile to consider a few preconditions to collaboration: it is necessary to gain a more significant knowledge of our own collection (Evans 2002b). This is especially imperative at my institution, where the collection management is a recent phenomenon. Secondly, an evaluation, assessment and articulation of what areas of specialisation we want to meet at the local level is also necessary. Once this is accomplished, the local institution will better understand its local strengths and be better equipped to find out which of those 166 vols. per FTE plays to our strengths as an institution, and which we can verify the other institutions may collect to play to their strengths.

If each JULAC institution can accomplish this locally, we can at the very least get our houses in order. If further collaboration is to result, we will have to have a clearer vision in order to take the next steps:

- establish trust and develop communication about collection management projects.

There are tremendous structural changes required to implement changes in sharing resources across administrative boundaries. However, the above four steps would be required as a base for such a change in collection structure. Implementing them now, even without collaborative budgets, purchasing and storage facilities, would help and not hurt the JULAC collections.

In the absence of JURA, such modest and incremental steps don't yield the sort of obvious and tangible benefits collection that characterise what has been called the "something for nothing' or very little syndrome" attitude towards collaboration (Evans 2002a, p. 214). However, if our goals are to provide the widest array of collections in the most efficient and convenient way, then we must recognise that we cannot do this on our own. We also have to realise that with collaboration often comes increased workload and commitment in some areas, such as staff time, transit costs. If any further cooperation JULAC is pursued, the 8 libraries have got to begin seeing the forest through the trees, and stop regarding collections in a narrow, isolated fashion. I am in agreement with Marcia Thomas, in her assessment of consortia, that it is far too common for benefits solely to be articulated in the amount saved in monetary terms (Thomas 2010). The establishment of trust and release of absolute control may be a tall order, especially in the geographic context of Hong Kong. However, fear of sharing information is an easy place to start—especially when it comes to collection management. At the very least, we will know what other JULAC libraries are doing with their print collections even if we don't agree with it.


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