

Networking Close to Home: A Shared On-Line Computer System

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In the Library world, the concept of networking usually calls to mind large scale computer link-ups sharing access to bibliographic data bases such as OCLC or WLN. When networks have been established for the sharing of other functions, they have frequently involved similiar types of libraries (the North Suburban Library System in Illinois, and the Gaylord Cluster here in Indiana) or, when they have been multitype, they have still been geographically spread out (Project Circ).

While automation allows libraries to link across the miles, in the enthusiasm to do so librarians have often overlooked resources closer to home. Sharing these resources may require more complex relationships than the typical "public library - only" network, but the benefits to the local community can be exciting.

The Challenge

In approaching automation planning at the Carmel Clay Public Library we became aware that we would want to take advantage of available technology to link with some other library. To do so would expand the resources available to our patrons - a high priority since the budget was unlikely to ever be able to respond to all of their needs for materials.

The belief that Carmel Clay Public Library should network with some other library was qualified by two conditions:

(1) The partners had to be close enough to our community so that patrons would be able to take advantage of the new access the automated system could provide without requiring extensive courier service or increased interlibrary loan costs. Our community is very mobile and we assumed people would be willing and excited to visit other libraries; and we couldn't afford to provide the material any other way.

And (2) our feeling about future developments in automation led to a commitment to a full MARC Data Base for our collection. The costs of any conversion are excessive but the experiences of other libraries indicated that the most complete conversion of the data base the first time around would be the best investment.

These conditions limited our options. While a link with the public libraries in Noblesville or Indianapolis would have met the first condition, neither of those institutions shared our concern for MARC's.

An Answer

In our own backyard we found a potential partner who shared that concern - the Carmel Clay Schools. The school media centers are very strong in Carmel and have had extensive involvement with microcomputers. Several of the schools were beginning to explore the applications of micros for handling circulation-related functions, but were concerned that this solution would not facilitate resource sharing among the schools.

The idea of a shared system was of interest to them. They had recently incorporated the use of OCLC into their technical services operation so the necessary tools were in place for them to develop a MARC data base.

The key to the successful germination of the shared system idea was the "can do it together" attitude of the Carmel community. This attitude is frequently revealed when there is a problem to solve or a challenge to meet. The lines between governmental units have not stood in the way of problem solving, witness the Joint Plan Commission and the Board of Zoning Appeals, both of which cross political boundaries.

A difficulty in developing the idea was the lack of a role model for a truly shared system between a public library and a public school system. Contracts for other shared systems often reflected a scenario where one library bought a system which others contracted to use. Even in Project Circ, which is a more cooperatively owned and operated system, there still is a pivotal role played by INCOLSA as the developer of the system. At the time, no role model could be found for a system jointly developed and owned by a school board and a public library board.

A non-library project developed in

the Carmel area during the early 70's provided the legal model needed to organize such an endeavor. The Hamilton-Boone-Madison Special Services Cooperative was formed by five school corporations using provisions of Indiana Code 36-1-71 et seq. This allows for an Interlocal Cooperation Agreement between governmental units, providing the legal basis for the shared system. The public library and the schools use the same law firm¹ which had helped develop the Tri County School project, and share the same geographic service area. This has been beneficial.

The process of defining the legal relationship proceeded at the same time as the RFP was being developed and the project bid. This two track process required a great deal of faith on the part of both parties and a commitment that somehow the shared system would eventually fly.

A great deal of faith was also asked of the vendors bidding the RFP for they were asked to configure and bid:

- (1) a stand alone system for the public library,
- (2) a system large enough to include the schools immediately, and
- (3) a phased-in approach to adding the schools over a five year period - all with guaranteed prices.

The CLSI bid did that, in addition to providing all of the requested subsystems, storage, performance levels and training.

The public library signed a contract with CLSI while work continued on the interlocal cooperative agreement. The schools and the library signed their agreement in December of '85 which was also when the schools signed with CLSI. All three of these

contracts recognize the existence of the other contracts and reinforce the shared partnership between the schools and the public library.

As a result of the Interlocal Cooperation Agreement, a Joint Board, comprised of representatives from the School Board and the Library Board, has been established to govern the shared system. Its responsibilities are to establish policy, approve budgets and represent the two institutions in the governance of the shared system.

Implementation

The conversion process has been completed for the public library and is now underway at the schools. The data base loaded by the public library is serving as the first source of records for the schools with early indications of a 40% hit rate. The public library originally had about 20% of its title records in MARC format. Microcon was used to complete the conversion process.² OCLC online will be used to obtain the remaining MARC records for the schools.

Installation of hardware is being done in stages. The central computer room, located at the public library, is completed with the exception of one processor which will not be needed until the last schools are online. The public library is already using the system for daily activity and at least one school was "up" in the fall of '87. The final school, in twelve, isn't built yet but will be online by 1991.

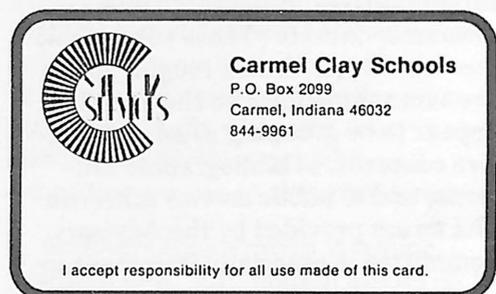
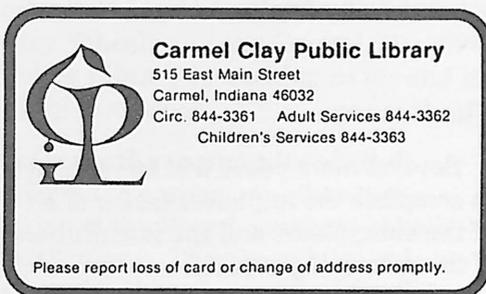
A new library card has been designed, using the logos of both institutions and each patron will be assigned a unique bar code number to be used throughout the system.

What have been the frustrations?

The greatest frustration has been one common to many automation projects—timetables have only been guidelines, they have seldom been firm. The project is currently one full year behind the original schedule. In many instances our projections were naive, but responsibility for the delays must be shared by all parties.

Completion of the computer room took longer than the contractor expected; conversion took longer than the librarians expected; hardware installation was delayed because of site preparation; and software installation was delayed because the vendor was just beginning the introduction of a major new release. The library's share of the project was funded by previously approved construction bonds so there was little delay with their funding, however, the lengthy additional appropriations process for the schools caused delays in obtaining their equipment being funded through Cumulative Building Funds.

Some frustration has come as a result of the unusual nature of the specifications. While everything being implemented is only a further refinement of proven CLSI abilities, the application has been complex. One example is the use of an OCLC inter-



face. CLSI has used these for several years but in our system it must support three OCLC terminals and their printers, located at two different sites. This particular example raised a question about the possible benefit of a shared processing center but that is not likely in the near future.

The degree of standardization required by any automated system has caused some frustration. This is probably much harder on the schools than on the public library which has been working with a MARC data base for several years and has only one collection to coordinate, while the schools will have twelve sites serving different aged audiences. The system provides for extensive local customization of circulation set-up so each school media specialist will have ample options for circulation rules in their building. Help screens for the online catalog can also be customized for each building to best meet the needs of the age group being served.

Role of the Advisory Committee

In addition to the Joint Board, the Interlocal Cooperation Agreement called for the appointment of an Advisory Committee, consisting of a number of librarians from both institutions. This group is responsible for recommending a budget, policies and procedures to the joint board, and for maintaining standards of operation.

This group is functioning very well, identifying the many issues to be hammered out and assigning them to subcommittees for research and recommendations. These subcommittees have been formed roughly along the same three lines as the issues appear to be grouping a) administrative concerns, b) bibliographic concerns, and c) public service concerns. The forum provided by the Advisory Committee is especially important in

providing the opportunity for team problem solving cutting across institutional and hierarchical lines. Although the public library staff had attended school media staff meetings frequently over the years, there has never been such a joint team effort before. This will benefit other areas of school library cooperation in the future.

Community Perception of the Project

Feedback about the project has been positive to date. The Clay Township Trustee and Advisory Committee members were very supportive and allocated federal revenue sharing dollars to help fund some of the costs of conversion.

Press coverage has been generous and the local press has been particularly responsive to the idea of the shared system since the earliest discussions, giving ample coverage to the conversion project and the joint library card.

While the public has responded well to the implementation of the system at the public library, and has all the press coverage, they still seem only vaguely aware of the joint nature of the project. More work needs to be done to increase public understanding of the potential of these linked collections. It is likely that in the fall of 1987 when the first schools are online, this work will be much easier. The group to be targeted first are the teachers who have an idea of the concept being developed but not much more.

The Future

Several more years will be required to complete the implementation of all of the subsystems and the installation of the remaining schools.

Materials Booking and Book Acquisitions software has been loaded into the system but is not expected to be in use until 1990 because of the amount of staff time required to change from manual to automated systems.

The schools' installation schedule is an ambitious one given the volume of conversion to be completed.

There are many policy questions yet to answer. A major one concerns just how much access the general public will have to the school collections. At present the school media centers are not staffed to handle walk in, non-school traffic, so traditional ILL methods will be implemented using the school's courier service. In time, however, both Boards agree that open access to all these collections by all local residents is the goal.

The opportunities for cooperative collection development are exciting and we expect to see movement in this direction very early on.

Those local residents who do understand the potential of an automated system have already been inquiring about the possibilities of dial up access into the system. This is an exciting option and one that we hope to explore. The local Cable TV company is also willing to investigate a possible role in making the data base available to cable subscribers.

Conclusions

Some conclusions can be drawn about why the shared system, jointly owned and operated by the Carmel Clay Schools and the Carmel Clay Public Library is working so far and is likely to succeed.

One is the community attitude referred to earlier. Another is the vision of the Board members of both institutions. They have been able to recognize the potential for benefit to

the community, have had the courage to make the necessary financial investment to achieve that potential, and, have had faith in, as well as respect for, the advice of their professionals in library/media services.

The staff's "belief" in the project has been critical for no one on the staff had ever been involved in something like this before. An entire article could be written on the dynamics of staff relations during such a project, but suffice it to say that commitment and high expectations can go a long way in making up for specific experience.

Other conclusions can also be drawn about why projects like this should be developed in other communities.

One is political. If public libraries and/or school libraries do more to build coalitions on the local level they are likely to be perceived as real team players, as integral parts of their community. The knowledge and skills of librarians can be of great value in leading other local governmental personnel toward increased cooperation and sharing of scarce municipal resources. It may be the schools in one community, it may be the courthouse law library in another; most communities have need for more efficient and effective sharing of local informational resources.

The argument is often used that such sharing will eliminate duplication. This should be suggested as an aspect of the benefits of local shared systems but should not be used as the only selling point for there will always be some duplication that is appropriate. The benefit will come from eliminating it where possible and enhancing service at the same time.

Another consideration is a very practical one. Automation allows us to

access each other's resources but it is dependent upon some method of telecommunications over which we seldom have much control. Although it is difficult to project how telecommunications methods will change, at present there are less expensive methods of linking at the local level than across long distances.

The best measures of the success of our project will come in future years. For now, early indications are that the community has made a wise investment in linking to share its local resources more effectively.

NOTES

¹The agreement finally drafted, clearly states that in the event of a dispute arising from the agreement, this firm cannot represent either party.

²Carmel Clay Public Library is in the process of completing an analysis of the true costs of conversion and the appropriateness of Microcon as a conversion method for this size and type library.