

The University of Minnesota and Wilson Learning Corporation: An Alliance that Works

Carol A. Carrier
College of Education
University of Minnesota
and

James J. L'Allier
Santa Fe, New Mexico
Wiley Learning Laboratories

Abstract. The University of Minnesota College of Education and the Wilson Learning Corporation recently joined to create the Alliance for Research and Development in Applied Learning Technology. The goal of this partnership is to foster research in adult learning and technology-assisted instruction. This paper describes the background, structure, and components of this Alliance. Principles that foster success with this type of partnership are described.

Introduction

One chilly day in November of 1983 a half dozen individuals from the Wilson Learning Corporation (headquartered in a suburb of Minneapolis) sat around a conference table at the University of Minnesota listening, asking questions, and taking notes. Throughout the day they interacted with a group of College of Education faculty members who stopped by, one at a time, to discuss their research interests, accomplishments, and plans. As it turned out, this day-long meeting was a crucial stimulant in the formulation of a new organization that would come to be called the Alliance for Research and Development in Applied Learning Technology. In this article, we will describe the background of and rationale for the Alliance, present its structure and major components, and finally, discuss several guidelines that seem essential if partnerships such as this one are to succeed.

Rationale and Background of the Alliance

The issues in the world today are too complex for any one organization to address alone. The problem addressed by the Alliance is the learning crisis faced by individuals and organizations due to (a) the rapid generation and equally rapid obsolescence of information and (b) specific demographic factors.

Recently, in a television interview on the CBS program "Sunday Morning" on April 27, 1986, Daniel J. Boorstin, the Head Librarian of the Library of Congress dramatically illustrated the impact of our information environment by putting it in the context of another age. Essentially he said that a person in the 16th century processed in a lifetime the equivalent of all of the information contained in a single copy of the *New York Times!*

Less dramatic, but tragically real is the half-life of engineers. Simply stated, two years after leaving engineering school, one-half of their information is obsolete. The rapid influx of the volume and decay of information touches all professions and is rapidly approaching "gridlock" proportions.

Compounding the problem is a population factor that has no historical precedent. According to the last census, the population of the United States is over 200,000,000. If we focus on the population born between the years 1945-1959 (the mid-section of the post war baby boom), we come up with a 27-40 year-old age range. This represents over 80,000,000 people, or 40% of the total population.

Added to these startling population statistics is another fact. In a *USA Today* (Aug, 1986) article, Ronald Kutscher of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, stated that a large segment (those in the 27 to 34 year-old range) will change occupations three to four times within their working lives.

This prediction is not hard to accept when one considers how rapidly growing technologies, changes in the natural resources base, and the influx of new information can change whole economies and industries almost overnight. This escalating growth is reaching crisis proportions, and it is not a crisis of information as much as it is one of learning.

This crisis not only touches the clients of enterprises like Wilson Learning but everyone involved in the learning business, which includes businesses like Wilson as well as more traditional institutions such as universities. In the past the typical solution to such issues was to create a course or curriculum to effectively transmit the new information to the learner. Such solutions are no longer adequate because of the changing nature of information and the number of individuals who need to have access to it. There is a need to shift the focus from the information to the learning process itself. This realization opened up a number of critical questions.

Can we teach people how to learn? How do adults learn? How can we use technology to deal with large numbers of learners in an effective way? How do we identify critical learning or cognitive styles and adapt these to instruction? What is a good definition of competency? What are the components of competency-based curriculum? What are some effective ways of tracking competencies? How can cooperative learning increase learner outcomes? How can simulations be used to help learners discover fundamental rules? How can interactive video and computer-based instruction be used more effectively?

It was clear to the management of Wilson Learning Corporation that there are no simple answers to any of these questions, nor would their organization be able to investigate these problems on their own. Many of these questions are issues requiring basic research. This corporation consists largely of applications specialists within the training industry,

with no resources to deal with these important and fundamental questions. The corporation needed to find partners who would be interested in pursuing knowledge about better ways to help adults learn. These partners could work with the corporation to examine and perhaps revise previous assumptions about optimal methods for using technology with adults. It was this realization that gave birth to the Alliance.

The initial concept of the Alliance was the brainchild of Larry Wilson, founder of Wilson Learning Corporation and President of its Interactive Technology Group. Wilson has long recognized that the College of Education at the University of Minnesota and Wilson Learning Corporation were involved in similar enterprises but from two different points of view. A primary objective for colleges of education at institutions like the University of Minnesota is to produce basic research on teaching and learning. On the other hand, businesses like Wilson Learning seek to apply what is discovered from such research to the problems of adult learners in the settings where they work. It seemed obvious to Wilson that these two organizations had much in common and that together they might begin to move toward addressing the learning crisis in a way that would be more powerful than through independent effort.

The Alliance for Research and Development in Applied Learning Technology began with the signing of an agreement between the two organizations. Wilson Learning Corporation donated \$1,000,000 to be delivered in ten installments across 10 years. This document outlined in general terms the nature of the partnership. More specificity was achieved as representatives from the two organizations began to work together on defining the components of the Alliance.

Structure and Components of the Alliance

The major thrust of the Alliance is to foster research in the area of adult learning that is assisted by technology. To help focus this general goal, four major award programs were instituted as well as a number of dissemination activities.

Faculty research awards

The program offers three faculty research awards each year at a maximum of \$10,000 each. Consistent with the Alliance's major goal, the proposed

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research must involve adult learners and some aspect of technology-assisted learning. Faculty must submit a 5 page proposal describing their research plan, including a section on how this research could address an area of concern in business. Examples of topics of faculty research projects that have been funded include studies of the use of distance learning strategies, effects of various text comprehension approaches, and the use of expert systems.

Dissertation fellowships

Three dissertation awards of \$5000 are made every year to doctoral students who have passed their preliminary examinations and have defined their dissertation research problem. Applicants must submit a 5 page proposal describing their proposed study. They must also submit a letter of recommendation from their adviser. Again, these awards are made to individuals whose dissertation topics involve adult learning and technology.

Doctoral fellowships

Two doctoral fellowships are awarded each year to two new doctoral students. Recruitment is carried out nationally for top students who wish to study in areas related to technology-assisted learning with adults. Mailings of brochures and the placement of announcements in journals like *Educational Researcher*, *Educational Communications and Technology Journal*, and in publications like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* are ways that this fellowship program has been publicized. Students need not apply to the University of Minnesota prior to applying for the fellowship, but must show evidence that they have been admitted to an appropriate program within the College prior to receiving funds. This award provides an \$8000 fellowship during the first year of study, a guaranteed graduate assistantship during the second year of study, and the opportunity to apply for an Alliance dissertation

fellowship during the third year of study.

The fellowship program is designed to attract a pool of bright, full-time doctoral students interested in the role of technology in adult learning. As this program grows, a variety of new dimensions will be added, including a seminar in which doctoral fellows will be encouraged to share their research plans. They will be introduced to individuals from the private sector who have a strong interest in improving learning environments. They will begin to build a network of colleagues both inside and outside the University. These students will be given opportunities to work on projects that involve state-of-the-art uses of technology for instruction and will be encouraged to complete internships at Wilson Learning Corporation.

Internal contracts

This program involves the awarding of contracts to University of Minnesota faculty for work on specific projects that Wilson Learning Corporation has initiated. This system works in the following way: Wilson Learning staff identify faculty members who they believe will be able to contribute to one of their development or research projects. The two parties discuss the types of tasks the faculty member would complete and the estimated time commitment. Once an agreement has been reached, the department chair is approached by the faculty member with a proposal. The request may be that Alliance funds be used to buy some release time during the year, be set aside for travel, or be paid to the faculty member during the summer. Once the department chair and faculty member reach an agreement, the proposal is sent to the Dean's office for approval. The final step is approval by the Alliance Review Committee. Once all levels of approval have been gained, monies for the faculty member are moved from the University Foundation to

the department for disbursement as agreed upon.

This program is very appealing to faculty for many reasons. First, it gives them an opportunity to work on interesting projects that utilize their expertise. In turn, these projects enrich the professor's expertise and may result in additional writing and publications. Second, such contracts establish valuable relationships that may lead to consulting opportunities at a later date. Third, because it is an internal contract rather than outside consulting, this type of arrangement "counts" as evidence of obtaining research and development monies. Thus it is recognized as valuable within the University's reward system. Fourth, the contract provides some prerequisites to the faculty member, such as summer money, a research assistant, release time, or travel money.

Dissemination activities

A primary vehicle for the dissemination of research findings from projects sponsored by the Alliance is an annual symposium held at Wilson Learning Corporation headquarters. Recipients of the student and faculty research awards each team up with a staff member from Wilson to prepare and present a summary of the background and design of the research, the findings, and possible implications for business problems and products. Members of the audience include Wilson personnel, University faculty, and graduate students. In the future, clients of Wilson Learning also will be invited to attend.

Guidelines to Promote Successful Partnerships

Programs such as the one described here that involve partners from organizations with different organizational structures and goals can be enormously beneficial for both parties. In this section principles are described that we believe will strengthen the success of these partnerships and reduce problems.

1. **Be prepared to accommodate differences in the cultures of the two organizations.** For example, we have learned that the different cultures that exist within our two organizations may lead to different expectations in the speed and style of decision-making. Decisions within business often can be made from the top down and quickly. At universities, bottom-up decisions are valued, oftentimes with painstakingly slow processes that include committees and task forces, and other faculty

dominated structures. Important decisions are rarely made quickly. Business can make such decisions more quickly because the consultative process is often much more limited.

Another cultural difference has to do with expectations about work styles. Faculty at research universities value their autonomy and protect it. They decide what they will teach and when. They choose the topics or problems they wish to study. They select the doctoral students they wish to advise. They decide when they will come to the office, meet with students, take trips, apply for sabbaticals, and so on. The business climate fosters team-oriented activities and one's success may well depend on that of one's team members. Cooperative efforts are the norm rather than the exception.

These differences broaden the perspectives of individuals on both sides of the partnership. Faculty experience the inevitable pressures that build when a product must be delivered to a client within a tight deadline set by an outsider. Business people begin to appreciate the time consuming nature of conducting research.

2. **Individual within each partnership organization must assume responsibility for coordinating the partnership within their respective settings.** These persons will communicate program components, policies, and events to other members of their organizations. The multitude of logistical tasks inherent to such arrangements must be managed competently. Close communication between the two individuals will alleviate many troublespots.

3. **Maintain the integrity of the program by initiating and following policies that are made public.** As programs of this nature evolve, many ground rules must be established by the governing board composed of members from the participating institutions. We have found it important to establish written policies to guide proposal development and review. Once these policies and ground rules are established, it is important that they be followed closely so as to minimize misunderstandings.

4. **Each participating partner must share in the expenses associated with the administration of the program.** There are many "hidden" costs that accompany the type of program described here. Promotional materials must be created and distributed, long distance telephone calls made, awards banquets

held and travel costs incurred. Staff time from individuals within each organization is needed. We believe that each organization demonstrates its commitment to the partnership by bearing some of these costs.

5. **The program must be allowed to evolve and expand.** Every partnership like the one described here must be viewed as an experiment whose methodology can be modified. The starting point, of course, is a mission statement that is agreed upon by the partners, but with time, that mission must be reviewed and perhaps expanded in unforeseen ways. Evidence of growth and change over time is a healthy indicator that the program will meet new needs.

Joel Barker (1985) in his book *Discovering the Future* describes "paradigm pioneers" as those individuals who recognize the need to switch from the prevailing paradigm in a field to new ones that promise solutions to formerly unsolved problems. Creating partnerships between colleges of education and businesses for the purpose of conducting research on learning and instruction is a powerful paradigm shift for both types of institutions. We hope that such partnerships will result in more successful bridges between theory and practice.

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