An Examination of the Role of Participatory Management in Academic Special Collections Departments

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Numerous theories, models, approaches, and methods have been applied to the management of academic libraries over the past four decades. More recently, many of the models put in place have been adapted (more or less successfully) from the business world, while others have evolved within a nonprofit context. Participatory (or participative) management is no different, though it has a peculiar place in the history of management theory. Although most modern management theories began with the abstract models of social and organizational psychologists and scholars from related fields, participatory management was one of the first that focused primarily on the needs of the individual. In this paper, I will define participatory management and trace its use and history. I will focus on its application to libraries, and to special collections in particular.

In its current form, one can say that participatory management began in the mind of Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), a progressive Prussian social psychologist.[1] Much of Lewin's early work centered on humanizing the pioneering theories of Frederick Taylor. While he was devoted to the same scientific mindset that had guided Taylor's work, Lewin was equally committed to the democratic participation of the individual in all realms of life. Through his writings, "Lewin showed that all problems, even technical and economic, have social consequences that include people's feelings, perceptions of reality, sense of self-worth, motivation, and commitment."[2] This also led him to write extensively on collaborative consultation, and his work changed forever the landscape of management. In fact, Marvin Weisbord explains that Lewin's relative anonymity today is due directly to his ubiquity in modern management theory.

Lewin's actual model for participatory management had slightly less grandiose origins. Weisbord explains that "it evolved during World War II from a collaboration between Lewin and anthropologist Margaret Mead to reduce civilian consumption of rationed foods."[3] In controlled studies with housewives from Iowa (where Lewin had relocated after Hitler's rise to power), Lewin and Mead found that the women were much more responsive when given the facts of food scarcity and told to come up with a plan than when they were simply lectured at regarding the same issues.

"Lewin had found a core principle: we are likely to modify our own behavior when we participate in problem analysis and solution and likely to carry out decisions we have helped make."[4] By reducing the perceived dominating or resisting forces and involving all concerned, not only were decisions more widely received, but the participants were happier with the results; subsequent studies even suggested that they were healthier. Of course, Lewin did not regard this new model as a panacea—this was not a "technique." Rather, it was more of a new perspective he encouraged, one that had to be tailored for each situation, regardless of how similar it might seem to previous cases.

Lewin was careful to note that "participation" was not the same as "groups" or "teams" given false responsibility by managers seeking a quick fix to employee complaints, but lacking in any real confidence in the skills and input of their workers. Although those methods have their place and can be useful when used properly, they are really only effective in specific cases of decision making and problem solving. They cannot be expected to achieve "unity of purpose," which is the point of participation.[5] Ultimately, the role of participatory management is not always to anticipate what an organization will need in the future, but to steer it away from what has failed to work in the past.

Even before Lewin's work, however, Mary Parker Follett (1868–1933) "discussed the growing need for what she called management coordination. Many today call it participative management."[6] Follett, lecturing at the London School of Economics and Political Science, emphasized the need for group processes in major decision making and conflict resolution within organizations. It is difficult to determine whether Lewin or Follett proved most influential in the development of participatory management. A brief overview of Follett's work suggests that she focused more on "collaboration" than "participation" *per se*,[7] however, neither of these terms were formally established at the time of their writings, and neither Lewin nor Follett were seeking

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to establishing a "management methodology." Yet, Follett's expectations for the evolution of worker-supervisor relations fit extremely well with twenty-first-century realities in the library. Gerry Morse explains that Follett "foresaw that increasing pace and complexity, a rising average level of employee education, and the continuing expansion of specialists would make necessary workplace relationships that were not superior-subordinate, not dominance and compliance."[8] This, together with the fact that employees now often work physically separated from their superiors, only argues more stridently for the relevance of a participatory management model.

Participatory Management in Libraries

Moving to the specific consideration of participatory management in libraries, Mary Bolin explains that for much of their history, libraries, especially those in university settings, were quite hierarchical in their management structures. The movement against top-down hierarchies in society in general that took place during the 1960s, particularly on university campuses, ushered in a number of management revisions, including participative management and even student evaluations of teaching faculty.[9] Yet, then as now, the chief obstacles to achieving a "collegial" environment rest as much with the library administration as they do with the "supervised" staff. Bolin explains that whereas collegial teaching faculty strive to be "colleagues, without regard for specific position," collegial librarians (especially those with faculty status) should work "without regard for functional differences."[10] This is more easily imagined than realized, of course. The chief difficulty is that, although among teaching faculty an increase in rank does not necessarily change the professor's function, amongst librarians, an increase in rank often removes one from former "colleagues" thus emphasizing rank rather than the task at hand. Granted, there are leadership positions amongst teaching faculty (department chairs, curriculum chairs, etc.), but these are usually temporary positions that do not permanently alter their holders. A participatory model could began to alleviate these differences by helping advanced librarians focus more on "leadership" rather than "management."[11]

Indeed, a truly collegial relationship may, in fact, be the key to truly effective participatory management. The *Dictionary of Business and Management* defines the collegial approach as one wherein "decisions are made on the basis of knowledge that individuals hold, regardless of their organizational position. Professionalism and mutual respect are the keys to this sort of relationship."[12] But how to actually enact this still remains unclear—even the definitions themselves remain evasive. Writing in 1988, Louis Kaplan noted the difficulty in determining if a library had even implemented a participatory management style, much less whether or not it was working. He concluded his essay lamenting, "even if a survey had been conducted the outcome would have been subject to question for the reason that there is still no consensus as to what is meant by participative management."[13] Nearly ten years later, Jeanne Plas had to admit that although participatory management and similar models are not as "'touchy-feely' as some critics would have it, they are at this point fuzzy." She continued, "we know there are a lot of people in a variety of different positions doing *something*, but we're not always certain just what that something is."[14] For Plas, the key to participatory management, as opposed to teamwork initiatives and collaborative projects, is maintaining the individuality of the workers involved. Many of the team-based models American managers experimented with in the past decades were borrowed from foreign cultures, and often did not translate well. Simply put, such models "were not made to deal directly with the American culture or the needs of the U.S. worker."[15] As a result, workers rejected them and management often gave up, thinking it had tried its best.

Keeping the culture of the worker in mind has both macro and micro components, and managers in all fields have learned from the past mistakes of ill-adapted innovations. Nevertheless, keeping the micro-cultures of the workers in mind is much more difficult to achieve because the indications of success and failure are so much more subtle, even though the results are no less substantial. As alluded to above, collegiality cannot be manufactured, especially amongst workers who have no examples from which to build collegiality.[16] Although management styles have changed significantly in many academic libraries over the past few decades, technology has introduced even more sweeping changes in how libraries work, which has required a reallocation of resources, both human and financial, to deal with these developments.

As Joan Magretta explains with apt wit, for "knowledge workers, who, by definition, know more about their jobs that their bosses do, supervision is a very special kind of hell."[17] This is true for both manager *and* employee. Yet, as Robert Stueart and Barbara Moran explain, "participative management has the virtue of forcing decision making down to the level where the most relevant information can be found and where the effect of the decision will have the greatest impact."[18] This does not mean that management abandons its responsibility for the final decisions; indeed that would be truly devilish, and this is not a consensus model. By implementing a participatory model, managers are not necessarily trying to "unite" the staff, though that is often a result, they are using their staff to the very best of their abilities, mining them for the skills that made them so essential to the organization in the first place. At the same time, management can be freed to focus on broader, organization-wide activities, confident in the task management of qualified employees. Consequently, the people who know the most about the issue are the ones involved in making the decisions, which usually results in better decision making, and the managers are truly leading, which usually results in a more efficient and successful organization.

Participatory Management in Special Collections Departments

Based on the preceding consideration of participatory management in academic libraries more generally, it becomes increasingly clear how appropriate this model can be for special collections management, provided it is applied thoughtfully. For this article, I shall use "special collections" to refer generally to special collections, rare book rooms, and other departments in academic libraries that manage materials requiring special handling. Before continuing, we should briefly consider the role of special collections within the wider academic setting. Terry Belanger explains that, for years, special collections functioned as showpieces for many academic libraries, "perhaps in part because rare books are attractive for enhancing the library's public relations base on campus. Moreover, directors tend to like the parties, the festivities, and the other excitements that rare book departments can generate."[19] Yet, this does not mean that they always like them well enough to continue funding them at the appropriate level to maintain their effectiveness.

Reporting on the formation of the Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) Task Force on Special Collections in 2001, Joe Hewitt and Judith Panitch explain that "the RCC [Research Collections Committee] agreed that collecting, preserving, and providing access to the primary resources commonly referred to as 'special collections' are part of the core mission of the research library."[20] There is a tendency to associate special collections only with such items as manuscripts, rare books, and the like, but this is precisely the point, as "the collecting of primary resources is a distinguishing characteristic of a research library qualified to be a member of ARL."[21] In many cases, it is the special collections alone that make a research library great, since the rest of the collections, however large, can usually be duplicated elsewhere.

In the course of the Task Force's discussions, it became clear that one of the leading problems facing special collections departments is being separate from the rest of the library's organizational structure. This often results in management problems both large and small, not to mention budgeting issues as well, since special collections activities are often not included in the statistical analyses performed throughout the rest of the library. In many cases, this is due to the difficulty in even defining what, exactly, the role of special collections is. "While deriving a single, simple definition of special collections may be neither possible nor desirable,"[22] it is clear that libraries will need to be very specific in their language when referring to those departments that handle special materials.

As for the special collections staff, Hewitt and Panitch observed that they are being asked to take on even more responsibilities with the advent of digitization projects and the like, far exceeding the already highly specialized expectations that have always determined special collec-

tions staffing. Indeed, Michèle Cloonan and Sidney Berger have shown that special collections are now, arguably, the most technology-intensive areas of research libraries.[23] This means that not only will special collections staff need to consider participatory models within their own departments, but they will also need to develop similar relationships with technical services and cataloging departments.[24]

Participatory management in special collections departments received enhanced focus as a result of the work of the ARL Task Force on Special Collections. In 2003, this group issued an updated report on the significant problem of unprocessed materials in special collections departments across the country.[25] Entitled, "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers," it highlights the issues of time and staffing required for the detailed processing necessary for effective access to special collections materials. While item-level processing can enable researchers to have increased accuracy in their searching and to work more independently, it can take staff away from other projects.

One of the organizational causes they identified in relation to this problem was the inflexibility of rules regarding cataloging and processing.[26] Not all collections need to be cataloged at the item level, but determining the processing level for each and every collection in a special collections department is not within the expertise of any one cataloger (or curator, for that matter). Yet, if a supervisor is the only one who can make decisions on the relative importance of a collection, then priorities may become skewed. Since the point of maintaining special collections is to provide access to them, the last section of the report emphasized means to achieve access, and noted that "there is an abundance of expertise in our research libraries—encompassing languages, subjects, cataloging, processing, and technology—to carry out a successful collaborative project to process the backlogs of 'hidden collections'."[27] This is almost a tacit endorsement of a kind of participatory management model. Although this could probably not ever become a permanent facet of every special collections department, experimental groups freed from their daily duties could make a substantial impact on this national backlog.

Participatory Management in Practice

As suggested by the ARL report, the first place to look for collaboration is between the supervisor and the worker, in this case, the curator and cataloger. Elaine Bradshaw and Stephen Wagner explain that certain administrative structures can inhibit effective rare book cataloging: "When special collections are part of public services and cataloging is part of technical services (a common library administrative structure), opportunities for collaboration are hindered."[28] Although one option can be to move the rare book cataloger into special collections, this is not always necessary. Increasing communication and creating avenues for collaboration between all departments involved with special

collections would provide the necessary flexibility. An excellent example of this on a much larger scale is the Special Collections Cataloging Team of the Pennsylvania State University Libraries.[29] This team began life in 1995 as the Rare Materials Cataloging Team, and describes itself thus: "The structure was officially sanctioned on April 1, 1996, and we began conducting ourselves as a Team. In June, 2000, we agreed to accept responsibility for all of Special Collections, and thus evolved into the Special Collections Cataloging Team."[30] The team's original goal was to decrease the substantial backlog of uncataloged materials in Special Collections, which consisted of nearly twenty thousand items when this project began. The team's website provides a number of discussions of teamwork and effective group activity.

Although the Penn State group emphasizes its "team" status, there are numerous examples of participatory management at work. One key distinction is that there is not a formal manager of the Special Collections Cataloging Team. The chair of the group is a temporary occupant, who rotates out depending upon the specialty required for the next project.[31] In a purely participatory model, the team would have a permanent manager who would consult with different team members based on their respective specialties. Members from the team meet regularly with Special Collections as well as Cataloging Services to determine needs, plan for new and ongoing projects, discuss current or proposed policy and procedure, and address any other issues that might arise. The website serves as a resource itself, providing progress reports on ongoing projects as well as cataloging documentation and links to tools useful for rare materials cataloging.[32] What is, perhaps, most impressive about the Penn State Team is that the majority of cataloging done there has been near-original cataloging, with the aim that the entries be as specific as possible to the collections at hand. By 2001, the team had completely eliminated its backlog and was current with all incoming gifts and acquisitions. They decided to keep the team together, even after the initial goals were met, and adopted a project-based workflow system with a clear delineation of the team's roles in various cataloging activities.[33]

A second example of participatory management styles being applied to special collections work is the study of Winslow Lundy and Deborah Hollis on the backlog reduction project at the University of Colorado at Boulder (UCB).[34] Catalyzed by the ARL studies on unprocessed collections discussed above, but not being in a position, financially, to devote additional staff or other resources to the backlog, they sought an alternate route. In researching how other libraries had dealt with similar backlog problems, including the Penn State Special Collections Team, the UCB librarians decided to experiment with a participatory model, and with elements of collaborative-style teams as well.[35] In assembling their team of catalog librarians, paraprofessional catalogers, and special collections staff, they placed a nonsupervisory original cataloger in the position of team coordinator. Other than this team, UCB did not do any other departmental restructuring until it could evaluate the effectiveness of this new team. The team coordinator was given complete freedom to explore any and all possible strategies to deal not only with the technical side of the backlog, but also with the question of how to increase user access to special collections. His first step was to review departmental reports from special collections and interview departmental personnel to ascertain exactly what the state of the collection was.[36] This interviewing process is one of the most important aspects of participatory management. As Noel Morton and Stefanie Lindquist explain, "because knowledge is intimately connected to individual and group interests and power . . . truly accurate information gathering will require a joint enterprise of many (different) people."[37] One cannot hope to involve staff in the solution to a particular problem if one does not involve them in identifying that problem in the first place.

Despite the desperate need for not only processing backlogs but also updating the means of access to already-processed materials, interest in the project lagged as personnel changes swept the department and a number of catalogers left or were reassigned. Not long after this, however, an unlikely blessing came to the department in the form of a severe cut in the acquisitions budget. With significantly less material coming in, the remains of the team were able to refocus their attention on the unprocessed materials and put their original plan to work, without needing to request additional funding. Personnel were allowed to move from one division to another as needed, and all were encouraged to participate in decision making and determining what needed to be done based on their own expertise. According to Morton and Lindquist, "Follett emphasizes that legitimate authority and knowledge are created only by taking into account the experiences of all individuals involved in performing a functional part of the business activity."[38] UCB was doing just that and, as a result, was well on its way to a working participatory management model.

From this point, workflow procedures and training materials were drafted by the appropriate staff members, and they started prioritizing the backlogged collections. Workstations were moved and modified to accommodate different materials, and security measures were put in place to ensure the safety of particularly rare materials. Determining which catalogers would handle which collections was the chief focus of the workflow design. The majority of the catalogers were unfamiliar with pre-1800 imprints. Thus, rather than attempt to render them all experts in rare book cataloging (an unrealistic and unnecessary goal), they were introduced to the basics through a brief study of *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Books*.[39] These catalogers, then, would do basic entries (or work from existing entries in OCLC as they found them), after which special collections catalogers would follow up with more specialized information.[40]

Although the project was still underway at the time of the Lundy and Hollis's report, the experiment was work-

ing extraordinarily well, even despite additional personnel changes. One benefit they highlight, which was not expected, is that all of the staff members involved have increased their own specializations considerably. In the course of working with the special collections materials, those catalogers previously unfamiliar with them not only gained greater knowledge through first-hand experience, but also sought out additional training in rare book topics relevant to the project.[41] What ultimately confirmed the success of the experiment were two setbacks the project experienced just before the article was finished. First, the budgetary shortfall that had resulted in the decrease in acquisitions, and thus the increase in cataloging, was resolved and new items began pouring back into the library, taking valuable time away from the project. Yet, because the catalogers had been given the responsibility to make their own schedules (and many had come to enjoy working with different materials), they became more efficient processing in both areas. Thus, although production slowed, it by no means stopped, and it remains far more efficient than before. Second, the head of cataloging, who originally proposed this project, unexpectedly left his position, which could have posed more problems for the ongoing success of the project than even the acquisitions budget increase. As noted by Martell, "a change in authority structures in which power is decentralized creates a situation where non-administrative personnel can initiate and move a project forward even through fluctuations of budget and personnel."[42] The trust UCB had in its lower-level staff enabled them to maintain an extensive program through events that would have ended any traditional hierarchy-dependent project.

UCB consulted a study that is particularly helpful in showing the application of participatory management. Although not addressing special collections exclusively, Gerrida Oosthuizen and Adeline du Toit studied the application of "participative" management in academic information services in the Gauteng province of South Africa.[43] Although they do not provide tremendous detail about the settings they mention, except to note that participatory management there tended to be isolated to low-level staff and concerning relatively insignificant decisions, they provide an excellent discussion of the rationale propelling attempts to establish participatory management models. Oosthuizen and du Toit note that participatory management's unique feature is that it presumes that employees have a potential role in all levels of decision making within an organization. "Participative management is more than a willingness to share influence—formal patterns of participation need to be truly implemented where employees have a right to contribute to all levels of decision-making."[44] As a result, a high level of trust among all parties is necessary before successful implementation is possible. Participative management in itself is more demanding of managers than the traditional directive styles of decision making. It often requires a rebuilding of trust and a reeducation of management and the workforce, to say nothing of patience and

multiple acts of faith by management before employees believe and buy into the process. Participation should not be done to employees but with them.[45]

Managers must remember that the majority of employees will not trust this innovation at first, if ever. Most employees' experience of such "experiments" tend to be no more than acts of manipulation on the part of management to try to get employee support for an unpopular initiative. At the same time, Morse points out, "the employees don't want to do your [the manager's] job," and will resent any program that appears to transfer responsibility that should belong to management to the staff.[46]

Oosthuizen and du Toit also emphasize that while early applications of participatory management are necessarily experimental, they should not be thought of, or used, as temporary solutions. Participatory management can work as a full-fledged model, if implemented properly. They note that in many contemporary management settings, "the focus of attention has shifted away from the question of whether to initiate a team-based employee involvement program and is now centered on how to implement such programs most effectively."[47] Nowhere is this more true than in highly specialized settings such as technology and, in this case, special collections.

Participatory management has tremendous potential, as demonstrated throughout this article, but using it successfully can be difficult. Similar to Plas's observations earlier, Art Lichtenstein explains that participatory management sounds good to our ears because we, coming from a democratic society, assume that having input on decisions that affect us is a good thing and our right. Yet, because of this, "we fail to take a critical look at its effect on library management."[48] As a result, many libraries have simply jumped into participatory management without even reflecting on whether it "was really suited to libraries. Rather than choosing participatory management as the most effective way to develop outstanding libraries, deans and directors may have embraced it simply because it was the only model that fit the times."[49]

Lichtenstein outlines a number of factors that managers need to keep in mind as they consider the implementation of this model:[50]

1. It requires skillful and constant management, and even so, it is not appropriate for all forms of decision making. Simply put, "participatory management does not mean that everyone has to be involved in everything."[51]
2. Participatory management is not knowledge intrinsic to humans; people need to learn how to use it, both managers *and* employees.
3. Not every employee wants to be involved in decision making, and should not be forced into this role any more than their position requires it.
4. Participatory management is time consuming, and while it may save time and energy in the future, it will not at the beginning, and both managers and

employees need to understand this and be patient.

5. Poor implementation or temporary use of participatory management models can cause serious resentment among employees. People do not usually react kindly to having influence yanked away from them.

6. Finally, and perhaps the most subtly dangerous possibility, "participatory management may serve to mask ineffective leadership," resulting in both poor library performance overall, and potentially irreparable damage to staff relations.[52] This possibility stems from the unfortunate fact that participatory management disperses, and can subsequently obscure, decision making responsibility, thereby making it difficult to hold any one person accountable for a poor decision made in committee.[53] Of course, this is not the only management model in which such a thing can happen, but it is important that managers keep it in mind.

Ultimately, the purpose of any management model is to maximize productivity and efficiency for the organization adopting it. No model is perfect, but some are clearly better than others. Like governments, management models tend to work best when the majority of the people involved are given a voice. Necessarily, some voices will be louder than others, and some will choose not to utilize their voices. Participatory management seems to have tremendous potential if, again like government, managers and staff are willing to put in the necessary effort to see it work. Dictatorships are relatively easy, if expensive, to maintain. Participatory management not only renders management more effective, it provides the entire staff with a greater understanding of leadership writ large, which they can transfer to other roles within the organization, or even take with them to new settings.

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7. Mary Parker Follett, *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett*, ed. Henry C. Metcalf and Lyndall F. Urwick (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941); Pauline Graham, ed., *Mary Parker Follett–Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s* (Boston: Harvard Business School Pr., 1995); and Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*, ed. Dorwin Cartwright (New York: Harper, 1951).
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34 M. Winslow Lundy and Deborah Hollis, "Creating Access to Invisible Special Collections: Using Participatory Management to Reduce a Backlog," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 30, no. 6 (2004): 466–75.

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