

U-Benchmarking Club of University Libraries: The advantages of the technology at the service of the universities

Columbus Executive Director: Daniel Samoilovich's Intervention at the 9th Regional Conference on Cataloging and the 7th Information Services Seminar, organized by the Library System of the Universidad de San Luis de Potosí in Mexico.

When we started benchmarking seven or eight years ago, webinars were not common. They are now. **But benchmarking is much more than just a webinar.** In fact, what is essential is not technology, but what it allows us to do.

You are knowledge management professionals. Let me therefore share with you how the idea came about, what problem we wanted to solve, and how we were making benchmarking an increasingly powerful instrument.

Columbus is an association that has 30 years of existence. Our mission is to foster collaboration between universities in Europe and Latin America and stimulate institutional development. Columbus is an acronym: COLlaboration in University Management: a Bridge between Universities and Scholars. From the beginning we organize study visits and training programs for university rectors. These activities stimulated the development of strategies. But then the rectors addressed us and said: **"We already know what we want to do, but now we need people trained for that task."** Then we began to consider **how to support professionalization in the different functions of the University:** how to improve the quality of teaching, how to better cooperate with the environment, how to better manage finances, how to recruit and retain talent, etcetera.

One of the ways we started this practice was to create consortia, that is, groups of universities focused on a specific topic. We also participate in the development of international projects with European funding, one of them dedicated to the theme of libraries called "Library of Babel", as a tribute to the famous ancient library.

All these activities helped us to reflect on a very important issue, in my opinion: **how to stimulate reciprocal learning between institutions that share the same problems but act in very different institutional and national contexts? I do not believe in the concept of "best practices".** A practice that works very well in one context can work very poorly in another. Does this mean that colleagues cannot learn from each other? The answer is yes, but this is not automatic **and you need to create an enabling environment.**

To give an effective answer to this question we created the U- Benchmarking Club. The first thing we did was benchmarking the benchmarking.

There are many ways to do benchmarking: one can benchmark results, meaning put products or services on a bench and measure performance or results. One can benchmark processes: how things are done and how you can improve what you do. For example, at that time there was an organization that no longer exists and developed a benchmarking program through which each institution reported on what they did, an expert evaluated the practices and then encouraged an exchange based on what the expert considered the most meritorious practices. For the reason I mentioned, we have rejected this type of approach. From an epistemological point of view not only people, but institutions also build their knowledge.

In Columbus, we were inspired by an approach practiced by colleagues from Nordic countries. The Nordics are usually very generous sharing their experiences and in this case they also shared what they knew how to do. Swedish colleagues took a little boat to Denmark and practiced benchmarking in a very structured way. That is, they had a methodology, a way of organizing reciprocal learning, a code of conduct, etc.

As you know, **sometimes problems lead to innovations.** They did it face-to-face. We could not take a boat. In any case we could never have reached San Luis de Potosí. So our innovation was to use a communication platform similar to the one we are using now to enable a remote exchange.

Obviously, this was not a minor challenge: it was necessary to **create a trust** that the personal encounter favors. Shortly after walking we realized that while working distance is not as powerful as a personal encounter, it has some very important advantages.

The first is that **it allows the construction of a process in which contact with others, individual and collective reflection and application on the ground are intertwined.** That is, the experience is not developed over three days but over three months. You just participated in five workshops. Surely it was a very enriching process, and now your university can apply it back. In the case of benchmarking, this process is intertwined and this can be very powerful. **At Columbus we take the concept of training-action seriously.**

We also realized another question: when not incurring in transfers and travel fees, **the number of people who can participate in an experience like this is bigger.** This allows creating and reaching a critical mass of colleagues within the institution who share a vision. You know that in everyday work, opportunities to discuss with colleagues are limited. But what happens when a team accesses other experiences and this leads to a dialogue between them?

Moreover, in benchmarking, **we ask that different levels of responsibility within the University are represented: people with political responsibility, operational levels, etc.** The operatives need an institutional guarantee to develop improvement actions, just as,



without the participation of those directly responsible, the beautiful plans for improvement are left on paper.

One of the secrets of successful benchmarking is **to have an expert who knows in depth the subject and is willing to facilitate the process**. This is not easy, because it is necessary for the person to have experience but, at the same time, to be able to go beyond it and connect with other situations. In this case we were lucky to have Paula Andrea Ramirez. We knew she was well acquainted with the subject, but I confess that it was quite difficult to convince her to join this mission.

All this is articulated and strengthened if, from the beginning, **it is proposed that each institution, at the end of the year, should have an improvement plan**. And for this we also propose a methodology.

Another of the results of the benchmarking is to have developed **an application for an Erasmus+ project**, which is currently under evaluation.

I also learned from benchmarking. I learned, for example, about that huge battle you are waging to lead to **open access to knowledge**. I also learned how libraries are evolving into new roles.

Finally, let me invite you to approach Columbus if your institutions are not yet members. We propose activities and offer services that are very interesting. I give you only two examples:

We have just made it possible for five young talents in chemistry to be invited to participate for free in a six-day meeting with 31 Nobel Prizes of the specialty in southern Germany in June. Five lucky ones. It may seem to you that it is a small number but let me tell you that it is 20% of all Latin American young scholars, who are studying in Latin America, the United States and Europe. We have also nominated 18 young scientists for a similar meeting with Nobel Prize laureates in Economics.

We are also pioneers on creating the Columbus Hub Academy, a platform where students of your universities can participate in projects with students of other member universities of Columbus or the European Association of Universities. In this way, they can acquire a very concrete international experience. As you know, more than 95% of students in Latin America do not have the opportunity to carry out an international experience.

This is what I wanted to share with you. Thank you very much.