

## **The Knowledge Café: A Unique Teaching Experience**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching adult learners in a community-based educational setting differs in many ways from applying typical campus-based or online instructional best practices. Adult learners show tremendous diversity in their backgrounds, approach learning in a myriad of different ways, and rely heavily on their past experiences to help guide their future knowledge acquisition. Teaching a thoroughly engaged and eclectic group of adult learners in an “off-campus” setting can be rewarding and challenging at the same time. This paper describes a collaborative partnership, known as The Knowledge Café, between a local community foundation and a regional campus of a major university to provide business owners with advanced knowledge on professional social media technologies. Details regarding how the partnership was established are presented, along with teaching insights from the inaugural year of operation. Suggested future work and activities provide an overview of how The Knowledge Café may evolve as the campus-community partnership continues to grow.

**Keywords:** Community partnership, adult learners, social media, knowledge café, teaching off-campus.

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For post-secondary educators, teaching outside of the structure of the college or university system can be an opportunity that is at the same time both rewarding and highly challenging. Surrounding communities are frequently eager to engage faculty members for the specialized expertise and knowledge that they hold. In turn, faculty members can benefit strongly from the real-world problem solving experiences and interactions that they encounter when working on issues of importance to the community.

Such partnerships tend to thrive when each party has something meaningful and unique to offer – and for educators, this is often the ability to present complex subject matter in a manner that it is readily absorbed and comprehended by a very diverse community audience. Excelling in this process requires a keen grasp of the needs and wants of the community participants along with a fundamental knowledge of how to approach an audience that can range in age from 18 to 80 with a myriad of different levels of understanding. In short, the challenge facing the educator is very different from that seen in typical classroom settings where students are likely to share many of the same educational experiences and goals.

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This paper explores the design, implementation and inaugural year of operation of a novel campus-community partnership to provide education and training to small business owners and prospective small business owners on the theory and practice of business-focused social media technologies. These are technologies that could, if properly applied, help drive the growth of small businesses across the area beyond what is possible to achieve through more traditional business practices. To place the partnership into perspective, discussions covering the process of learning how to effectively teach these technical concepts and plans for transforming the initial program into a university course-driven service-learning project over subsequent years are included.

## **Partnering with the Community**

### ***Common Partnerships***

Partnerships between university campuses or individual faculty members and the surrounding communities come in a variety of forms that all serve to link very different types of organizations in pursuit of common learning and mutual benefit. Curwood and co-workers observed that partnerships of this kind tend to be hard work and also tend to involve blending together different personal styles, cultures, locations and other parameters that can result in complex working relationships (2011, p. 16). To the degree that a partnership can be structured ahead of time, with a detailed understanding of what will be achieved, the probability of success is enhanced for those who will contribute on an ongoing basis.

Such partnerships are often classified, in general terminology, as to whether they fall under community service learning guidelines (CSL) or community-based research guidelines (CBR) (Curwood et al., 2011, Hoyt, 2010; Gray & MacRae, 2012). In the case of CSL, the partnership is based on “an educational approach that integrates service in the community with intentional learning activities” (Curwood et al., 2011, p. 15; Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning, 2006, p. 1). In the case of CBR, the distinction from CSL is defined as the opportunity for “knowledge production” by all participants involved in the partnership (Nyden, 2009, p. 9) as opposed to a portion of the participants taking a more passive role of receiving the benefits of the learning activities without actively contributing significant independent knowledge of their own.

At Miami University, both CSL-style and CBR-style projects and courses are abundant within the curriculum. Undergraduate courses make use of the CSL model in the majority of cases with projects commonly pre-arranged between individual faculty members and community institutions under the auspices of a university service-learning coordinator. When specific guidelines are followed, faculty may apply to have their courses designated as university-approved service-learning opportunities and students successfully completing the courses receive a service-learning designation at graduation. Graduate-level courses are more likely to follow a CBR-style approach or one that incorporates elements of both styles.

Also of strong interest within the university, are projects involving individual faculty members or groups of faculty members interacting directly with community members or institutions on an ongoing basis as elements in a plan to provide teaching expertise that is frequently combined with community service. Other interactive plans may involve a scholarly research program. The interactions tend to follow the approach described by Hoyt (2010) where faculty members perceive a community need or opportunity, investigate the situation, and build a mutually beneficial partnership with the community over time. Hoyt noted that partnerships can develop into a state of “sustained engagement” where “people inside and outside the university engage in an evolutionary continuum between the ever present themes of practice and knowledge; they seek to overcome, rather than reinforce, the false dichotomy between the two” (p. 82).

Sustaining engagement with the community is not always easy and certainly does not always follow a straightforward path. Clifford and Petrescu (2012) observed that three dimensions must be covered in the process of creating community engagements that are both beneficial and sustainable for the parties involved. These dimensions include internal (relationships, organizational dynamics and culture within the university), external (relationships and dynamics of the community, power and resource imbalances, community identity), and personal (psychology, competencies and career issues of the faculty) – all having a strong impact on the overall partnership (p. 83). The authors offer an engagement strategy that centers on processes involving being authentic in engaging the community, maintaining a core commitment to learning and carefully articulating the commitment to improve the community throughout the process (p. 90).

### ***Identifying a Community Need***

The Southwestern Ohio region has lost a large percentage of its manufacturing jobs over the past ten to twenty years. Community-based nonprofits are working to help local residents establish new small businesses – particularly those that fall outside of the traditional manufacturing sector. Much of this effort occurs by offering basic business workshops and skill-based training on contemporary business topics such as financing, managing a workforce, marketing products and/or services and other similar topics. Workshops and programs are advertised via traditional print and voice media plus through social media channels, and instruction or coaching in basic social media techniques appropriate for business is readily available. At the present time, however, what has been lacking is any form of advanced social media training for business owners that would allow them to extend their businesses more broadly via content-driven social media sites, strategic scheduling of updates and other communications, understanding of user demographics through Web analytics, and other more complex processes.

As might be expected, the communities that may be most willing to engage with university resources in establishing ongoing partnerships are those that have the fewest resources available themselves to conduct needed projects in support of community growth and improvement. Since university resources are also stretched, these communities are not looking to universities as sources of funding, but rather sources of expertise that may be tapped and leveraged for the good of the community. A case in point is the revitalization

project in South Memphis described by researchers Lambert-Pennington, Reardon and Robinson (2011). The University of Memphis has shown success in addressing urban core issues such as land use and transportation through establishing partnerships that involve multiple faculty members and students from a broad cross-section of departments. Such interdisciplinary partnerships add additional layers of complexity to the process, but also afford the opportunity to make important contributions that may be outside the scope of what a single professor or even a single department can provide (p. 62-63).

Particularly when seeking to establish committed partnerships in economically challenged areas, individuals at either the community level or the university level may face suspicion that partnerships may not last. This occurs despite the fact that all parties involved recognize the need for the work under consideration. Stated in other terms, once the true depth of the engagement needed to bring about needed change is fully understood, will partners be up for the challenge? In the South Memphis revitalization work, it took several semesters of continuous engagement by university faculty and students before residents of the community were willing to buy in and trust the efforts of the partnership (Lambert-Pennington et al., 2011, p. 65-66). Support from the university administration was viewed as critical during this timeframe as faculty were spending precious research time on community engagement activities and civic reports to explain projects as opposed to generating more traditional research output resulting in peer-reviewed journal articles (p. 65). Similar concerns are noted by Hoyt (2010) when describing community partnerships with economically challenged communities in Massachusetts surrounding Harvard University.

### ***Communications – Promote Mutual Benefits***

Communications by the campus or by faculty members involved in campus-community partnerships can be a critical factor in whether or not such partnerships are viewed in a positive light, regardless of the degree of success achieved through the partnership itself. Research by Arrazattee, Lima and Lundy underscores this importance by stating that, “Non-reciprocal representations of campus-community partnerships can alienate community partners serving an important role in the educational process, can perpetuate the idea of ‘helpless’ communities needing assistance from the outside to be successful, and can reinforce the very notions that engagement activities such as service-learning aim to dispel” (2013, p. 41). These researchers stress that language used to describe these partnerships can vary widely from department to department within a given university. For example, general news articles published by universities on campus-community partnerships frequently contained language that placed the community partners at a disadvantage – such as referring to the community partner(s) in terms that equated to being “needy” or that they were receiving “help” from the university (p.47). In contrast, community engagement offices at the same universities were much more likely to use collaborative language in their communications that stressed “working with” community partners as opposed to the help-oriented language previously described (p. 48). The language difference is not as subtle as it may initially seem, due to connotations involving the self-esteem of those who may be perceived as requiring assistance.

It is similarly of interest to note that the language and actions of university officials can also have implications for the faculty members engaged in campus-community partnerships, thus potentially affecting the willingness of the faculty to participate. O'Meara, Louder and Hodges (2013) observed that a theory on power and agency in organizations previously described by Lawrence (2008) could be used to understand and explain faculty reactions to various types of actions taken with regard to campus-community partnerships. Termed "episodic power" by these researchers, such strategic actions were viewed as providing a key driving force of encouragement, especially to younger or tenure-track faculty who might question whether or not campus-community partnerships were worth the time and effort in an already-crowded pre-tenure agenda (p. 10-11). As observed by Whitchurch (2012), the trend toward more community engagement by faculty is likely to continue as academic institutions seek to redefine and improve their relationships with the communities that they serve.

As an example of this practice, Miami University places a very high regard for and emphasis on activities that strive to engage the communities surrounding the three primary campuses in Southwestern Ohio in productive, mutually beneficial activities. Faculty are encouraged to seek out opportunities to develop long-term working relationships with community agencies that can encompass teaching, research and service pursuits, either singly or in combination. Such practices continue to grow in importance across institutions of higher education and may be classified in a variety of ways to include "civic engagement," "community engagement," "service-learning" and several other terms (Driscoll, 2014; Pike, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2014).

While there is no indication in the literature that an increase in emphasis on community engagement projects and activities is altering the way that universities as a whole evaluate faculty, (for example, away from the traditional emphasis on excellence in teaching and research with service-activities listed third, if at all) many institutions favorably acknowledge such faculty service either institutionally or by department and use it as a characterizing element of the university (Pike et al., 2014, p. 90). As one example, the Carnegie Classification of Community Engagement provides a good indicator of this emphasis, with 361 institutions now listed as qualifying through both Curricular Engagement (CE) and Outreach & Partnerships (O&P) ([http://nerche.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=341&Itemid=92](http://nerche.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=341&Itemid=92)).

On a specific institutional basis community engagement and service activities can also rise to the level of profoundly influencing faculty evaluations – particularly in situations where the mission of the institution calls out the process as a key area of emphasis. This is the case at the author's institution, one of the Regional Campuses of Miami University. Faculty are evaluated annually on three criteria that include, in order, teaching performance, service, and finally, scholarship/research. Service activities and projects that seek to fully engage the communities where the campuses are located receive active support from the administration in a variety of tangible ways and are reflected in detail on annual performance evaluations.

## **The Complex Relationship Between Campus-Community Partnerships and Teaching**

Community organizations love to engage university faculty members. Faculty are frequently viewed as having a wealth of knowledge in subjects that are of strong interest to, and in many cases, great importance to, members of the community. From the faculty perspective, opportunities to engage the community often involve chances to interact with eager students who bring a tremendous diversity of experience and thought to the learning process. Successfully engaging the members of a community organization, or members of the community at large, in an educational setting is, however, substantially different from teaching university students in a traditional lecture-based or online course setting. Careful attention to the preparation and delivery of educational materials, plus an in-depth understanding of how adult learners process information both help maximize a successful outcome.

Marienau and Reed observed that community-based learning for adults requires balancing several distinct perspectives, including a concern for transmitting knowledge, the developmental value of including experiential learning, and the possibility of needing to teach both younger and older learners within the same program (2008, p. 61-62). The authors note that conceptual frameworks involving “events that directly engage learners in dealing with genuine problems or situations, while reflecting critically on these experiences in interaction with others” are likely to resonate well with the needs and wants of community learners (p. 62). Moreover, adult learners may be faced with less flexibility in terms of their schedules than their traditional student counterparts and be less likely to do work outside of the community classroom to prepare for subsequent sessions (Berker & Horn, 2003; O’Connell, 2002). This underscores the suitability of using presentation and assignment styles that allow for collaboration between participants and time for discussion within each instructional session.

Adult learners tend to thrive in situations where they can leverage their prior experiences and apply them to new problem solving situations (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000). Designing activities and assignments that allow learners to take the skills that they have and the knowledge that they have accumulated through life experience, professional training, and other sources and then apply those attributes to new topics can stimulate interest in the subject matter, but it also requires great care to structure approaches so that they are neither too difficult for those who lack prior knowledge, nor too simplistic for those who seek to build on a foundation of knowledge already in place. Grouping learners into smaller instructor-assigned teams after holding a preliminary discussion with all learners can serve to establish appropriate blends of skills and knowledge to keep all learners engaged and moving forward.

Particularly in situations involving a high percentage of adult learners, it is often helpful to provide plenty of opportunity for participants to influence the direction that the instructional process will take (Marienau & Reed, 2008, p. 70). This again speaks to the fact that adult learners are more likely to enter into a new learning situation in pursuit of specific knowledge – often to complement something that they are already partially conver-

sant in or that is necessary for them to master a skill to meet a career goal or other professionally oriented situation. Fortunately, engaging learners in the process of deciding what to study is entirely congruent with the concept of offering instruction in a community partnership sense – where the needs and wants of the community organization or the community at large provide the impetus for setting up the partnership from the beginning.

In a similar vein, it is also helpful for instructors to follow the pulse of discussions that occur in community learning situations, often allowing learners to take the floor in providing stimulating multi-directional conversation on a topic with the instructor at least temporarily taking on more of the role of a discussion facilitator as opposed to a deliverer of knowledge (Neuda, 2010). This approach helps to establish a common footing with learners, known as “adults teaching adults” that can drive comradery in the community classroom and stimulate comprehension of the topics at hand (Neuda, 2010, p. 2, 10). A similar approach noted by Stewart (2014) has been show to work well in developing professional learning communities among students who have similar interests and are aspiring to secure a selected advanced degree. Thus the crossover into the realm of adult learning in a community partnership is not unexpected.

## **A New Campus-Community Partnership**

### ***Defining the Opportunity***

The genesis of campus-community partnership under discussion here came through conversations that the author had with local business owners and individuals demonstrating an interest in starting new businesses. Although many of these individuals believed that they had strong support within the community and good, fundamental resources that they could tap for training on basic business practices, more advanced skills and counseling were largely lacking. One of the primary issues that came up repeatedly was how to extend the reach of a business venture beyond the local community. Being an economically depressed area, there was only a certain amount of potential to grow a small business beyond a modest local clientele, yet that level of business success would not always be sustainable.

Concurrently, the author had recently developed and launched a new senior-level undergraduate course entitled “Social Media and Career Development” for students who wanted to learn more about maximizing the impact of their online job search efforts and, subsequently, their ability to use social media appropriately once on the job. Tapping more deeply into the knowledge of local and regional business people, plus their needs and wants in hiring new employees, had the potential to significantly enhance the concepts taught in this course. Thus, it appeared at this point that it could be possible to develop a mutually-beneficial partnership.

### ***Professional Social Media Use for Business***

It was readily apparent that general training on how to use social media to increase the “reach” of a business, coupled with one-to-one coaching on specific applications, could

make a difference in the marketplace success of small- to medium-sized businesses in the Middletown, Ohio area. Professional use and application of social media technologies continues to rise at a rapid pace across business, government and not-for-profit institutions. The term “professional” is key in realizing maximum benefit from the time invested in social media as overuse or careless use of the relevant technologies does not equate to automatic professional success (Cleary, Ferguson, Jackson, & Watson, 2013). The challenges are many and are as diverse as the spectrum of constituencies served by social media technologies and applications. In the scientific community, social media applications are influencing how scientists share data and collaborate on projects, plus how scientific papers are reviewed and published (Coppock & Davis, 2013). In health care, sharing of recent developments in treatment between physicians and also sharing health care guidelines with patients are both essential contemporary applications of social media (Cleary et al., 2013, p. 153-154). In the public sector, social media sites are frequently used to disseminate information and/or provide access to government programs, but true two-way engagement with the public remains a high priority issue to resolve (Mergel, 2012). Not-for-profit agencies share many of the same constraints and challenges as government, with resource mobilization to help achieve results as a primary issue that still needs to be more thoroughly addressed (Zorn, Grant, & Henderson, 2013).

Focusing again on business-oriented social media technologies and applications that are appropriate for small- to medium-sized businesses, use tends to be prolific and follows many of the same fundamental best practices of business communications, management and leadership, and marketing found in general business guidelines (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014; Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014). Unfortunately, for many individuals just starting out in business, and certainly for those individuals who may not be experienced in social media from their casual or private online use, understanding and distilling to practice the huge amount of literature available on the topic can be both time consuming and confusing. When learned collaboratively with partners and in situations with multiple opportunities to experiment and receive feedback, the challenge of professionally incorporating social media into a business plan becomes much more manageable.

For more detailed information on teaching approaches for introducing adult learners to social media technologies, the research conducted and summarized by Heaggans (2012) may also be helpful. In a practical sense, Heaggans observed that adult learners are less likely to be interested in the inner workings of a computer than their younger counterparts and more likely to want to move directly toward how the technology can assist them. Approaches that limit the use of computer and/or social media jargon and focusing directly on steps that adult learners can take to address their own articulated needs can be highly successful (p. 2-3). Additionally, Heaggans found that adult learners are less likely to complete multi-step projects and assignments than their younger counterparts. This translates into a best approach based on delivering concepts in smaller increments with additional time spent between successive segments for practice (p. 5).



### ***Establishing a Community Partner***

With the basic concept of the partnership defined, the next step was to identify a partner within the local community that could help bring together a highly diverse group of potential participants from the business community and also assist with funding the programs that would be delivered. Such a partner was identified and secured through a grant from the Middletown [Ohio] Community Foundation (MCF) under the heading of support for Quality Education and Human Needs, one of four quarterly grant funding competitions held by the foundation each year. This application for funding sought to provide instruction and a discussion forum for those interested in learning more about professional social media applications that could be used to expand and/or enhance business performance. The program described in the grant application was intended to strengthen the ability of local Middletown small business owners and potential business owners to effectively and efficiently employ a wide variety of business-building social media technologies thereby enhancing the probability of long-term business success. The primary benefit to the community was described as augmenting the excellent small business development services already available in Middletown by filling a knowledge gap regarding social media best practices and opportunities that could enable small business owners and potential business owners to expand their operations and build their competitive advantage and/or expansion in the marketplace. A series of monthly “lunch and learn” activities, including instructional presentations, book reviews, guest speakers, and panel discussions was proposed to blend together a cohesive, practical guide to the social media technologies that small business owners and potential business owners can actually put into practice.

The grant application was funded by the MCF, with funds set aside to cover a series of seminars to be delivered roughly within the timeframe of September 1, 2014 through June 1, 2015. The MCF funded the campus-community partnership with a modest budget of \$3750. To help defray costs, the Miami University Middletown administration offered to waive the costs associated with renting university space for the sessions, saving a total of \$2,700 over the series. Shortly after the sessions began, an additional \$500 in grant support from the Middletown Campus Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) was raised to assist in covering food costs and honoraria for guest speakers. With careful attention to details regarding instructional materials and other supplies, a workable budget was ready to go.

### ***Selecting a Name***

With a solid working agreement established with the MCF regarding the deliverables of the partnership, final preparations turned to issues such as contracting with a reliable caterer for refreshments, securing actual room reservations on specific dates and contacting potential guest speakers to determine their interest in participating. The partnership was also given an official name designed to be attention-getting and evocative of the core purpose of the program as a whole. Borrowing from the work of David Gurteen, a UK-based knowledge management consultant, the campus-community partnership was named “The Knowledge Café.” True knowledge cafés serve as “... a means of bringing a

group of people together to have an open, creative conversation on a topic of mutual interest to surface their collective knowledge, to share ideas and insights and to gain a deeper understanding of the subject and the issues involved” (Gurteen, 1998). While the first few sessions of The Knowledge Café were envisioned largely as lectures and presentations to establish a common baseline level of knowledge among participants, it was also envisioned from the start that sessions would evolve toward a collaborative state of participative knowledge sharing more fully embracing the principles set forth by Gurteen (1998) and also by Gasik (2011) in his later work on project knowledge management.

### *Understanding the Needs and Wants of Potential Participants*

The first session of The Knowledge Café was held on October 1, 2014. Several weeks prior to that session, a brief survey was distributed to local business owners via chambers of commerce, local business incubators, etc., asking for their input on topics to cover, desire to attend afternoon or evening sessions and several other parameters. The results obtained were used to guide the development of the schedule for the series of eighteen sessions.

“Pre-session” results included the following observations, based on a total of 55 completed surveys. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (67%) stated that they would prefer the evening timeslot. Twenty-two percent favored the afternoon timeslot and eleven percent said that the topic of the session would drive their choice of timeslot. Respondents cited a variety of reasons for wanting to attend The Knowledge Café including, in order, “to learn more about social media” (78%), “to network with other business owners” (72%), “to start a new business” (44%), “to help my organization” (28%), and “to get help starting a new career” (22%).

Respondents were also asked to rank-order a list of sixteen potential topic ideas for The Knowledge Café from those of greatest interest to those of minimal interest. Results are presented in Table 1 for the top nine topics from the survey. Beyond the top nine, it was decided to keep topic selection flexible to evolve with the preferences of participants as the program moved forward.

### *Getting the Word Out*

All advertising for The Knowledge Café was self-produced and followed the format of a two-panel flyer that could be easily transmitted as a pdf by e-mail or incorporated as a jpeg image into Web sites or social media sites of local and regional business organizations. The university assisted by featuring the advertising on monthly event calendars and in bulk electronic mailings of campus activities. The overall theme and the basic description of the event remained consistent across all flyers produced, with the material on the left-hand panel and the specifics regarding each session changing to reflect the material that would be presented and discussed. The right-hand panel provided general information on The Knowledge Café to put individual sessions into perspective. An example of a typical advertisement is shown in Figure 1. This session provided participants with

**Table 1: Topic Preferences for The Knowledge Café.**

Topic	Mean Ranking *
Facebook Marketing	1.64
Why is Social Media Important to Business	2.80
Twitter Revenue	3.56
Business Book “Brainsteering”	3.75
Growing Your Social Media Influence	3.80
Return on Investment in Social Media	4.00
Business Book “The 2020 Workplace”	4.33
LinkedIn for Business	4.42
Pinterest and Instagram	4.50

\* The mean ranking value is a measure of the relative frequency that each choice was cited by survey respondents. The lower the number, the more popular the choice. Sample size = 55 respondents.

**Figure 1. Advertising for The Knowledge Café Session on April 16, 2015.**

the opportunity to interact with a panel of Facebook experts to learn the tips and techniques necessary to produce a business-focused Facebook site.

## Welcome to The Knowledge Café

### *Schedule*

A typical session schedule for The Knowledge Café is depicted in Table 2. Set up in this manner, sessions generally flowed very well and there was ample time for all participants to do some networking along with participating in the actual session program.

**Table 2. A Typical Session Schedule.**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Time</b>
Meet, Greet, and Refreshments	30 min before and first 10 min of session.
Announcements	5 min
First Part of Program	45 min – usually presentations with Q&A
Break, Networking, Refreshments	15 min
Second Part of Program	45 min – interactive problem solving & discussion
Adjourn	“Hard Stop” at 2 hrs

For sessions conducted directly by the author a handout with text and helpful information was provided at the start of each session. Most guest speakers also followed this protocol. All sessions featured visual aids displayed on a large screen – many with “live” interactions over the Internet.

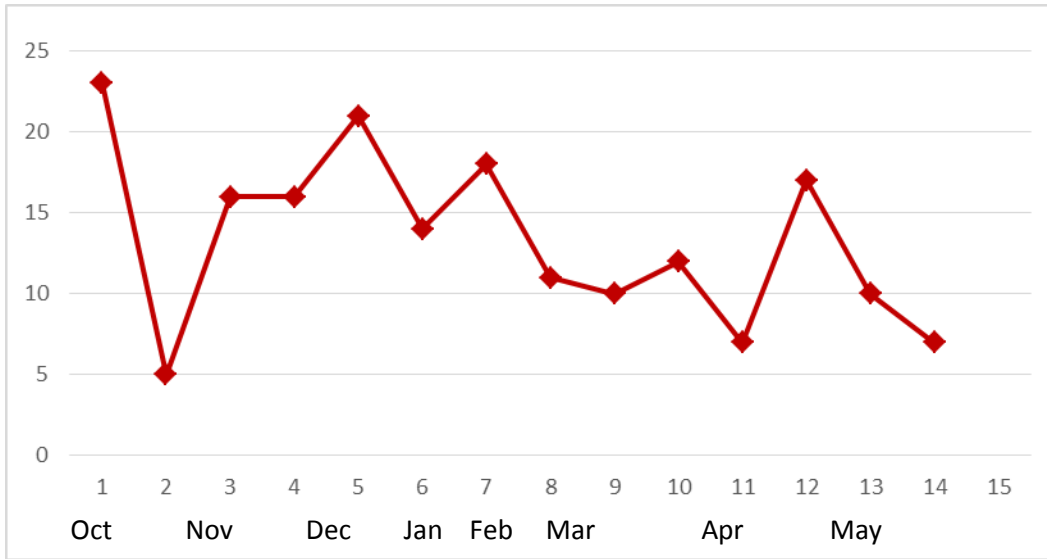
## Results

### *Demographics and Attendance Parameters*

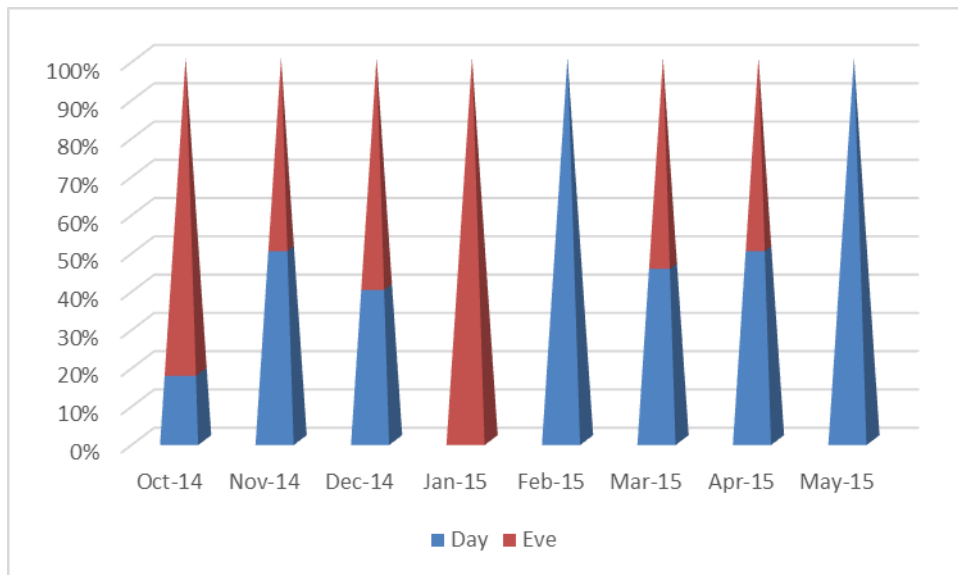
The Knowledge Café has received a highly positive response from the Middletown community, with virtually one-hundred percent of attendees indicating that they believed the sessions to be of value when polled. Sessions have varied in attendance based on a number of variables that include the time of day, the weather, other events scheduled the same day, the topic selected, etc. The average attendance is 14-15 people per session. A graph of the attendance across all sessions to date is provided in Figure 2.

The sessions presented on October 1, 2014 and October 15, 2014 were identical and duplicates to provide the same introductory material to both an evening session (October 1) and an afternoon session (October 15). Thus, the unusually low attendance at the second session on October 15 is not unexpected. Other gaps in the data set include two sessions that were cancelled due to weather-related closings of the campus.

Attendance at evening sessions generally exceeds that of afternoon sessions, although afternoon attendance actually has been more robust than initially expected. Anecdotal



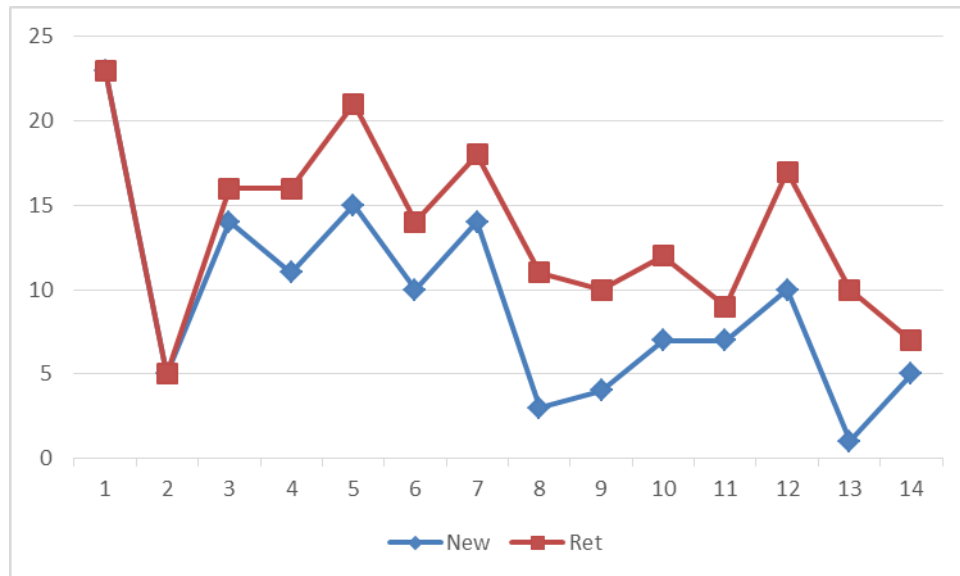
**Figure 2. Attendance at The Knowledge Café by Session Number.**



**Figure 3. Day vs. Evening Attendance Note: The months of January (Eve), February and May (Day) included sessions only during single timeslots.**

conversations with attendees indicate that they are often able to take a “long lunch” at work to attend if the topic is of interest. Individuals who are retired and/or small business owners who are single proprietors also frequent the afternoon sessions. A breakdown of the attendance by afternoon/evening session timeslots is provided in Figure 3.

Data were also tracked for new versus returning attendees. The Knowledge Café shows a good history of attracting new attendees to sessions, but the number of attendees who



**Figure 4. Comparison of New and Returning Attendee Attendance Numbers.**

return for multiple sessions is also growing. The relationship between these two groups of attendees is shown in Figure 4.

Attendees have come from many different backgrounds and include small business owners (57%), entrepreneurs (including retired business people who have become entrepreneurs, 10%), individuals from non-profit agencies such as community foundations, churches, educational institutions, and governmental bodies (13%), plus university students and university faculty members (20%).

### ***Why Participants Attend***

Attendees are divided nearly equally between male (52%) and female (48%) with the largest percentage (86%) coming directly from the Middletown area. In discussing The Knowledge Café, there appears to be two overarching reasons that participants attend. First, many individuals state that they are there to learn about professional social media technologies and applications in general – and how these technologies can help drive their businesses. These individuals tend to attend frequently and they align very well with the original target market segment for The Knowledge Café established at the time that the grant application was filed. Second, other individuals come when they see a specific topic advertised that is of professional and/or personal interest. These individuals may have, for example, a strong interest in improving Facebook skills or are trying to get set up on LinkedIn for business. They select topics that specifically appeal to their needs and/or wants.

### ***Sessions Held During the Inaugural Year***

Throughout the inaugural year of operations, The Knowledge Café has offered a wide variety of programming based on a combination of the subject knowledge of the facilitator (the author of this manuscript), the preferences of the community of adult learners participating, and the availability of guest speakers and other personnel to assist in covering the materials. As expected based on the adult learning theories and best practices previously noted from the research by Heaggans (2012), the most popular sessions successfully blended the transfer of new learnings to participants, the opportunity for participants to engage the facilitator and each other in experience-driven discussion, and the ability to work on solving real-world problems relevant to the participants' own situations. While all sessions were considered highly valuable by participants, certain sessions did stand out as generating the highest level of positive comments during the sessions and also for several weeks thereafter. The "top two" most popular sessions in each category are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3. Most Popular Session Topics.**

<b>Sessions Involving Predominantly a Lecture-Style Format</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Media 101: Beginning topic scheduled twice as the "starter" sessions for the program.</li> <li>• Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers" and the implications for social media use in business.</li> </ul>
<b>Sessions Involving Predominantly Interactive Discussion and Problem Solving</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook Expert Panel Discussion: What works well and what does not work well.</li> <li>• Social Media Mini-Sessions: Tools to enhance social media sites.</li> </ul>
<b>Sessions Involving Knowledge Transfer and Q&amp;A with Guest Speakers</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LinkedIn for Career Development and Business Applications.</li> <li>• Building Your Business Through eBay.</li> </ul>

## **Discussion**

The inaugural year of operation of The Knowledge Café as a campus-community partnership has been challenging, but has also generated results that exceeded initial expectations.

### ***Value to the Participants***

Throughout the sessions of The Knowledge Café, comments were solicited from participants regarding their impressions of the program, specific learnings, and recommendations for future sessions. Opportunities were provided for written feedback, although some participants preferred to sit down and provide their comments in an oral interview format. With over 200 participants during the first year, comments were overwhelmingly positive with many remarks noting the value of the sessions not only for their novelty and technical content, but also for their fostering of valuable networking opportunities between business individuals, university personnel and not-for-profit agency members. Participants also frequently cited the casual, but informative format of the sessions, the ability to interact on topic choices and the knowledge contributed by local guest speakers who provided supplemental subject matter expertise.

Comments regarding the novelty of the sessions were especially gratifying to hear due to the amount of effort placed toward creating interactive learning sessions that were not typical of other adult education programs available within the community. Emphasis on letting participants weigh in on the topics to cover, seeking interactive participation through shared experiences and stories, and encouragement for participants to bring their immediate unsolved problems in social media to the table for discussion all played a role in creating the novel learning experience. These efforts no doubt helped participants to master and retain the concepts presented. As noted by Suzuki,

*One of the best and most powerful teaching tools to make something memorable to students is novelty or the element of surprise. Something that is novel or surprising focuses attention, engages emotional systems, and is therefore highly memorable or 'sticky,' as neuroscientists like to say (Suzuki & Fitzpatrick, 2015, p. 145).*

Verbatim comments written by participants underscored the general feedback received verbally. For example, specific written comments addressed the useful information provided on “LinkedIn,” “Twitter,” “Facebook,” and other more specialized social media platforms. Participants also noted the value of sessions devoted to developing good content for social media sites, the concrete “real world” examples provided for study, and the breadth of expertise brought to sessions via knowledgeable guest speakers.

Regarding areas for improvement, participants would like to see more opportunities for hands-on work to help participants put new knowledge into practice. Participants would also like to see more advanced topics introduced in subsequent years. While they greatly valued the fundamentals explored within the first year, many participants hoped to be able to continue growing their knowledge through additional sessions in the future. Finally, participants thought it would be helpful to offer more duplicate sessions since they were disappointed to miss materials when scheduling conflicts made it impossible to attend.



### ***Value to the Practice of Teaching***

In keeping with the goals of establishing a true two-way collaborative partnership between the campus and the community, Miami University Middletown has also benefited from The Knowledge Café. The campus has received a large amount of positive publicity from the program, including articles in the local press. The program also brought numerous people to the campus who had not been there before and many commented positively on the facilities and the other program opportunities that they learned about while on campus. The type of partnership described here broke new ground in terms of how it was established (through a community grant, but with high university involvement) and is already in discussion as a model for future projects.

From the standpoint of interacting with a broad cross-section of industry, government, and not-for-profit agency individuals on a regular basis, the author has gained insights on problems and challenges facing small- to medium-sized business owners that far exceed original expectations. This first-hand knowledge is directly influencing lecture materials and assignments that are being used in senior-level leadership and social media courses. In particular, the clear focus on issues related to contemporary workforces and improving the external marketing of businesses are helping prepare students for their chosen career paths.

One of the greatest learnings was the need to become extremely adept at switching “modes of operation” multiple times within a given session. For example, a single session might start out as a communication of new knowledge (pure teaching mode) before switching to an interactive discussion on applications that participants had seen online (discussion facilitation mode), followed by introducing a structured group assignment to get participants to try new skills before adjourning for the day (encouraging, coaching mode). All of these techniques are part of good teaching practices, but successfully applying them in a flexible manner to address the needs and wants of active adult learners required a good deal of preparation before each session – including the need to anticipate possible directions that a session might take and to have appropriate materials prepared and ready for use as needed.

### ***Launching a Similar Program***

Establishing The Knowledge Café was an iterative process that required a great deal of exploration and negotiation between a variety of prospective partners before the concept was refined and the ultimate partnership between Miami University Middletown and the Middletown Community Foundation was realized. The literature provides numerous perspectives on how to approach a process of this type and the information contained therein is highly valuable. In addition, looking at the program from the teaching point of view reveals a set of six steps that can help drive a successful effort.

1. Engage potential campus and community partners on an informal basis and discuss mutually beneficial possibilities before starting any kind of formal process. Be realistic in assessing the teaching skills and preferences that are

- likely to be of interest to the community and seek collaborators that are proactive and open to many points of view.
2. Once potential participants are identified, work diligently to understand their needs and wants – allowing these findings to help shape the desired program. Be prepared to move in instructional directions that may be outside of a preferred comfort zone, if it is in the best interests of participants.
  3. Be keenly aware of the need for flexibility throughout the program – including opportunities that may only come to light once the basic work is underway. This may mean changing a teaching strategy from straight lecture to participative discussions, incorporating more or less hands-on work and adjusting expectations of what participants are willing to do outside of the formal sessions.
  4. Do not “go it alone.” Adult learners appreciate diversity of thought and approach. Seek out guest speakers, people with unusual or contrasting points of view, etc. Run some expert panels to provide a breadth of experience and know-how on tough subjects. Look for opportunities to provide both breadth and depth to the topics covered.
  5. Learn to switch seamlessly between teacher and facilitator – the roles overlap, but each has its unique place in providing robust programs for adult learners.
  6. Above all, do not be afraid to personally champion the overall effort from start to finish. Successful programs will build their own momentum in the majority of cases, but virtually any program will begin with the nucleus of an idea by one, or at most, a small group of individuals who have a vision of what could be realized.

The importance of the sixth point above cannot be overestimated. Projects like The Knowledge Café depend strongly on having a vision of what can be created and the combination of skills and perseverance necessary to address issues and unforeseen hurdles as they come up. Flexibility (point 3) is also an absolute necessity. To that end, projects of this type are likely to be most successful for instructors that thrive in an environment of high uncertainty and constant change. The combination of dealing with adult learners having widely divergent levels of prior skills and the importance of being able to address real-time problems and issues brought up within the sessions can wreak havoc with carefully outlined lesson plans. For instructors that grasp, and also embrace, the strategies needed to work in this learning environment, projects like The Knowledge Café can be highly positive experiences.

## Future Work

Given the success of The Knowledge Café to date, there is strong excitement on both sides of the campus-community partnership to see the relationship continue in subsequent years. From a pure research point of view, the first year's activities were highly experimental and provided valuable input for refining the program in future years. With program logistics fully developed and a refined concept of what all parties expect from the collaboration, it will be important to collect additional quantitative and qualitative data on participation and outcomes. Considering the format and content of The Knowledge Café

sessions, projected upgrades and changes may be broken down for each of the next two years.

### ***Year Two***

Increasing participant engagement within the sessions is a primary goal for the second year of the program. The intent is to move from a format that involves a majority of presentations with Q&A plus limited participation activities to a format that captures more of the true spirit of a knowledge café as defined by Gurteen (1998). Termed “Studio Workshops,” these sessions will afford participants the opportunity to work collaboratively to share knowledge and solve business problems of mutual interest within the context of The Knowledge Café. Facilitated by brief presentations on business-focused creative tools such as Edward deBono’s *Six Thinking Hats* (1985) plus various “mapping” tools such as process mapping, mind mapping, and customer-journey mapping, participants will use a process known as “adaptive expertise” to reach their business goals (Hatano & Ouro, 2003; Schwartz, Bransford, & Sears, 2005). Adaptive expertise involves individuals who can draw on their knowledge to invent or adapt strategies for solving problems within a specific knowledge domain, and then in an ideal sense, learn to transfer higher-level learning from one domain to another. With suitable facilitation, Studio Workshops should enable participants to better zero in on the concepts that will be most beneficial to their own specific business needs. Thus, year two is anticipated to involve less formal lecturing and more emphasis on collaborative learning moderated and coached by the facilitator.

As this manuscript reaches print, “year two” activities are well underway and results to date reflect positive reactions by the majority of participants to the program enhancements noted above. As The Knowledge Café has moved forward into more complex topics, attendance has fallen slightly (ca. about 10%), but a dedicated group of regular attendees has also emerged and is working hard to build on the concepts mastered during the first year of operation. Notably, members of this group are beginning to volunteer to lead or co-lead sessions as a way of bringing their personal expertise into the mix. This level of engagement is also seen through the Studio Workshops where attendees are demonstrating a strong desire to collaborate on more difficult social media projects.

As “year two” moves forward, student engagement is still relatively low, but there are important signs that this is changing. (Recall that university students were not the original target market for The Knowledge Café.) Several instructors on campus, noting the value of the materials presented, offer their student extra credit to attend sessions and to follow up by describing their learnings in short written essays. Building on the success of these initial efforts to engage students will be important in future years for The Knowledge Café as is noted below.

### ***Year Three and Beyond***

Thinking beyond the second year, efforts will be undertaken to enhance The Knowledge Café by incorporating broader campus participation through more traditional course-

based community service learning. Although details remain to be worked out, it is envisioned that a campus-based partnership between two or more instructors of courses in business, communications and/or computer science could add substantial value to The Knowledge Café by engaging their students as guest speakers on relevant technical and business topics, service-learning partners for the business participants in attendance, or even as resources to the Studio Workshop sessions proposed in year two. Such an effort has tremendous potential for both sides of a partnership. Students would be exposed to a large number of local business individuals who are diligently working to expand in the local economy. Business individuals would benefit from increased access to students who are currently studying the latest technical content in social media, business communications, and general good business practices.

Currently, The Knowledge Café has operated exclusively as a campus-community partnership within a small- to medium-sized ex-manufacturing city of about 50,000 people that is in the process of reinventing itself as a technology center. Within this environment, all parties agree that the partnership has been very successful. It would be very interesting to apply this same partnership model to either smaller or larger venues. For example, in smaller venues such as small college towns, there may be fewer alternative avenues for residents to explore learning opportunities like those provided through The Knowledge Café. While this scenario would be predicted to enhance attendance and engagement, further research is needed for confirmation. On the other hand, in larger venues such as major cities and/or their surrounding suburban communities, additional sources of readily available expertise might be predicted to make partnerships like The Knowledge Café harder to establish. This latter point is currently under investigation by the author through a university grant to establish a separate branch of The Knowledge Café in a nearby suburban area that contains a higher concentration of larger businesses and industries.

The Knowledge Café is likely to be in constant evolution to meet the changing needs of both the campus and the community. What has been established to date, however, is a mechanism or process for collaborative learning that is working well within the local environment. To the extent that all partners can keep a strong focus on maintaining this mutual benefit, the success of the Knowledge Café is likely to continue to build.

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