

The Embedded Librarian: Bringing Library Services to Distance Learners

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Introduction

As the number of courses for distance learners continues to rise, librarians have been finding ways to extend their traditional support of on-campus students to the online environment. This paper will offer examples of how librarians in higher education are addressing the needs of distance learners by embedding themselves in courses offered on course management systems (CMS) like Blackboard, WebCT, ANGEL, etc. These cases, drawn from library literature and personal experience, will show how subject faculty can collaborate with librarians in many ways to improve the information literacy skills of their students.

There are several adjectives to describe librarians' involvement in CMS—embedded, lurking, integrated, blended—but no matter what they are called, distance learning librarians strive to follow policies spelled out in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* (2004). The Guidelines encourage librarians to provide equivalent library services to distance students and faculty as they do for on-campus patrons. When it comes to instruction services, librarians follow ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000) which, in short, are a set of abilities that require individuals to locate, evaluate and use information effectively. Providing equivalent library information literacy instruction in CMS courses has created many challenges and opportunities for librarians and faculty.

Cases From the Literature

In a seminal article, Cox (2002) offered ways to extend the traditional one-shot library lecture to distance learners, but for many it has become a general outline of the ways librarians can get involved in Blackboard courses. He listed levels of involvement from posting simple links to library resources as a guest lecturer or teaching assistant to becoming a course instructor engaged in the course content and student assessment. This obviously implies a good working relationship with the subject faculty. Shank and Dewald (2003) saw two models of librarian involvement in the virtual classroom: Macro-Level Library Courseware Involvement, which entails working with course developers to integrate a global library presence in the courseware, and Micro-Level Library Courseware Involvement allowing individual librarians to collaborate with instructors to customize library instruction.

Faculty/Librarian Collaboration

Collaboration with faculty is a main theme running throughout the library literature. George and Martin (2004) described the implementation of a professional development grant to encourage librarians to collaborate with teaching faculty at all levels. They saw integrating library services in Blackboard having positive benefits for students (to be more informed about library resources), faculty (to develop effective research assignments) & librarians (to share creative ideas proactively with instructors). Noting that distance learning faculty have something librarians need—direct access to students—Markgraf (2002) outlined many ways to network with faculty. Noting that many faculty consider integrating library resources into their online courses is a burden rather than a service, she argued that librarians can address faculty needs by relieving time pressures, and assisting in publishing and technology issues.

Riedel (2002) worked with a team of faculty and instructional designers on three online courses and found occasional misinformation presented by faculty. For example a business course syllabus advised students the best place to start their research is a meta search engine and cited some proprietary Web sources with no mention of library databases like ABI/Inform & General Business File. The team was able to design transferable library modules that would direct students to relevant library resources for specific assignments at the appropriate time. Anderson and Simmel (2005) designed a sales pitch built around a cost/benefit analysis to faculty in a series of interviews. Their pitch was that a librarian's presence would help students learn how to research and develop critical thinking, save instructors time, and increase student comfort level asking librarian for help. Cost to the instructor would be the class time spent on IL instruction and on interacting with the librarian.

Buehler (2004) pointed out that librarians already work with faculty to purchase materials, teach library classes, create pathfinders, and assist in their research, so integrating library resources in CMS courses is another opportunity to reach students. She described a demo course for faculty on integrating library resources in their online courses that instructors take at their point of need. She argued that when distance learning students see library resources mingled with assignments, they spend less time navigating the library site without direction or Googling, and that's good news for faculty and students.

Not all faculty are interested in collaborating with librarians in online courses. In a survey of business faculty, Fraser, Buxbaum and Blair (2002) found that the instructors required very little research and provided materials directly to the students. They wanted students to concentrate on content and analysis and were not interested in having their students learn researching skills. They were most interested in librarians' help with copyright issues.

Working With Students

Levels of librarian involvement will vary greatly and depend on the instructors, librarians and the institution. The goal for all is improving student learning and institutions create models that work for them.

Pointing out that working with instructors implies courtesy and caution, Markgraf (2004) wrote of the lurking librarian who watches for an information need by monitoring discussion threads and posting solutions for the whole class. All students benefit from others' questions. Evaluations from several nursing courses showed that although not all the students took advantage of the librarian's help, five of the seven top grades were from students who accessed library pages.

Costello, Lenholt & Stryker (2004) used library instruction in Blackboard to address the learning styles of Generations X and Y. The Net Generation wants information customized for them; they don't want to know how the library is organized. Librarians created links & handouts to give to students when they needed them and to help prevent students' indiscriminate Web searching. They describe a blended class where there is library instruction in a computer lab where students actively use the resources and get one-on-one help, addressing other characteristics of this generation's learning style. Library evaluation there was eighty percent positive. In another example of a blended strategy, Ladner, Beagle, Steele, & Steele (2004) said that course-related library instruction needs to migrate from physical to virtual learning environments. In this so-called classroom flip, lectures are moved out of the classroom and into a CMS, and homework is brought into the classroom where there will be more time for higher level discussion and practice; conversations can extend out of class through the CMS discussion board.

Buchanan, Luck and Jones (2002) described a team teaching project designing and delivering a graduate course in multimedia literacy, giving the instructors and librarian an opportunity to create course units that address all of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards. For example, a lesson on creating Web pages included research on issues of free vs. fee access, censorship, plagiarism and intellectual property, key topics in the ethical use of information.

In a survey of nursing students who had access to a librarian as a co-instructor in their Blackboard courses, Dinwiddie and Lillard (2001) found only a few students took advantage of the opportunity, but comments by those who did were overwhelmingly positive. In a Likert-scaled survey most students agreed that the librarian helped them find appropriate material, and provided timely and useful announcements; most students were comfortable asking for help, felt their expectations had been met, and would ask an online librarian for help again.

Embedded at URI

The University of Rhode Island is a mid-sized land grant, sea grant and urban grant institution with about 15,000 students. Like many universities, URI has seen enrollment in online classes steadily increase over the last several years and as a reference librarian, I saw this population as under-served. Proceeding with caution and courtesy, I began to offer library services to the URI distance learning faculty in the spring semester 2005. As an instructor of an online credit course in information literacy, I subscribed to the WebCT faculty mailing list and had direct access to those teaching online. However, I wanted to get involved but didn't want to be overwhelmed in my first try. For my first semester's attempt an IT administrator offered to send out an RFP to the mailing list in order to filter the responses for me. There was only one response and I enrolled as a student in a marketing course. I was probably overly cautious in posting and consequently had only one student question that was better answered by the instructor. Also, the course itself was produced by the publisher of the textbook, so there was very little flexibility in assignments or readings.

In the fall of 2005 I went down the list of asynchronous courses offered that semester and picked out seven English courses that had research projects assigned to students. Four instructors took me up on the offer and I got my first real taste of embedded life. In all courses I posted general information about using the online catalog to find books and how to search appropriate databases to find critical articles on their subjects. One instructor wanted his students to write their own reactions to the primary works in the class and required no research, so I spent very little time on that course. I got the most reaction from students in the course whose instructor encouraged me to be proactive. I had also done face-to-face instruction for another one of her courses so we had a good idea of how each other works. Several students asked for advice by email and two made appointments to sit with me at a computer to learn to search the MLA Bibliography.

The following spring I bravely sent out my own message to the list offering my services and got seven responses—instructors of two English and two women studies courses, and one each in communications, social psychology, and general studies. I had corresponded with two other instructors who declined the offer saying they thought students would perceive my presence as producing extra work. My involvement in the courses ranged from just giving my contact information to posting just-in-time resource lists for specific assignments to providing individual reference help for research projects. The two most involved instructors referred students with database questions to me and one required each research group to contact me for advice in finding and evaluating sources. Anecdotally, these two instructors said their students' projects had shown improvement compared to past semesters.

As I continue to extend my library's services to distance learners, I am learning lessons that many of those cited above have learned: the more collaboration there is between a librarian and an instructor, the

better the relationships with their students resulting in better research; providing appropriate material at the students' point of need is an effective way to reach distance students who cannot make it to a library; librarian involvement at the institutional level legitimizes the library's role in instruction. Distance learners need the library too, and meeting them in their virtual classroom can be a positive experience not only for them but also for librarians, subject faculty and institutions.

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Biographical Sketch

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