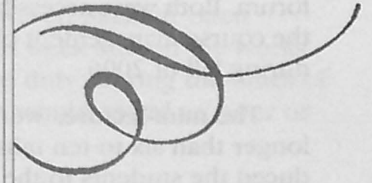


LIBRARY INSTRUCTION FOR DISTANCE STUDENTS: PIONEERING AN ONLINE COLLABORATION

by Susan Skekloff & Worth Weller



One of the issues faced by distance learning instructors and administrators at universities and colleges that offer credit hours to students residing across a large geographic area is how to get students in the library. This is an issue shared by librarians who, while supportive of distance learning efforts, are often frustrated that their support and services can be overlooked or underutilized in this rapidly growing segment.

Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne, Indiana (IPFW) is a largely a commuter campus of over 11,000 students. Dormitory housing became available in the fall of 2005. IPFW offers undergraduate and graduate educational opportunities and has recently experienced steady growth in the number of online courses being taught in a variety of disciplines. The staff of six full-time reference librarians offered the traditional, in-person library instruction session, and e-mail reference service. More recently, the librarians began experimenting with instant messaging. The latter two services could handle some of the needs of distance learners, but the question remained, how best to develop the personal connection with the librarian fostered in face-to-face instruction for distance learners?

In the fall of 2004, the IPFW Division of Continuing Studies offered an opportunity for that personal connection with students by including librarians in a campus-wide production of a CD-ROM to be distributed to all prospective IPFW distance students. A unit describing library services useful for students in distance courses was included in "Taking the Mystery Out of Distance Learning."

Four librarians developed short scripts (between three to six minutes each) covering reference services, online resources, and document delivery options. Using MediaSite Live, each librarian could be viewed on one portion of the screen, informing students about library services which would most assist them in their research pursuits, without their having to come to campus. The Library Director also took part, offering a friendly introductory welcome. As the librarians talked on one side of the screen, the other side showed a

sequence of examples via Powerpoint screens illustrating highlights of the service described. Eventually the CD-ROM evolved into an online version which can be accessed from the IPFW Division of Continuing Studies website. Librarians were the only staff on campus to use the MediaSite Live option for the production of their section on the CD-ROM. They felt the extra challenges of script writing, recording, and coordinating Powerpoint images with each speaker were well worth undertaking because students could see and hear them, creating a more personal connection with librarians.

Worth Weller, a Continuing Lecturer for the IPFW Department of English and Linguistics and the Division of Continuing Studies, coordinated the production of the CD-ROM.

As an experienced, enthusiastic distance education instructor, Mr. Weller wanted his composition students to be able to more easily connect with a librarian when their research needs arose. In the summer of 2006, Weller, asked the reference librarian for the IPFW Department of English and Linguistics to undertake a pilot project in two online sections of English W233 (Intermediate Expository Writing) that he would teach in the fall. Each section had an enrollment of 22 students. W233 is taken after the first required composition course and emphasizes the production of well researched argumentative papers. Weller wanted to improve the students' awareness and use of scholarly journal articles. The topics which students choose for their project were not limited. They covered all disciplines, social and behavioral sciences, history, and medicine to name several. The questions Weller hoped to answer were these: might a librarian be able to offer an overview of the databases which could help these distance learners? Could a librarian give guidance over the Internet on beginning search strategies and clearly outline the mechanics of getting the articles without actually doing the work for the student? If so, could the librarian's method of accomplishing these goals be done within the online course delivery platform?

After consulting with associate librarian Susan Skekloff, who had 25 years of experience in classroom library instruction, the two set about developing IPFW's

first virtual library instruction experience. The project consisted of two instructional components. The first component was a series of pre-recorded "mini-lectures," and the second component was a discussion forum. Both were accessible to students within WebCT, the course management platform available on campus during fall of 2006.

The mini-lectures were designed to be short, no longer than six to ten minutes. The first lecture introduced the students to the librarian via a MediaSite Live presentation and gave an overview of the discussion forum and its goals and purpose. A series of three lectures followed, all recorded using MacroMedia Breeze (now Adobe Connect): "Using Academic Search Premier"; "Search Paths: Keyword Searching and Retrieving Books and Journals"; and "Specialized Databases." Specialized databases included PsycInfo, Medline, and Education FullText (Wilson). Prior to recording these lectures, the librarian received a list of the students' topic choices and selected several topics to use as search examples. Students were required to view the mini-lectures prior to using the discussion forum.

Students accessed the discussion forum, titled "Ask the Librarian," via a button within the W233 course screens. All students could view and comment on all questions transmitted by their classmates and read the librarian's responses. Students received five points of extra credit for using the "Ask a Librarian" component.

Near the end of the pilot semester, students were surveyed about their response to the program to determine if it should be continued and enhanced. Survey questions (delivered by SurveyMonkey.com) evaluated the "Ask the Librarian" mini-lectures and discussion forum during fall of 2006 and revealed the following:

Question 1 - If you participated, were the librarian responses helpful?

Not really	4.8%
A little	33.3%
Quite a bit	23.8%
A lot	38.1%

Question 2 - If you participated, do you think you found sources that were more helpful to your project than you would have on your own?

Not really	19%
Yes	81%

Question 3 - If you participated, do you think you wrote a more academic research paper because of the program?

Not really	38.1%
Yes	61.9%

Question 4 - If you participated, do you think that you learned enough from the program to write a better research paper next time completely on your own?

No, I'll still need help with the research.	9.5%
Yes, I think I've got it.	90.5%

Question 5 - If you did not actually ask the librarian any questions, why not?

Too busy	13.8%
Already proficient at library research	24.1%
Got everything I needed from responses to the other students	51.7%
Just seemed like more busy work	24.1%

The most surprising result, perhaps, was the 51.7% of respondents who indicated that reading the forum responses assisted them, even if they did not actually discuss their own research questions with the librarian. "It was very gratifying to know that the format of the forum was helpful, perhaps much in the same way that an in-person, classroom instruction session might be, with over half of the respondents indicating that they have gained information regarding their own library-related questions from the questions of others and the librarian's suggestions," commented Skekloff. This result seemed to indicate that the discussion forum was an effective and efficient means by which to conduct a virtual library instruction session of sorts, for distance learners.

"From my own perspective, that of an instructor well versed in the pedagogy of teaching argumentative writing but woefully ignorant of specialized databases and how best to perform keyword searches, this program was practically an answer to prayer," reported Weller. Before he and Skekloff joined forces, he noted, his only option with difficult topics was to send the students to the library to speak in person with a reference librarian, a tactic not always feasible for Internet students who often enroll in distance learning courses to accommodate their own hectic schedules, the demands of family life and work, and the obstacles of driving long distances.

In the fall of 2007, Weller and Skekloff continued the project with two more sections of English W233. Some revisions included using MediaSite Live for all of the mini-lectures. Macromedia Breeze was somewhat cumbersome and harder to use and seemed especially unsuitable for dealing with system glitches and presenter errors. The mini-lectures were shortened when possible and attached to a newly created tutorial on how to link to the full-text of online journal articles. This eliminated the need for the librarian to spend time on this feature when explaining database selection

and search strategy to students; referring to the tutorial was enough. The number of questions regarding linking to full-text articles was also greatly reduced in the discussion forum.

Another survey taken during the fall of 2007 produced similar statistics regarding the use of "Ask the Librarian." 62.5% indicated that they participated by viewing other students responses. 62.5 % indicated that the librarian's responses were "quite a bit" or "a lot" helpful, 37.5% indicated "a little" and zero indicated "Not really." 75% indicated that they found sources that were "more helpful" to their project than those they would have found on their own, while 25% said not really. 100% of the respondents said the librarian responded in a timely manner.

However, participation in the forum also dropped during fall of 2007. Total numbers of questions and responses ranged from 40 to 50 during the first semester of implementation, to nearly 100 in the spring of 2007, and then dropped to 18! Skekloff and Weller discussed the decrease in questions. Weller indicated that during the first two semesters of implementation, he had more closely monitored the forum, occasionally adding comments to the discussion. With the success of the previous semesters, his monitoring of the forum lessened considerably. Weller theorized that the lessening of instructor involvement contributed to the students' falling participation rate. With this issue in mind, he will start making weekly posts of his own to the forum to increase students' awareness of his presence.

It has long been documented in library literature that student perception of instructor participation, even in the traditional one-shot, in-person library instruction sessions, is a determining factor in how students perceive the library instruction session. Perhaps this factor is just as important in virtual instruction.

As favorably as the program has been received by students, there are challenges that remain for this pioneer project. One involves the fluidity inherent in the online sources. A significant redesign of the IPFW Library's homepage was introduced in January 2008. This means that all recorded mini-lectures currently show a homepage that no longer exists. Also, one or more of the databases used in the mini-lectures have re-designed their interfaces as well. Another example, the icon and messages which link to full-text or Document Delivery options, have also changed. Thus, the tutorial which answered so many of the students' questions, is now out-of-date. Keeping pace with change is thus one of the biggest challenges facing online library instruction.

Another consideration is the time devoted to providing clear answers and guidance to the students' research questions. Weller indicated that the librarian would check three times a week for their posts and never on the weekends. However, Skekloff often checked every day during the week and on the weekends when she had reference duty. During the times of highest volume, the librarian would spend an hour or more responding to questions.

Written communication skills were an important aspect of answering questions. One simple technique that seemed to promote clarity was to ask the student, "Does this help?" at the end of each response, giving the librarian a way to gain additional feedback and allowing the student to more easily ask for clarification if needed.

IPFW's "Ask the Librarian" project continues in 2008, incorporating the fluid, changing nature of the virtual library and student reactions to this service. Feedback so far has been positive, and distance students in this project have had an opportunity for a virtual "face-to-face" connection to a librarian, a real person as opposed to just a website, a connection that did not exist for them before. The project is an initial, evolving model for faculty and librarians who want to maintain collaborative partnerships in the classroom.....in an online world.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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