Online Library Instruction for Distance Students:
An Update on Librarian-Instructor Collaboration at IPFW

by Susan Skekloff & Worth Weller

In 2006, the authors, feeling that distance education students were not taking full advantage of library resources and with the encouragement of then Director of Distance Learning David Wood, began adding mini-lectures about selected library databases to Continuing Lecturer Worth Weller's two online sections of English W233, Intermediate Expository Writing. After viewing the lectures, students were able to utilize a feature called "Ask the Librarian" (ATL), a discussion forum in which students and Helmke Reference Librarian Sue Skekloff could communicate about library databases and services which the students encountered on their path to producing an argumentative research paper. All students in the classes could view the discussion, and those who actually used the forum received extra credit. In 2008, after four semesters of using this approach, Weller and Skekloff published an overview of the program in an article entitled, "Library Instruction for Distance Students: Pioneering an Online Collaboration," in volume 27, issue number two of *Indiana Libraries*. The article reported that their survey of students found that the program was well received, not only by students who actually asked questions of the librarian, but also by those who just viewed the answers given to others. In 2006, 81% of those who participated indicated that they found sources more helpful than those they could have found on their own, and in 2007 the results were similar.

The Ask the Librarian (ATL) instruction forum has continued into 2009. Though both Weller and Skekloff documented positive outcomes of the program in the 2008 article, they decided to incorporate several changes in late 2008 and early 2009. The first change was in the timing of introducing the librarian and the ATL forum to the W233 students. Weller had at the beginning of the program directed student questions to the librarian around the eighth week of the 16-week semester, about the time the students' annotated bibliography was due. However, as the program matured, he wanted to see if bringing the librarian in earlier, allowing her the opportunity to assist in topic selection, would increase participation and aid students in their often frustrating process of finding a manageable approach to the topic. "We were discovering that students were overwhelmed by their topics," reported Skekloff. "They had these huge ideas that just weren't realistic, that weren't doable within the scope of the project."

With the new approach, students began using the ATL forum in the fourth week of the semester, at the same time they were exploring topic choices for an argumentative research paper. As could be expected, the program jumped in usage; thirty more questions were answered in the ATL program than in the previous year. From the librarian's perspective, this increased participation offered an excellent way to become more integrated into the course and allowed students to become more aware earlier in the semester of the available library resources.

However, topic selection discussions seemed even more labor intensive than answering database selection, navigation and search strategy questions. Skekloff, who has often responded to this type of question in reference interviews with students, and who also has a master's degree in English and had taught English W233 and W131 at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) at the beginning of her career, has had experience working with the topic selection process. This experience proved to be of use when dealing with such vague and often inaccurate opening statements as, "I want to write about how vaccines cause Sudden Infant Death Syndrome." Librarian responses to the students on these types of questions could not be undertaken quickly and usually incorporated more than one question-and-answer session. Communication had to be clear and well thought out, and often Skekloff referred back to the importance of bringing Mr. Weller in on the process as well.

Spring semester of 2009 saw the second important and exciting new addition to the ATL program. Weller asked Skekloff to consider adding ATL to an entirely new course, English W131, Elementary Composition, the basic 100-level composition course which freshmen are required to take. He was teaching two online sections of this course and wanted to see if these students, who needed to incorporate a limited number of secondary sources into several of their assignments, would benefit as much as the W233 students had from

ATL. Students would be introduced to the forum at the tenth week in the semester, in time for help with their final project, a short research paper.

English W131 students were complete novices in the area of library research, Skekloff found. Their questions were challenging because of their general lack of focus, and it often took several sessions with each student who had a question to introduce the library's most core journal database and suggest a search strategy. Even though there was a substantial use of the forum, the librarian found that a personalized approach to the same database was needed for each student.

Skekloff also found that four online sections of writing classes was about the limit that she could participate in and still provide quality and timely responses. The heaviest flow of questions occurred from weeks eight through 15 and often required spending 60 to 90 minutes in the ATL forum three times a week on average during that period. This included time spent in databases making sure that she could offer clear initial search strategies to students.

In spite of the intense and time-consuming nature of the forum, the program clearly complements the library's mission. "Ask the Librarian" has offered positive, documentable support for the writing students who take advantage of it. In W131, out of a total of 30 students, 15 students who used ATL received an A or B on their rough drafts, compared to the same grades for just 2 nonusers (Table 1). In W233, out of a total of 33 students, 11 forum users received and A or B, compared to the same grades for six nonusers (Table 2).

Table 1: W131 Students – Spring 2009

W131	Users	Nonusers
A	5	1
B	10	1
C	5	3
D	1	3
F	0	1

Although a correlation between grades and usage is not a perfect match, because of issues including a student's prior writing and research experiences, the results still seem to support the program. "Better research makes for better focus, which makes for better organization and analysis, and thus a better paper," observed Weller.

Table 2: W233 Students – Spring 2009

W233	Users	Nonusers
A	4	1
B	7	5
C	2	3
D	0	3
F	5	3

Weller's spring 2009 classroom surveys also seemed to support the authors' interpretation of the above tables. A full 95% of those who responded reported they felt they would write a better research paper in the future because of the program (Figure 1), and 76% reported they felt they had better sources because of the program than they would have had on their own (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Spring 2009, W131 and W233 Students

10. If you participated, do you think you learned enough from the program to write a better research paper next time completely on your own?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
No, I still need help with the research.	4.8%	1
Yes, I think I've got it.	95.2%	20
	answered question	21
	skipped question	10

Figure 2: Spring 2009, W131 and W233 Students

8. If you participated, do you think you found sources that were more helpful to your project than you would have on your own?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Not really.	23.8%	5
Yes.	76.2%	16
	answered question	21
	skipped question	10

The authors were also interested to discover why some students did not use the program. Thirty percent reported they already felt proficient in library research; 40% claimed they viewed the discussions but didn't actively participate because they got what they needed from the other students' questions; and the balance said they were "too busy" or that the program just felt like "busy work" to them (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Spring 2009, W131 and W233 Students

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

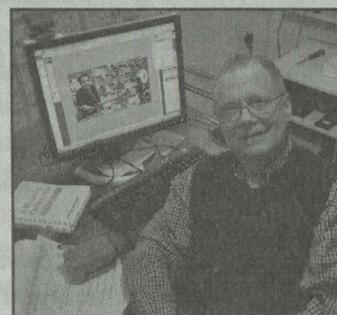|	Response Percent	Response Count
Too busy.	18.5%	5
Already proficient at library research.	29.6%	8
Got everything I needed from the responses to other students	40.7%	11
Just seemed like more busy work.	14.8%	4
answered question		27
skipped question		4

Despite the program's new successes, ATL needs more tweaking. Skekloff and Weller are still struggling with keeping the mini-lectures up-to-date due to changes in interfaces. Skekloff has not found the perfect software with the lowest learning curve possible to provide database tutorials that can be quickly changed as needed, but is hopeful that JING may yet provide one solution. Weller would like students to be able to access tutorials via their iPod's.

Communication with distance education students is exciting, challenging and rewarding, but labor-intensive in both the time it takes to engage in meaningful dialogue and in using the best and most adaptable technology. Because of these challenges, Weller and Skekloff intend to continue to seek out the best means to retain distance education students and support their academic success.

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