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Tutorials: Resource Instruction for Distance Learners

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Tutorials:

Resource Instruction for Distance Learners

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ABSTRACT
Academic librarians, devoted to providing resources and services for learners, find both opportunity and challenge in the continuing growth of online programs in higher education. The technology tools available for online courses are also available to librarians seeking to support those courses with research and information literacy skills instruction. Researchers have delineated factors necessary for achieving defined learning outcomes with online tutorials. These factors include assignment relevance, faculty collaboration, and student interaction. A fourth issue emerges as equally critical; there must be a single iteration of the tutorial, posted in an unique online location, and subject to dynamic revision. There are cost-effective ways to serve online learners that meet all four criteria.

Academic librarians, devoted to providing resources and services for learners, find both opportunity and challenge in the continuing growth of online programs in higher education. The technology tools available for online courses are also available to librarians seeking to support those courses with research and information literacy skills instruction. However, the perennial problem of effectively connecting with learners remains a challenge.

Nearly half of the students served by Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, Illinois, are enrolled in the School of Graduate and Continuing Studies (SGCS). Most of these adult learners attend classes at remote locations, online, or in hybrid programs. Olivet's online student population growth parallels a nationwide trend. Allen and Seaman (2013) reported that the percentage of post-secondary students enrolled in at least one online course rose from 9.6% in 2002 to 32% in 2011. Nearly 70% of chief academic officers agreed with the statement "online education is critical to the long term strategy of my institution" (p. 16). Allen and Seaman further reported that over 62% of institutions of higher education offer programs that are completely online. Online courses appeal to non-traditional learners who, for various reasons, seek instructional opportunities "in places and times that are convenient for [them] rather than [for] teachers or teaching institutions" (Moore & Kearsley, 2011, p. 3). Administrators in higher education may view the online venue as a means of expanding educational opportunities to meet the needs of these non-traditional students (Churkovich &

Oughtred, 2002). To comply with the collective librarian conscience, as well as with standards delineated by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) for Information Literacy and Distance Learning, librarians endeavor to provide this diverse and dispersed student population with resources and services that are equivalent to those available in traditional higher education settings (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2008; American Library Association, 2000).

ACRL Information Literacy Standards (2008) for all learners include identifying, evaluating, and accessing information resources, then integrating the content into the user's thinking to enable critical application for a specific purpose. Librarians in higher education seek to facilitate that process across all disciplines for students at all levels and in varied learning environments. Non-traditional programs usually prevent face-to-face access to students, but the same technology that creates the online educational opportunity can be the means to spanning the gap.

Even before the explosion of online courses, librarians and other educators were experimenting with online tutorials to supplement, reinforce, or replace face-to-face sessions to enhance learning outcomes. Kaplowitz and Contini (1998) developed an online library instruction tutorial to assist biology students who needed to access information for specific course assignments. In 1993, they used the online tutorial with one group of learners and compared the learning outcomes with those of students who received face-to-face instruction. With their well-constructed mixed methods research, Kaplowitz and Contini demonstrated equivalent learning in the two presentation formats. Muth and Taylor (2000) also achieved favorable cognitive results when comparing face-to-face and online instruction at Ball State. In fact, in a systematic literature review comparing computer-assisted instruction (CAI) with face-to-face instruction, Zhang, Watson, and Banfield (2007) concluded that the "two methods appear to be equally effective for teaching basic library skills" (p. 478).

One early study stands in contrast with the others. When Churkovich and Oughtred (2002) compared student responses in a traditional instructional setting with those from a learner-driven tutorial, the tutorial users did not demonstrate equivalent skill development. Online tutorial users scored lower on both cognitive and affective measures. The researchers concluded these negative results could be attributed to two factors: the tutorials were not linked to a specific assignment or course, and student accountability was limited in the online venue. Their work indicated that learner motivation correlated with the learner's point of need and with the learner's expectation of faculty assessment as part of the course requirement. Librarian-faculty collaboration can address both elements of student motivation to assure relevant instruction.

Multiple studies document the value of faculty-librarian collaboration, as well as obstacles to that collaboration. Mitchell-Kamalie (2011) demonstrated a statistically significant increase in student's information literacy competency when instruction

and assessment were provided in collaboration with course faculty. Badke (2005), on the other hand, summarized the philosophical differences that impede cooperation. He noted that faculty members tend to resist collaboration due to time constraints, content focus, and the perception of information literacy as discipline specific rather than as a broader lifelong learning skill. Badke also argues for approaching faculty tactically from a position of strength, seeking out those who are most amenable to cooperative strategies. Oakleaf, Millet, and Kraus (2011) experienced unexpected success with this tactic. They initiated collaboration with a few faculty members who welcomed their involvement. Positive results and responses provided them with experience and faculty affirmation that prepared for a broader opportunity. An accreditation visit became the impetus for a campus-wide academic initiative. Oakleaf, Millet, and Kraus submitted a proposal for a cross-disciplinary focus on information literacy. Their proposal was accepted as the academic initiative and adopted in preparation for accreditation.

Dewald (1999) investigated yet another aspect of online tools. She examined 20 web-based library instruction tutorials, evaluating them according to accepted best practices for teaching and learning. Her criteria included active learning, encouragement of problem solving and critical thinking, appeal to varied learning preferences, clear objectives, communication of concepts as well as mechanics, and directions for assistance. Learning style considerations, as well as student perception of relevance and accountability, emerged as critical factors for student engagement in successful online learning.

From Research to Practice at Olivet Nazarene University

These essential instructional factors – assignment relevance, faculty collaboration and student interaction – were in place when one of the program coordinators in the SGCS at Olivet Nazarene University approached the SGCS librarian with the idea of working cooperatively on a library tutorial assignment. The assignment was originally designed for master's level learners. The tutorial, a guided, self-directed assignment, was composed of three sections. The first section represented the basic strategies generally covered in face-to-face sessions with new nursing students. These strategies included the use of database subject headings and database limiters to create a focused search to retrieve citations of peer-reviewed articles relevant to the students' specific research needs. The second and third sections were created jointly by the program coordinator and the librarian; these sections directly related to course assignments including an assignment for one specialty track of the program. To reinforce concepts, assignments included both instruction examples and active participation by learners. The orientations were included in course syllabi and were required, graded assignments for all students. The basic design and implementation parameters satisfied the qualifications of short, assignment-specific, active learning instruction, with student and faculty accountability. Since the concepts could be generalized to other

assignments, the program coordinator decided to insert the tutorial into orientations for all new students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Almost immediately, problems began to surface. Grading issues generated problems for students and faculty. Adjunct faculty instructors, competent in their fields and personally astute information users, were often not familiar with the university library resources, or with the purpose of the research strategies developed in the library tutorial. Nevertheless, these instructors were expected to grade the library assignment. Without the broader view of the learning process, faculty members tended to grade according to a static answer key, expecting, for example, that the number of items retrieved would be constant.

Next, click-by-click instructions quickly became obsolete. When database vendors updated their search interfaces, instructions in the tutorials did not match the users' actual experiences. And finally, the academic master's degree track for which the last section of the tutorial was originally devised was phased out of the program making that section irrelevant.

Librarians assisting the learners were the first to recognize the discrepancies and resulting confusion. The tutorial was quickly and repeatedly revised to conform to both internal and external changes. Each subsequent version was posted on the library website. The revisions were also submitted to program developers to be updated when syllabi were revised. Instructors were advised via email to direct their students to the library website to access the most current version of the assignment.

The technology that enabled the remote experience quickly became an insurmountable demon. Faculty members, who worked from the initial syllabi, were reluctant to redirect to a resource other than the one in their originally assigned documents. Their resistance was justifiable. These instructors usually do not develop course syllabi themselves and they are encouraged to adhere rather strictly to the planned course in order to assure continuity in the program. Iterations of the assignment differing from the most current version appeared in syllabi, on courseware, and in old email links. The resulting student and faculty confusion and frustration seriously undermined the value of the instructional process.

The nightmare for all concerned ultimately resulted in one important change: all library instruction tutorials are now hosted on the library website. Updates can be as spontaneous as needed. Students are instructed to go to the library website to access tutorials related to specific courses or assignments. Such a policy change was only possible with support from administrative personnel who shepherd program development. Program and institutional administrators are also educational stakeholders whose cooperation increases the probability of successfully inserting information literacy skills into online courses.

Interaction with faculty and administrators can be challenging, especially when these individuals are also working from off-campus locations. However, the distance and online students should still benefit from the instruction librarians can provide, and librarians must be committed to serving them. In the words of Winston Churchill, "It's no use saying 'we are doing our best.' (We) have got to succeed in doing what is necessary" (Military-Quotes, 2014). There are appropriate and cost-effective ways to continue to engage the online/distance student populations that require minimal collaboration and thereby respect the time constraints of faculty and administrative colleagues.

With or without library instruction, some students find their way to the library for help. These random reference encounters, whether face-to-face or via email, chat, or text, serve as an alert to librarians. Interactions with learners provide insight into specific student research needs and an opportunity to gather course and program numbers, as well as faculty names. A one-on-one encounter can form the basis for the development of a program – or assignment-specific tutorial.

For example, an encounter with a nursing student working on a research proposal prompted the development of a tutorial for one online course. The student called in distress because her research proposal had been rejected. After discussing her project ideas and the survey questions she had developed, the librarian realized that the assignment required that the researcher identify a vetted or validated tool for data collection. After explaining the validation concept to the student, the librarian mediated a quick search in Health & Psychosocial Instruments which uncovered a validated questionnaire suitable for the student's project.

The librarian gathered the course number and the faculty name and prepared a tutorial outline so that the same instruction could be available for others in the class. A gifted student worker generated a tutorial using Camtasia to serve future learners. When that research course number appears on the academic calendar, the librarian informs the teaching faculty of the tutorial. Notification and/or a link can then be posted on the course board or emailed to students at faculty discretion.

Talented student workers and inexpensive or free software such as Jing, Prezi, or Powtoon, provide cost-effective labor and tools for tutorials developed with librarian direction. The resulting tutorials can be hosted on the library website, or on an online video hosting or sharing site where content can be dynamically maintained. The one essential interaction with faculty is an email communication recommending the tool to the students. Many of the teaching faculties welcome this unintrusive offer to contribute to student success.

The experience of Oakleaf, Millet, and Kraus (2011) can be an encouragement to all librarians who are pursuing ways to engage online students to impact their academic success and develop life-long information literacy skills. The primary message is to begin wherever opportunity arises. Seek ways to meet students at their point of need

(Peele & Phipps, 2004; Miller, 2014), cultivate relationships with amenable faculty, be optimistic and be alert to seize broader opportunities. ✞

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