

Distance Learning Library Services

Keeping Up With the Times

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INTRODUCTION

Libraries are vital components of academic institutions. Davis-Underwood and Lee (as cited in Cain & Lockee, 2002) indicate use of library services contributes to academic success and student retention. For students learning at a distance, library services become even more vital since local access to resources may be unavailable. The rise in the number of institutions participating in distance education reflects an increasing demand for distance library services. The

American Library's Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) recently released its revised Standards for Distance Learning Library Services. The standards are built on the principle of Access Entitlement whereby "Direct human access must be made available to the distance learning community through instruction, interaction, and intervention from library personnel" (ACRL, Bill of Rights section, para. 2). Library services must be available to distance learners regardless of their location.

Libraries provide access to resources as well as instruction on locating, accessing, evaluating, and using resources successfully. Striving to meet the information and research needs of its distance learners, libraries "ensure that the distance learning community has access to library materials equivalent to those provided in traditional settings" (ACRL, Resources section, para. 1). These resources should be sufficient to fulfill assignments, to support curricular needs, to meet teaching and research needs, and to facilitate the acquisition of lifelong learning skills. In support of distance learners, libraries provide rapid, reliable, and secure access to electronic resources such as full-text catalogs and databases of scholarly journals, books, dissertations, newspapers, and eBooks. Document delivery and inter-library loan services are available where full-text access is not, allowing distance learners to receive their information in a timely manner. Additionally, distance librarians help learn-



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ers identify local libraries from which they may receive service.

Resource availability is only part of what libraries are about. A major component of library service is ensuring users can effectively access and use these resources. Distance libraries provide the human side of resources referred to by Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2004). The remainder of this article describes how distance libraries personalize and provide service through the use of various information communication technologies.

REMOTE ACCESS AND THE PERSONAL TOUCH

PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Distance library staff has several options for communicating personally with distance learners. Instant messenger (IM), chat, or online conferencing software are commonplace. The Kreitzberg Library at Norwich University, for example, uses Meebo to chat with students from several instant messaging services such as Yahoo!, AOL, MSN, and Google Talk. Ask a Librarian is a service designed to provide real-time assistance to users at a distance. Ask a Librarian services vary, however, depending on the institution or organization providing the service. Some offer a toll-free number for phone assistance, and most offer live text chat and 24-hour e-mail response. In Florida for example, Ask a Librarian is a statewide service and users may connect with librarians outside their institution as librarians from around the state staff the service. Clicking on the "Ask" icon on library Web sites will usually take the user to a page where they can begin chatting via text or to instructions on how to contact the library staff. In addition to chat services, distance libraries provide webinars and individual instruction to students via telephone and online conferencing software such as WebEx and Elluminate.

PODCASTS

Distance libraries also use a variety of information communication technologies in providing services to remote independent learners. Audio and video streaming is used to provide library orientation, information and instruction. The George C. Gordon Library at Worcester Polytechnic Institute produces "Library Audio to Go," a podcast focusing on specific information resources and topics related to library research. The Sheridan Libraries from Johns Hopkins University offer podcasts with computer tips, a lecture series with visiting authors and other professionals, library news, and a tour of the library facility. Podcasts are useful for distance learners who can take learning with them, wherever they go.

RESEARCH GUIDES AND TUTORIALS

Research guides and tutorials are another means of communicating with and instructing students. These electronic help pages can provide subject guides or resource lists, instruction on how to conduct research, instruction on using databases and Web resources, help on locating books and articles, information on plagiarism and copyright, and help with citations and style guides. Many libraries offer access to electronic tools such as ResearchSoft and EndNote to assist with compiling bibliographies. Distance libraries use tools such as Captivate to capture, create, and demonstrate how to use such applications. Tutorial presentations vary from fully text-based to completely interactive with the use of audiovisual media and can be accessed via the library Web site.

In addition to working with students, distance librarians "work collaboratively with teaching faculty in distance-delivered programs to integrate information literacy into courses and programs in order to foster lifelong learning skills" (ACRL, Management section). Research tutorials can be part of distance coursework delivered syn-

chronously using conferencing software such as Elluminate or asynchronously delivered via a library Web site or a course management system. At Nova Southeastern University, distance doctoral students complete several library research modules linked within WebCT.

LIBRARY 2.0

Rainie (2006) discussed three characteristics of digital natives that have significant implications for libraries. First, digital natives, born with access to technology, take for granted the ability to access and share information from multiple sources using multiple devices. Second, for this social group, “conversations, research, and learning never end” (Rainie, 2006). Third, digital natives hope for assistance whenever they need it, including help from librarians. Embracing change and responding to the needs of this new learner, many libraries are moving “from the traditional library as place and toward a more ubiquitous presence, striving to meet users where they are” (Mathews, 2007, p. 83). Distance learners are served in this effort through Library 2.0 or libraries use of blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, social networking sites, and virtual worlds. The Library 2.0 focus is on community and user-created content. The remainder of this article explores some of the tools academic libraries are using to engage distance learners while providing them the resources they need to be successful.

BLOGS AND WIKIS

Many distance libraries are using blogs as a timely communication tool to inform patrons about events in the library, to provide news on updated resources, to solicit feedback, and even as subject guides to assist researchers. Northwestern University Library blog keeps patrons current with library news, and the Virginia Commonwealth University has a library suggestion box within their blog where

patrons can make their voices heard in library related issues. Ohio University Library’s business blog provides tips, tricks, and tools for the business researcher. Blogs generally allow users to add comments to blog postings, which is another way for patrons and library staff to communicate. Bloggers have the advantage of subscribing to the site’s RSS feed to be sure they receive updates instantaneously.

A wiki is a Web page that can be edited by users generally without the need for special software. This feature makes the Wiki an ideal tool for librarians to maintain subject guides. As sources become dated, it is easy to remove them from the listing and just as easy to add new references. Additionally librarians or users can add descriptive annotations to assist other users in their searches. In addition to its blog, the Ohio University Library maintains the Biz Wiki, a general collection of business information resources. Biz Wiki provides research guides specific to business as well as information on specific business reference books, journals, Web sites, and databases. Video tutorials on how to search the business databases are also available. Users have the ability to add resources of their choosing to the wiki making it a rich community resource. The Ohio University Business librarian uses Digsby chat and a Twitter tracker on the wiki page to keep in touch with users.

SOCIAL BOOKMARKING

Social bookmarking Web sites allow Internet users to store, organize, and share their saved Web pages with others. As users save a Web page, they assign a descriptive word(s) or tag(s) to the page, which is then organized by these tags. If users make their bookmarks public, their tags join other users’ tags. The most popular tags often appear in a visual display known as a tag cloud, with the more popular tags having larger font sizes. Clicking on any tag allows a user to see what Web sites others have

tagged for that particular word. In discussing social bookmarking's application to higher education, Alexander (2006) notes, "Pedagogical applications stem from their affordance of collaborative information discovery" (Projects and Practices section, para. 4). The University of Pennsylvania's library created PennTags, which "enable users to bookmark and tag books, articles, web sites, papers from the web, as well as library cataloging records" (Kroski, 2007, p. 101). Users of PennTags open themselves to a wealth of resources to support their academic endeavors while engaging in collaborative research. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School maintains a similar site for their community called the H2O Playlist.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Two other social networking areas where academic libraries are making their presence known are on MySpace and Facebook. MySpace users personalize their Web page with descriptions and pictures of themselves. They can link to friends, leave messages, upload music, and connect with people of similar interests. According to the Facebook Web site, users can connect with people who work, study, and live around them. Users can learn about the people they meet through networking with groups organized around a company, school, or region. They can share links, photos, and videos. The Perry-Castaneda Library at the University of Texas at Austin hosts a MySpace page. It gives information about the library, upcoming events, library tutorials, place to contact the librarians, and of course a place for friends of the library to connect. Wesley College's Facebook page gives users subject specific user guides, research tips, citation help, and more.

THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY

Second Life is a 3D virtual world where users can simulate many of the things they

do in the real world such as explore, create, socialize, shop, gamble, and take classes. They can also fly and teleport, things not yet possible in the real world. A recent check of SimTeach's wiki of institutions and organizations in Second Life lists over 141 universities, colleges, and schools from around the world with a presence in Second Life (SimTeach, 2008). What are they doing there? Kay and FitzGerald (2008) lists 32 categories of education uses for Second Life, but essentially Second Life is a place for simulation, visualization, and creative collaboration. Distance learning library services fit in several categories as they provide presentations, panels and discussions, training and skills development, tutorials, displays and exhibits, virtual tours, book discussions, and reference services.

There are 14 islands in Second Life coordinated by the Second Life Library 2.0 project. Most of the academic libraries are located in Cybrary City 1 and Cybrary City 2. The McMaster University Libraries offer research assistance in real time through their Second Life avatars that staff the help desk or through IM and e-mail. The San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science uses Second Life as a place for their distance students to experiment with teaching and learning in virtual environments, and for offering virtual library services. They also support the entire Second Life community by offering a place for Second Lifers to come and learn about the *in world* of Second Life.

CONCLUSION

Changes in technology allow distance learners to interact more closely with their learning community. Distance learning libraries are taking advantage of these same technologies to reach out to students and faculty to satisfy their need for information and instruction. In responding to the needs of the new digital learner, libraries are no longer place-based. Instead, they

are striving to meet the distance-learning credo of any time, any place, taking their services to the user wherever they may be.

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