Chapter 81
Distance Educators and Librarians:
Partners in Student Success

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ABSTRACT

Well-developed research skills are essential to our student's educational success. For a generation that will create more information than was created by all those who came before them access to information is not an issue, at least for those on the access side of the digital divide. However as that wealth of information grows so does the need for the skill sets that allows one to pull the drops of needed information from the ocean that they have available to search. Students, who have not known a world without Google, smart phones, and abundant wireless internet access, often feel their research skills are good enough but usually fail, not in the search for information, but in the ability to determine what the best information is and how to find it most efficiently. Online library research classes are one of the best methods for providing students with the skills they need to succeed. Designing, implementing, and teaching library research classes allows librarians to communicate research skills that meet our students at their point of need. This paper will provide an examination of the benefits for students, libraries and faculty in providing these classes, an overview on how they can be structured to meet the information literacy needs of any student and basic information on how to create library research classes at any institution of higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information literacy is defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." (ACRL, 2000) We all have different information needs and therefore information literacy is unique to each one of us. You may know your daughter only eats the breakfast cereal with the Tiger on the box, that is information that is relevant to you but not so to me, fortunately in the age we live in accessing most non-immediate

family related information is done through the Internet and therefore the skill set is transferable and teachable on a large scale.

In many respects we are unlike any others that came before us. We have the vast majority of the sum of all human knowledge available to us, in our homes, coffee shops, classrooms and, with smart phones, anywhere 24 hours a day. Our students live in a world where access to information is not as much of an issue as it was even 5 or 10 years ago let alone the 15 or 20 since many of us were last students. With larger databases, more e-journal titles, an increase in the number of books available electronically, and of course the sheer volume of information available through individual webpages, blogs and websites students have access to more information than any students before them in the entire course of human history. While there is certainly still an information divide our students are generally on the best side of it.

It is estimated that we currently create more information about every two days then we did from the dawn of human history to 2003 and that we continue to double that amount about every two years (Gantz & Reinsel, 2011). The concept that too much information would become a problem, even an acronym based saying i.e. TMI, is likely something researchers just a generation or two before us would have had trouble conceiving. Just reflect on that fact for a moment. Nearly every question a student will have, outside of the "I wonder if she likes me?" or "What's for dinner?" type, can be found, or at least likely exist in an internet accessible version. Research skills are the keys our students need to unlock the information held in this vast sea of data. We all know searching for the needle in the haystack gets more and more difficult the larger that haystack becomes. Having effective research skills is like having the ability to use a metal detector to find that needle.

Where librarians are of use is in helping our students make the most of the research tools and access they have available. Like having a swim-

ming pool in your backyard but never taking the time to learn to swim, our students often never learn how to effectively use the information resources available to them through their institution's library. Distance education classes, designed and taught by librarians, can make learning these skills easier and more convenient for our students. Librarians have, through necessity, honed information literacy skills and are the best suited to teach students how to thrive in the information rich world of academia. Librarians are referred to as information professionals and the typical degree is a Masters of Information Science or a Masters of Library and Information Science. The point being the whole purpose of most librarians' existence is to provide patrons with assistance in finding the information resources they need when they need them. Librarians often have graduate degrees in other areas and typically serve as subject librarians or liaisons to various disciplines which allows them to hone their research skills in specific areas. By working with faculty in this role librarians stay abreast of new areas of study, current resources and important developments in the field. In addition many provide reference services in various formats to a wide patron base which helps these librarians maintain their abilities to find and effectively evaluate resources for patrons outside their areas subject specialty.

Libraries today, more or less, are disseminators of information opposed to the warehouses they have been in the past. The role we still play is in providing point of need access and helping students navigate the ocean of information they often find themselves swimming in. Librarians are information professionals. We spend our time staying abreast of research trends, platforms, methods and user needs. Like any other skill set practice makes perfect and we spend a lot of our time practicing through helping our patrons, in a wide range of academic disciplines, find the information they need when they need it.

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