

Online Academic Libraries and Distance Learning

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BRIEF HISTORY OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Historically, distance learning or distance education began as little more than “correspondence courses,” which promised an education in one’s own home as early as 1728 (Distance Learning, 2002). By the 1800s the concept of distance education could be found in England, Germany and Japan (ASHE Reader on Distance Education, 2002).

In 1933, the world’s first educational television programs were broadcast from the University of Iowa and in 1982, teleconferencing began (Oregon Community Colleges for Distance Learning, 1997), often using videotaped lectures, taped-for-television programs and live programming, adding a human dimension. Students and faculty were now able to interact with each other in real time, enhancing the learning process by allowing student access to teachers across distances.

ACADEMIC DISTANCE LEARNING & THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY

Distance learning can be defined by the fact that the student and the instructor are separated by space. The issue of time is moot considering the technologies that have evolved allowing real-time access. Today, universities around the world use various methods of reaching their remote students. With the use of technology, access becomes possible, whether it is from campuses to remote sites, or to individuals located in their own homes.

The development of course instruction, delivered through a variety of distance learning methods (e.g., including Web-based synchronous and asynchronous communication, e-mail, and audio/video technology), has attracted major university participation (Burke, Levin & Hanson, 2003). These electronic learning environment initiatives increase the number of courses and under-

graduate/graduate degree programs being offered without increasing the need for additional facilities.

During the 2000-2001 academic year, the NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) estimated in the United States alone there were 3,077,000 enrollments in all distance education courses offered by 2-year and 4-year institutions, with an estimated 2,876,000 enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses, with 82% of these at the undergraduate level (Watts, Lewis & Greene, 2003, p. iv). Further, the NCES reported that 55% of all 2-year and 4-year U.S. institutions offered college-level, credit-granting distance education courses, with 48% of all institutions offering undergraduate courses, and 22% of all institutions at the graduate level (ibid, p. 4). It is clear that distance education has become an increasingly important component in many colleges and universities, not only in the United States, but also worldwide.

Although educational institutions create courses and programs for distance learners, they often omit the support component that librarians and accrediting organizations consider critical. It is recommended that courses be designed to ensure that students have “reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning” (WICHE, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education). Further, courses should incorporate information literacy skills within the course or in class assignments to ensure skills for lifelong learning (American Library Association, 1989; Bruce, 1997).

Distance learning (DL) students are unlikely to walk into the university’s library for instruction on how to use the resources, from print to electronic journals, as well as services such as electronic reserves and interlibrary loan. The elements of any successful distance-learning program must include consideration of the instructors and the students, both of whom have needs that must be examined and served.

With imaginative use of technology, libraries have created “chat” sessions, which allow 24/7 access to librarians who direct students to the resources that are available online or through interlibrary loan. In addition, librarians assist faculty in placing materials on electronic reserve so that their students can access the materials as needed. Libraries have become more willing to provide mail services and desk top delivery of electronic articles to their distance learning students and, when that is not possible, refer their students to local libraries to take advantage of the interlibrary loan system. Online tutorials have been created to help students learn how to access these resources, while other libraries have specific departments that assist their distance education students and faculty. The role of the library in this process is one of support, both for the students and the faculty.

CHANGES IN DISTANCE LIBRARIANSHIP

Of all of the “traditional” library functions, such as materials provision, electronic resources, and reciprocal borrowing available to the distance learner, there remains a significant gap in service, that of reference. Although chat lines and other 24/7 services are available, these services simply do not provide the DL student the same quality of service that the on-campus student gets when he or she consults with a librarian in person. Newer versions of distance learning course software provide external links to resources, but do not yet include reference service by e-mail and live chat sessions in their basic packages. It will be the responsibility of the library to make these services easily available and known to the distant learner, whose contact to the institution may not include information about the library and its resources. Proactive planning by the library with those who are responsible for distance education can ensure that the students are made aware of what is available for them in the library.

Recently, libraries have been looking at e-commerce business models as a functional way to serve their clientele in reference services, as today’s “customers” are savvier, and businesses have become more sophisticated in responding to customers’ needs. Libraries can use these models to provide the services for DLs whose level of skills has risen with the increased use of the Internet. Coffman (2001) discusses the adaptation of such business tools as customer relations management (CRM) software, such as the Virtual Reference Desk, Weblin, NetAgent, and LivePerson. These programs are based upon the “call center model,” which can queue and route Web queries to the next available librarian. A quick visit to the LSSI Web site (Library Systems and Services, L.L.C,

<http://www.lssi.com>) allows a look into the philosophy of offering “live, real-time reference services”. LSSI’s “Virtual Reference Desk” allows librarians to “push” Web pages to their patrons’ browser, escort patrons around the Web and search databases together, all while communicating with them by chat or phone (www.lssi.com). Many of these systems provide the capability to build a “knowledge base” that can track and handle a diverse range and volume of questions. These collaborative efforts, with a multitude of libraries inputting the questions asked of them and creating FAQs (frequently asked questions lists), provide another level of service for the distance learner (Wells & Hanson, 2003).

These systems have great potential, and while they show tremendous possibilities, they need more work to make them more functional for library use. Chat sessions are problematic when the patron is using his or her phone line to connect to the computer, and libraries must look to the emerging technology to find solutions to such issues to prevent becoming obsolete.

Another direction is the development of “virtual reference centers,” which would not necessarily have to be located in any particular physical library. Current collaboratives among universities have created consortial reference centers accessible anywhere and anytime. The reference center librarian could direct the student to the nearest physical resource or to an online full-text database based upon the student’s educational profile (e.g., university, student status, and geographic location). Although the physical library may indeed become a repository for books and physical items, the reference component may no longer be housed within that particular building.

An example of support is Toronto’s Ryerson Polytechnic University (Lowe & Malinski, 2000) infrastructure, which is based upon the concept that, in order to provide effective distance education programs and resources, there must be a high level of cooperation between the university, the departments involved, and the library. At Ryerson, the Continuing Education Department studied what types of support the students needed and identified technical, administrative, and academic help as three major areas of concern. Technical help was assigned to the university’s computing services; administrative help was available on the Web and through telephone access, and academic help included writing centers, study skill programs, and library services. Ryerson’s philosophy encompassed the concept that synchronization of all these components would assist in making the student’s experience richer and give the student a higher degree of success

The library and the distance education unit worked to provide connectivity to resources that were important to the classes being taught online or at-a-distance. It is these

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