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Instituting Blended Learning at a Small College: A Library Director’s Perspective

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Saint Anthony College of Nursing (SACN) is a small private Catholic institution that offers a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. Founded in 1915 as a school of nursing offering only diplomas it is now fully accredited regionally by The Higher Learning Commission and a member of the North Central Association (NCA) and program specific by the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLN-AC). As a single purpose institution with 13 faculty, 11 staff, and fewer than 100 students, SACN has continued to strive to modernize the program over the past decade with limited resources. Recent technological improvements led by the library director include the development of it’s own college Web site, a newly remodeled and enhanced skills lab, networked classrooms with teacher computers and projectors, and a renovated library with a computer lab, full-text online databases, and around 70 computer assisted instruction programs along with the usual slew of videos and print resources.

During the 1999/2000 academic year ideas were tossed around about enhancing courses with class Web sites and tools to create a blended learning approach. Technology has been steadily improving and costs have become more manageable during that time. Faculty, however, were not comfortable creating sites from scratch, so a commercial course management system was required. Informally faculty and staff had looked at different options, vendors, and services. During 2001, in conjunction with our sister school, Saint Francis Medical Center College of Nursing, we decided to jointly license with eCollege, an application service provider (ASP), to provide faculty with the ability to Web enhance all of our courses. This would also serve as a learning stage before jumping into full-blown distance education courses at some point down the road.

The interesting part to this endeavor is how involved the library director has been in instituting these technologies due to the size of the college. The smaller the college, the more hats you have to wear. This can be both exciting and draining at the same time. Everyone is truly expected to play broad roles at the college, from heavy committee assignments to being responsible for several areas. Because of my comfort with technology my position had been expanded from those of library director to also include support, guidance, and planning for technology not just in the library but for the college as a whole. Following are some of the experiences I’ve had in these distance education
technologies, from the initial groundwork to troubleshooting and support through the first year.

**Initial groundwork**

When we first began investigating our options a few years ago everything was very informal. With an MLS and a second Master’s under my belt I had been making progress towards my doctorate in instructional technology with an interest in distance education and was excited about prospects for SACN. A couple of the faculty had also shown some interest, and with low enrollments and the growing nursing shortage we began looking at some options to attract students and improve learning in the classroom. Much of this groundwork involved reading the literature, discussing what we wanted and what we could handle, looking at vendors, and talking with other institutions to see what they were doing.

After making little demonstratable progress since we had no authority we finally formed a task force, which later grew into a full committee. This committee consisted of the library director, three teaching faculty, and the director of student services.

Some of the vendors that seemed to have the widest market coverage really didn’t meet our needs in terms of cost and benefits. Blackboard and WebCT are two of the most popular vendors, but they were more expensive than the company we chose, eCollege. Also, being an ASP we did not have to worry about additional costs and time involved with maintaining our own hardware and software.

Initial training for faculty was done by inviting a guest speaker to demonstrate some of the basics of working with the software. Largely one-on-one training and self-education have followed this. I purchased books for the library, and found helpful journal articles to route. With my background, faculty would often come to me with questions in which I could then explain how to solve their problem, or I would work on it and get back to them within a day or two. My experience in distance education tools through my course work for my doctorate also meant that I could discuss some of the issues they were faced with and offer solutions for how they might want to go about structuring their classes. There has been a lot of experimentation and sharing of knowledge. Faculty have set up Lunch n’ Learns and mentors with more comfortable faculty assigned to less comfortable. The committee meets regularly to discuss issues, and I’ve continually been available to answer questions and solve problems.

**First year challenges**

Beyond traditional library duties, I was heavily involved with our burgeoning distance education tools. I supported faculty and students alike, and was there to guide faculty
in accomplishing what they wanted to do. Besides formal committee work, I was largely there on an as need basis, similar to a reference situation or even a consulting basis. Students in the library and from home usually needed help with logging in, printing, navigating, and other computer issues. This has slightly increased the workload for librarians, but not to any great extent. Faculty, on the other hand, obviously needed help with construction, how to use features, and the pedagogy behind using distance education tools. Much of this support was done in the library, with some extending to faculty offices or over the phone by people at home. This first year was expected to be the most difficult with a learning curve.

The fall semester included a handful of blended courses. By the following spring almost each course included some type of online content. Courses minimally included a syllabus and basic course information, while those taking the lead used asynchronous discussion boards, synchronous chat, online grade books, posted PowerPoint presentations and other documents and images, shared files, and so forth.

For my contribution, one of the techniques I found useful was to share problems and solutions that came up with the rest of the faculty. That way, I wouldn’t have to explain the same issue twice, and the rest of the faculty would learn from other people’s questions. This was done through simple e-mail. After solving an issue or a problem, I would create an e-mail with screen shots and explanations of what we discovered. This would then be e-mailed to the entire faculty list.

One of the most common problems was with connections. Although I didn’t enroll students in the system or create the course shells, I was the go between with student services and the eCollege contact to get that organized. Of course, there were mistakes or problems, with students registering late, incorrect log in numbers, missing birth dates, forgotten passwords, and the occasional, however infrequent, site being down. One key solution is to make sure that students log in right away the first week of classes as an assignment. In that way, any problems are quickly caught before essential work is due. This first year, faculty were not as organized and didn’t plan ahead, so occasional problems cropped up for the first several weeks of each semester. Of course, forgotten passwords or lost URL’s always popped up from time to time. Since students kept forgetting the URL to login, I placed a link right on the library home page making it very clear and easy for students to find. The link had originally been elsewhere on the college Web site, but the library site is what they were most comfortable with and was what came up on library computers.

Another issue that kept popping up dealt with browsers. We had found that there were minor differences for eCollege whether using Netscape or Internet Explorer (IE), the latter which eCollege preferred, as well as their versions. This included problems with printing with frames, document sharing, tools bars with typing in html, and adding
discussion threads. Users with AOL also had problems. I had a faculty member call me from home wondering why she couldn’t connect. After handling the situation as a standard reference interview I discovered that she was using AOL. When instructed to minimize AOL and open up her copy of IE everything worked fine. Browsers are also under constant updates, and eCollege has specific requirements. IE was preferred, but had to be of specific versions, and for Netscape it went so far as to only be compatible with the middle versions, not allowing the most recent or older versions.

Student journaling was also another issue. The hard part was organizing it so that it best fit the needs of the students and the faculty. Previously done by turning in hard copies, faculty wanted students to submit weekly journals. It had to be viewable by both teachers, but not by other students so that they would be free to say what they wanted. It also had to follow a specific format, so a text document was posted where students could cut and paste the format unless they wanted to manually type it in each time. Two of the faculty co-teaching a course made an appointment with me to sit down and look at the different features and functions. There we several different options for completing such tasks but we quickly narrowed it down to the best solution.

There were always technical questions as well. Faculty wanted to put up materials and not have it visible to students until certain dates, create question pools for online exams as well as the ability to set certain questions to specific topic areas for the exams, and uploading documents. The more complicated questions dealt with scanning in documents and pictures, and having to explain to teachers that because of copyright they could not take an entire instructional video and place it on the Web site. Just as librarians must inform teaching faculty about copyright for reserve materials I have had to instruct them about what they can and cannot do online.

Finally, we realized that we had no way of getting feedback from our students beyond what our standard end-of-course surveys offered. These surveys didn’t really incorporate any of the changes we had done this year, and we wanted to get specific questions answered. This meant devising a new survey targeted to areas of blended courses. I quickly found examples from other institutions, compared what they had done, and pieced together a form that fit our own needs which the teaching faculty modified to their own preferences.

**Conclusion**

As library director at a small college I have the unique privilege of working closely with the development of a blended learning environment and future distance education initiatives. I feel that this is the ideal situation. The library should be involved in any major endeavor of this type, to put forth our own ideas, and to better serve our students. Librarians need to be part of the administration of the college and part of the big picture.
Furthermore, librarians are experts in using technology and communication tools. We can always find more information on areas where we may be lacking knowledge, and by being involved we can prepare for student questions and problems when they walk into the library. With any type of planning and development there will always be a learning curve, and I think that this first year has been exciting and educational.

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