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Collaborative Role of the Academic Librarian in Distance Learning - Analysis on an Information Literacy Tutorial in WebCT

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Abstract

This article profiles a project to expand our general Information Literacy Tutorial into WebCT for students taking online courses. The Tutorial has provided online learners with a grasp of information competencies. The process of the project has confirmed the importance of academic librarians' collaborative role in distance learning community. It presents both opportunities and challenges for academic librarians to collaborate with faculty and educational technology specialists in integrating information literacy education into the course management system. More active multi-aspect collaborations are required to ensure effective teaching information literacy via the courseware.

As course management systems have become a popular support to distance learning on campuses, integration of library presence into the courseware "has had a challenging agenda", citing Campbell's phrase (2006), to academic librarians. This challenge applies especially to those with related position titles, such as a Distance Learning Librarian. It has been recognized that academic librarians "must seek to integrate their resources into online courses delivered via course management systems, in order to ensure that libraries continue to remain vital to higher education." Collaborations are crucial to ensure successful integration of the library into the course management system. (Fang & Kortz, 2005) This paper examines our experience in expanding information literacy instruction into WebCT at New Jersey City University, to define academic librarians' collaborative role in the distance learning environment. Future improvements in teaching information literacy via WebCT will be dependent upon the librarians' more active collaboration with faculty members, educational technology specialists and librarian colleagues, as well as new

information technologies. This analysis will benefit further cooperative ventures among the campus community to advance distance learning students' information skills in the ever-changing and increasingly prevalent digital world.

Since Fall 2004, our library's online Information Literacy Tutorial has become available through WebCT. All students registered in online classes have access to this tutorial within the course management system. This tutorial is a non-credit and optional course. The tutorial was originally designed by a small group of librarians as a self-paced online program on standard information competencies for students in all majors at NJCU. It includes an introduction to information literacy and five sessions. Each session focuses on a basic standard information competency and includes a self-test, which helps students assess the learning content practicing library use skills. This tutorial consists of animated PowerPoint presentations, charts, images and selected links that make it more effective and user-friendly.

The following chart of WebCT statistics shows that in the past one and half academic years, a little over half of total registered online students have visited the tutorial. 6.5% of them took the quiz. The average hits per student are 5.3. Though the data is not statistically overwhelming, it should be recognized that the tutorial has given a large group of online students a grasp of information competencies and research skills required in all subject fields. This has positively contributed to the fact that the percentage of students who had encountered difficulties using library resources reported in the library's student survey last year has dropped. (20% in 2003, 7% in 2005).

	AY2004-05	Fall 2005	Overall
Total students who visited the Tutorial	1,257, 57% of total online students	1,105, 51% of total online students	2,362, 54%
Total hits	7,458, 5.9/student	5,172, 4.7/student	12,630, 5.3/student
Students who had only one hit	285, 13% of students who visited the Tutorial	338, 30% of students who visited the Tutorial	623, 21.5% of students who visited the Tutorial
Students who took the quiz	108, 8% of students who visited the Tutorial	57, 5% of students who visited the Tutorial	53, 6% of students who visited the Tutorial

Collaboration with Online Teaching Faculty: Get Motivated

The faculty-librarian collaborative relationship has been traditionally maintained at higher education institutions. Will this relationship assume less importance in the online learning environment? Many librarians' experiences have pointed to the

opposite. As a matter of the fact, the course management system offers academic librarians an additional opportunity to join faculty to achieve positive learning outcomes for online learners. This practice in expanding the library's information literacy tutorial into the WebCT is another corroborative experience. The project of Information Literacy Tutorial via WebCT was initially a response to the request from the online teaching faculty through a library survey. In 2003, when more and more faculty members had been using WebCT to teach students who no longer show up at campus or to enhance their on-campus teaching, two of the distance learning librarians at the NJCU library, with other helps, conducted a survey on distance learning students and faculty. The survey was intended to gather information on how they use the library's resources and services, and to further help launch the collaboration with online teaching faculty members. - The survey revealed that 14.5% of student respondents had never used the library's homepage; 20% of students who replied to the survey had encountered difficulties using library resources or services. Though the library had created the online Information Literacy Tutorial and other instructions, only 1.8% of online students reported using them. An online teaching faculty member commented that she had to spend too much time to help students to search online databases. A faculty respondent requested additional support from the library via the survey: "If you generated generic 'how to use the library from home' Web content that we could put into our online courses that would be useful." These findings indicated that distance learning students need much more information search support than on-campus learners who can get support through classroom interactions. Librarians should provide this support to help faculty member smooth out difficulties in online classrooms. Establishing the WebCT version of Information literacy Tutorial is one support providing online students with a convenient access to information literacy education.

Nevertheless, the data of the above chart does reveal the necessity to improve the information literacy instruction via WebCT. As we can see, about half of students were unaware of the tutorial; the percentage of the students who only had one hit has somewhat decreased; students who took the quiz remained low. Of course, it may be partially due to the fact that some students may take online courses continually, so they do not get on the Tutorial in subsequent semesters or just click and get away. It seems that we can't be satisfied with the establishment of information tutorial in WebCT and wait students to click. Instead, we should strengthen the cooperation with faculty members to attract tutorial visitors, given the fact that the faculty has the most influence in directing students' attention. It is the faculty who make the decision to assign the tutorial to their students or not.

To further the cooperation with faculty and promote the Tutorial in WebCT, academic librarians should consider the faculty's attitude to information literacy. Despite

faculty's perception of library resources has been altered, to some extent, by the Internet age, the majority of faculty members believe that library instruction is beneficial to students' learning experiences. With our library's recent survey mentioned above, 85% of faculty at NJCU has provided their students with information about library resources, 50% of them has brought their classes to the Library for an Information Literacy session given by a librarian; 23% of the faculty members indicated they have assigned the Library's online Information Literacy Tutorial to their students. It is a great encouragement for us to develop collaboration with faculty.

Maintaining a strong liaison between the library and the distance learning and teaching community is the foundation for collaboration with faculty. In the same survey mentioned above, 37% of comments and suggestions for further library improvement were related to library instruction and promotion. These messages indicate that faculty members expect their students to know more about library resources and information literacy instruction. Academic librarians should be persistent and assume a more active role to reach online teaching faculty through various channels, such as advanced webpage, email listserv, WebCT designer meeting, surveys, *et cetera*, to promote library resources including the Information Literacy Tutorial which have started in the past semesters.

In addition to general promotion, librarians have to work closely with individual faculty members to integrate the tutorial into their sources. In the past two years, a small group of librarians headed by the Library Director started to promote the online Information Literacy Tutorial through meetings with faculty members. As a result, a few of faculty members who are enthusiastic about library collaboration have started to integrate this Tutorial into their courses, and given students extra credits for their information literacy outcomes, or completion of the Tutorial as a pre-requisite of their course. We should continue working closely with individual faculty members and extend these efforts. This semester, a faculty member in Art department has requested permission to include the Information Literacy Tutorial in his source syllabus and will require his students to take the information literacy quiz. This is a very encouraging sign. We can also further tailor the information literacy education via WebCT to fit into specific courses. There seems to be a long way to go in working collaboratively with faculty to cultivate students' information competencies in the distance learning environment.

Collaboration with Course Management System Administrators: Make it Possible

As commented above, the project was motivated by collaboration with online teaching faculty members, it was also a result of a subsequent cooperation with WebCT

administrators on campus. The distance learning librarians conscientiously shared the findings of the survey on online learning students and faculty mentioned previously with the Office of Distance Learning, which is responsible for managing distance learning programs and the supporting courseware, WebCT. The office devoted a great deal of attention to the library survey findings. They invited the distance learning librarian to conduct a presentation about library online resources and services at their WebCT designer group meeting, and welcomed the librarian's idea to expand our library's online information literacy tutorial into WebCT from the beginning. The distance learning librarian got training on how to use WebCT, as well as an account as an instructor from the Office. When the distance learning librarian completed the design of information literacy tutorial the Director of the office sent an email through WebCT listserv publicizing the online environment.

As it would not be possible for the Tutorial to exist in the WebCT without collaboration with instructional technology specialists, further improvement of information literacy education in WebCT will be dependent upon stronger collaborative ties with them. The distance learning librarian has been participating in WebCT designer group meetings for about two years. This participation has been corroborated as an effective channel to keep communicating with both online teaching faculty and WebCT administrators. To call for more visits to the Tutorial, under the librarian's request, the Office has recently confirmed they will notify registered online students to go through the Tutorial two weeks before the school starts from next semester.

Broader Collaboration: Perspective on Future Development

Besides working with faculty and course management system administrators, the process of developing the information literacy tutorial in WebCT has also been an experience of cooperation between distance learning librarians and other librarian colleagues. The initial online Information Literacy Tutorial was developed with joint efforts of the distance librarian and her colleagues, and a group of librarians who contributed to promoting it. Nevertheless, all those collaborations are within the library and the campus. To pursue success in teaching information literacy in a digital environment in the future, academic librarians' collaborative role should not be limited within the institution, rather, it should be broadened also to new information technology.

Campbell (2006) points out that "Utilizing the increasingly ubiquitous Internet and powered by ever-improving search engines, the World Wide Web rapidly became the largest and easiest-to-use storehouse of information in the world." Accompanying the advent of the new information technology, library users' way of retrieving and filtering information has changed. A large portion of current student body is the so

called “Google generation”. The same library survey conducted last year indicated that 89% of students who replied to the survey took Web sites searched by powerful search engines, such as Google, as their favorite information resources. Academic libraries should study Google’s success and learn from Google’s advantages to develop information literacy instruction that can meet their patrons’ needs in information searching.

In addition, the new web applications, such as Weblogs, RSS feeds, Wikis, Digital Library Visualizer, Digital Videos, *et cetera*, can be used to enhance library services and information literacy education in collaboration with IT specialists. Many college libraries have explored “proactively using technology to push their data out rather than just waiting for it to be found. Simple but effective tools such as blogs, RSS feeds, and electronic alert services now make it fairly simple to push information to people who could use it.” (Dempsey, 2006) To achieve this collaboration, academic librarians should not only have enthusiasm, but also proactivity to always keep pace with the new development in instructional technology tools and web applications. “Libraries need to become a resource for as well as the experts in each of the new technologies.” (Frey, 2006) Universities nowadays usually have departments for instructional and technological innovation. They regularly schedule training, workshop sessions and seminars in the use of information technology and instructional software for teaching. It is a valuable opportunity for librarians to get technology exposure and to develop cooperative relationship with IT specialists to enhance information literacy instruction. This collaboration, however, present more challenges to librarians.

Conclusion

The project of expanding the library information literacy program into course management system is, in essence, a practice integrating library services into the online learning environment. The process has also evolved into exploring the change of the academic librarians’ role in the digital age. With this in mind, establishing a comprehensive collaboration between both academic faculty and administration staff within the campus is critical for librarians to make library resources and services available and applicable to the distance learning community. It is both necessary and challenging for academic librarians to embrace new information technologies and to carry out their collaborative role utilizing these rapidly developing technologies to enhance library service while keeping pace with rising online education.

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