

# TEACHING AS VIRTUAL REPERTORY: TUNING EMBEDDED INSTRUCTION TO THE ONLINE COURSE

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## OVERVIEW

So often, we as librarians think of getting our way into the class at all as the lion's share of embedding work. This is understandable since there are so many hurdles to the kinds of pedagogical change that embedding (especially online) involves. In many ways, though, that first access to the class is more like clawing our ways onto the anxiety-riddled audition stage. We may find our methods, interpretations, tastes, and styles jarringly out of step with those of the primary instructor. We may find interest in collaboration snuffed almost as soon as it is ignited, or find ours and the professor's tempos completely at odds. While such scenarios can be demoralizing, what they demand, I think, is an ability to quickly read the pedagogical context and to apply a compatible embedding strategy from a developed repertoire of choices. I believe this ability will make us nimbler embedded librarians.

In this article, I propose four models of embedding, based on the degree and type of collaboration fitting for the course and instructor. I also discuss, within models, a few possible strategic variations – with examples drawn from my past year's experience working as Towson University's first Distance Learning Librarian. This experience has offered me opportunities to work with a range of disciplines, programs, and student levels, in face-to-face, hybrid, and online environments, in a short span of time. I hope to sketch a way to plan for such variety. Finally, I hope to indicate how that planning might contribute to the development of the online arm of an instructional program.

## THE FOUR MODELS

Any request to work with a new course should be followed by a collaborative planning meeting with the primary instructor and the embedded librarian. That meeting – or sometimes, the lack of one – can be very telling about what

kind of collaboration to expect in the virtual classroom. I recommend paying very careful attention to the kinds of pedagogical strategies the professor seems most enlivened by, as well as those which s/he is most quiet, concerned, or resistant about. For example, plan to gauge the instructor's receptivity to lecture, multimedia, discussion, "hands-on" activities, problem-solving, etc., and take note. Sometimes, of course, this can be hard to read. Turn to the course syllabus. Look at the assignments for similar evidence. Look, of course, for research-related assignments, and determine whether those research assignments are scaffolded. Such staged research assignments are the places where we find room for rich involvement. This planning stage is certainly a good opportunity to propose new strategies – such as scaffolded assignments and new pedagogical approaches – but realize, too, that some of these changes may be made over time, after proving to the instructor that you are able to work well with the established pedagogy.

Based on the above observations, I recommend planning for the following types/levels of online embedding:

### **Baseline Embedding: *Availability***

Baseline embedding focuses almost exclusively on visibility within the course management system and on-going availability. I recommend that the librarian create an "Ask A Librarian" tab in the primary course menu; post a photo, introduction, contact information, and availability; and create a discussion board for student questions. Although this ongoing availability is – on the surface – not substantially different than one's availability for student questions after any face-to-face session, the online environment allows us to maintain consistent availability within the actual "classroom" environment.

## **Second-Level Service: *The Tailored Resources List***

This type of embedding expands upon availability by adding a level of familiarity with the course outcomes and class syllabus by tailoring a list of resources for the course and/or class. Whereas the baseline availability might require little detailed knowledge of the course itself or of the class syllabus, second-level service is a bit more “embedded” due to its more fine-tuned involvement with the trajectory of the class. Providing a course-specific bibliography – using the CMS, LibGuides, or a similar tool – would represent this form of embedding.

## **Third-Level Service: *Phasing***

This model of embedding goes a step further by phasing such resources and support offered with the first two levels of services so that specific instruction and service is delivered *exactly* when the student needs it. For example, students may be asked to complete a certain topical module at the time they are completing an assignment tied to that topic. Synchronous instruction may be given. Virtual office hours may be offered – after instruction but before the assignment is due. Professors may refer students to the librarian for a consultation if they showed insufficient command of the topic at hand. This level of service, then, involves providing instruction and support for a particular stage in a research project, possibly addressing the student’s need at the point of content delivery, assignment completion, and/or re-learning.

## **Fourth-Level Service: *Assessment & Feedback***

This type of embedded librarianship brings the librarian’s role very close to that of co-teaching. In addition to course planning, instruction, and support, this level of embedding involves the librarian in learning assessment. The librarian might be asked, for example, to create research-related quizzes, to provide global responses to an annotated bibliography assignment, or to grade research journals.

## **TUNING COURSE, MODEL, AND TEACHING STYLE**

By ascribing each model a “level,” I am imagining that each model is ideally considered an additive to the models that come before it. For example, “Fourth-Level” embedding would add assessment and feedback to availability, bibliographic support, and phasing. Of course, there will be situations where a single model might be appropriate, independent of the others. So, while I propose an overarching additive model, each might be deployed alone as well.

Since the librarian is traditionally conceived as academic support, availability is the model most typically expected. In situations where the professor is resistant to a more expanded role for the embedded librarian, I recommend initially offering just this approach. There are also pedagogical scenarios where this is clearly the best choice: in programs where students have been taught the critical skills at an earlier stage, in courses where research requirements are

minimal or un-phased, and in courses necessarily so structured that additional elements are likely to be a strain on student and/or teacher. An example of the last scenario might be a nursing course where achievement of course benchmarks is tied to certification. I like to think of availability, though, as a model where critical, just-in-time teaching happens one-on-one, outside the traditional confines of the “class”. Because of that, I like to provide the teacher with a summary of the number and types of questions I receive at the end of every term, and I interpret these for the instructor. For example, I may say, “There appears to be a pronounced need for APA review among these students.” Backed with evidence, I can more easily make the case – only when necessary – for an added model of embedding with these professors, offering examples of what I have offered in similar scenarios, even as I serve as a kind of research “coach” or “advisor” by teaching them one-on-one.

I push the use of the discussion board as an FAQ-in-progress. Even when there are only a few questions asked in a given term, we often find that in Blackboard, there are two to three times as many views of the page. It is very likely that, in this public environment, students are finding their own questions already answered. I make this case to the professor. Experience has shown me that the discussion board is most heavily used, though, in cohort programs where the students are familiar with each other – especially in graduate programs. First-year undergraduates may be more anxious that asking a question publicly may expose some ignorance on their part; they tend to use email more. In either scenario, providing a photo and conveying a personal but professional tone is important in building approachability with students. Also, clarifying your availability and target turn-around time on questions in advance lets students know what they can expect. My style here is to put forth flexible availability, one-on-one teaching, and transparency with the professor.

Second-level embedding, providing a tailored bibliography or resource list, usually represents a relationship where the professor sees the librarian as a content specialist. This model may be most useful with departments where the librarian is actively knitted into the collection development process for the subject area. While in my own case, I have often been the online embedded generalist who collaborates with a subject librarian, I have facilitated the subject librarian’s development of the course resource list with the professor. During the course itself, the subject librarian may be less visibly active since the list is created in advance, but one-on-one recommendations of texts are common, and actively pushing new resources within the course management system is also possible, through the use of RSS feeds, for example. Again, the librarian can inform the professor of the most requested resources as a way to continually expand the bibliography or make a case for deeper course embedding. This model may be best for advanced or capstone courses in a discipline, and the primary mode would be that of specialized content advisor.

Third-level embedding involves phasing instruction. This model is most relevant for courses where research is central and research assignments are, or should be, staged. Librarians champion this approach to teaching research. Obviously, this embedding model is most appropriate for research writing classes – for example, many first-year seminars, composition classes, and disciplinary methods courses (in the latter, it may best be combined with a second-level embedding). Professors who have a history of working with library instruction sessions will be the most likely partners in this kind of embedding. The librarian’s mode in these cases is as a research instructor. In order for students to also take this role seriously, I advise negotiating with the professor for greater visibility in the course: a place on the syllabus (in terms of contact information and assignment scheduling), more frequent voice in the course management system, and “classroom” reference from the professor. The librarian will need to isolate the skills required at each phase of the research process and craft modules to walk the student through the acquiring and utilization of that skill. I recommend framing each module with clear learning objectives and explanation of how the skill will impact success with the research project. I also recommend the librarian consider offering in-time support (“virtual office hours” by chat) and re-learning opportunities (through consultations, possibly by professor referral). Finally, I recommend, with the professor’s permission, monitoring other discussion boards in the course to see if there are moments when you might propose other in-time assistance. In my opinion, the instructional mode requires that the librarian increase ongoing visibility within the course infrastructure and be active at each phase of the research project, but also prior to, during, and after major nodes in the learning arc.

Fourth-level embedding – providing feedback and assessment – is likely the rarest opportunity of the four. I have found, though, that as institutions shift to cultures of assessment, professors sometimes welcome librarians’ assistance. Crafting short quizzes, tests, and authentic assessments in which students practice the information literacy skills they learn can be as daunting as it is important. Such embedding requires something approaching a co-teaching mode and depends on substantial planning time. It can involve a huge time commitment from the librarian. I recommend, over time, developing a range of options to offer professors: short, auto-graded quizzes; rubrics for papers and (annotated) bibliographies; active learning activities; and global (rather than individual) feedback. I also recommend using consultations with students who have difficulty. For this kind of embedding to be a success, the professor and the librarian must agree in advance who is responsible for what – in terms of assessment design, delivery (including communication of due dates and grade weighting), fielding questions, grading, and feedback. Otherwise, dropping the ball between the two instructors becomes likely, and the assessment easily becomes devalued by students. Designed and coordinated well, though, librarians using this model can share the professor’s responsibilities, give needed practice to students before it is “too late,” and identify students in need of

re-teaching. This model hopefully has the potential to keep research projects from becoming “make-or-break” assignments.

## FROM REPERTOIRE TO PROGRAM

Hopefully, I have offered the basis of an embedding repertoire: research coach, content advisor, library instructor, co-teacher. I also hope that I have, incidentally, indicated online instruments to facilitate these roles: discussion boards as FAQs; RSS feeds for course resource recommendations; virtual office hours; and global feedback. Taking note of professors’ disciplinary conventions, class populations, and teaching styles, you might offer media or text introductions, auto-graded quizzes or opinion-based discussion boards, chat office hours or face-to-face consultations. Choose the tool that fits the occasion. I hope, too, it might be easier to map certain pedagogical scenarios to each of these models. In fact, when building an information literacy program, I would argue that certain types of (online) embedding become more viable choices for specific junctures in the program.

For example, I would recommend a third- or fourth-level embedding for one core first-year course like the first-year seminar or composition course. The skills taught would be fundamental, so the embedded librarian could be a generalist or any subject librarian. The same level of embedding could be offered for introductory research and methodology courses in the discipline – but taught in this case by the subject librarian. Second-level embedding (with availability) would be appropriate for most upper-level and capstone courses. And first-level embedding could be used with tightly structured, low-research, or new courses. I offer these suggestions not as rules but as a planning scaffold to be adjusted with the growth of the program and its particulars.

Most importantly, as librarians experiment with online embedding, it should prove useful to create banks of learning modules, tutorials, bibliographies, and assessment/feedback tools that could be tagged according to the embedding model, the discipline, the course level, format, and pedagogy. Over time, as a result, the library instruction program could become both richer and more responsive, readied with a repertoire of instruments and roles for use in the online environment.

## APPENDIX A: SAMPLE LIBRARIAN SUPPORT PLAN

### Librarian Support Plan

Course: \_\_\_\_\_

Service Level: \_\_\_\_\_ Support Model: \_\_\_\_\_

| Assignment                       | Service  | Date of Availability (with announcement)  |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Searching (Database Demo)</b> | <i>Video Lecture</i>   | September 12 (announcement)   |
| <b>Annotated Bibliography</b>    | <i>Instruction</i> (module) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview (video)</li> <li>• Example (text with commentary)</li> <li>• Source Evaluation (screencast)</li> <li>• <b>Assessment</b> /Discussion Board (Evaluate 3 sample annotated bibliographies for format and source quality)</li> </ul> | September 26 (announcement)<br>October 3 (assignment due)<br><b>Assessment Responsibility:</b> Completion grade given by primary instructor. <i>Global Response</i> provided by librarian |
|                                  | <i>Support</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 hours of chat office hours</li> </ul>  | September 30-October 2  |
|                                  | <i>Feedback</i> (Global Response on AB discussion board)   | October 8 (announcement)  |
| <b>Final Research Paper</b>      | <i>Links to Citation Help Guides</i>   | November 21 (announcement)  |
|                                  | <i>Support</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 hours of chat office hours</li> </ul>  | December 9-12   |

## APPENDIX B: FOUR MODELS OF EMBEDDING



