How Do You Count That?: Statistical Reporting of Online Library Instruction Activities

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Introduction

When several librarians at the University of Central Florida (UCF) formed a taskforce to examine library-wide reporting of instructional statistics, the task seemed innocuous enough. What could be more straightforward, after all, than instruction statistics in which librarians dutifully tally up numbers of classes and students and pass those numbers on to a coordinator or administrator?

But, as members of the taskforce discovered, accounting for library instruction activity is no longer such a simple matter, now that a great deal of instruction takes place in the online realm, in scenarios that often defy straightforward tabulation. Many times taskforce members found themselves asking "how *do* you count *that*?" – where *that* might be instruction in the form of a librarian actively participating in an online class through courseware, or instruction delivered through a password-protected instruction module, or instruction delivered through an online video, or instruction delivered through any number of other "non-traditional" means.

As any good librarians would do, the taskforce performed a literature review, intending to learn from the collective wisdom of our peers. However, the literature pertaining to library statistics proved to be very thin and the vast majority of the existing articles pertain to reference, circulation, or periodical statistics. In fact, very little about instruction statistics appeared to be formally written, except for guidelines such as

those issued by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), perhaps because (until recent years) the topic of library instruction statistics seemed so straightforward.

The ARL guidelines on instruction statistics – which have been adopted even in many non-ARL institutions (including our own, non-ARL institution) – stipulate counting only the number of "sessions" (i.e., classes) conducted and the number of "participants" (i.e., students) taught (ARL, 2009). Thus, a typical face-to-face (F2F) library instruction (LI) encounter is counted as one "session," and the number of students in the class is counted to determine the number of "participants." The ARL guidelines also address how to count instructional situations in which a librarian may meet F2F with the same group of students multiple times over the course of a semester – each new class meeting ("session") is counted separately, but the number of students ("participants") is counted only once (ARL, 2009). However, the ARL guidelines appear to provide no guidance with regard to the counting of instruction in the online realm. The concept of online LI is not mentioned, and all of the language in the guidelines suggests that traditional, F2F instruction is being described.

A few librarians on the instruction statistics taskforce also posted to appropriate electronic mailing lists, inquiring whether other libraries had developed standards with regard to the reporting of online LI statistics. The responses received indicated that other librarians were aware of some of the same issues and were similarly struggling with how to report such statistics, but no one appeared to have developed real guidelines or approaches suitable for adoption by others.

Thus, with very little published literature or standards to guide our decisions, the library instruction statistics task-force at UCF developed some institutional guidelines pertain-

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ing to the counting of online instruction: for example, the members agreed that situations that could be counted in a manner analogous to a F2F LI session (such as an instruction module which is assigned by a particular professor *and* for which the number of participants can be accurately determined) could be counted as LI for outside reporting purposes. Most other forms of online LI could only be counted on internal, unofficial reports. This solution meant that many forms of online LI would still not be officially counted, including much of the instruction being conducted by librarians at branch and regional campuses, but most taskforce members agreed that any further stretching of the instructional reporting guidelines could cause issues of standardization and consistency with other institutions.

SURVEY BACKGROUND

In an effort to go beyond opinion and experience in the realm of statistical reporting of online LI activities, we (the authors) developed a voluntary, anonymous, fourteen-question survey designed to understand how academic librarians at a wide variety of institutions are reporting online LI activities. As former instruction statistics taskforce members, we were aware of many of the issues regarding the reporting and compilation of LI statistics, especially as it related to our own institution, but were interested in how other institutions approached this topic. We wrote the survey questions with the goal of touching on basic demographics, online embedded LI, online tutorials, and online for-credit courses offered by the library. We provided background information and definitions for key terminology (such as "embedded" or "courseware") to respondents. Since this was an exploratory survey on a tricky topic, we also provided plenty of opportunity for comments and feedback (see Bottorff & Todd, 2010, for an archived copy of the survey instrument).

We secured approval from our Institutional Review Board (IRB) and then mounted the survey on a website wherein the results would be collected in a secure database. We then sent survey invitations to major electronic mailing lists devoted to LI (such as ILI-L, the Information Literacy Instruction Listserv), to the online delivery of services to patrons (such as to RCL-DG, the Regional Campus Libraries Discussion Group), or to similar public service topics. For example, lists targeting reference librarians (such as RUSA-L, the list of the American Library Association's Reference and User Services Association) were included, since most reference librarians are involved in LI activities. Lists targeting both large and small institutions were also included, since the authors wished to examine results from a broad range of academic institutions. We asked participants to complete the survey within a three-week window. After the survey closed, we retrieved the results from the database for analysis.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The authors plan to further analyze specific sections of the results at a later date, but the following preliminary data reveal the basic demographics of respondents, as well as the major trends and issues identified by them.

The survey received 307 usable responses. Per IRB guidelines, respondents were encouraged, but not required, to answer every question. The respondents represented a good cross-section of academic librarianship, including a mix of librarians from public and private institutions, small and large institutions, and institutions granting different levels of degrees. For example, 197 respondents were at public institutions, 103 were at private institutions, and a handful of respondents indicated an "Other" funding status. Approximately half (153) of the respondents were at institutions where doctorate degrees are awarded, but sizable numbers represented institutions where the highest degree offered is the Associate (47), Baccalaureate (38), or Master's (64). In addition, respondents hailed from institutions of many different sizes ranging from small colleges with fewer than 1,000 students to large universities with more than 20,000 students.

Significantly, the vast majority of respondents (287) still teach LI classes in F2F formats. But about half (145) also teach LI online or as an embedded librarian, and over two-thirds (218) are involved in developing online tutorials or other materials designed to be used in online LI. In addition, more than two-thirds of respondents (224) report statistics related to library instruction at their institutions and about half of respondents (143) are directly involved in the collection or compilation of LI stats at their institutions.

The remainder of the questions on the survey were designed to determine how librarians account for different types of online LI activities. The results reveal a great deal of inconsistency in how different library systems count and report such activities.

For example, respondents were asked to report how they count the situation where a librarian is embedded in a class through courseware, and the results indicated a wide variety of approaches. Roughly one-third (97) of the respondents that answered this question admitted that their library does not currently provide any embedded library instruction through courseware. Other responses included counting this activity as a "one-shot" F2F session (46 respondents), to counting it as multiple F2F sessions (20), to not counting it as instruction at all (32). Additionally, 50 respondents indicated that they "may or may not" count this activity as instruction, depending on the amount or type of interaction with the class. Another sizable number of respondents (37) simply were "not sure" how their libraries account for this activity.

As anticipated, respondent comments also provided some useful feedback regarding how individual institutions count library instruction statistics. For example, some respondent comments indicated that the various accounting methods may be partially due to varying degrees of embedding; for some courses librarians merely monitor a few discussion boards, while in others librarians create modules, grade assignments, or otherwise take a much more active role. However, many comments also reflected a great deal of general confusion or uncertainty about counting these activities. One respondent admitted, "We haven't figured out how to count [online tutorials]

yet." Many commentators thanked the authors for developing the survey and thereby raising their awareness of the issues involved. For example, one librarian noted: "I think this is an interesting topic. Many librarians have moved beyond the traditional face-to-face instruction and we need to start thinking how we will keep track and collect data on this."

Similarly varied results were received on questions dealing with counting activities such as LI delivered through online tutorials and LI delivered through online for-credit library research courses. In the case of online tutorials, for example, most respondents (133) reported not counting the use of tutorials in their LI stats, but those that do count them towards LI indicated a wide variety of possible approaches, similar to those reported for the embedded LI question.

Some comments alluded to the difficulty of getting accurate statistics on use of online tutorials. In a similar vein, most libraries are not currently offering for-credit library research courses, but those that do (about a third of overall respondents) reported a wide variety of methods of accounting for them, again similar to those reported for the embedded LI question.

A large number of respondents also reported that online LI activities – whether in the form of embedded instruction, online tutorials, or online for-credit research courses – tend to require a greater time commitment than traditional, F2F instruction. Some commentators cited common time-consuming features associated with online tutorials, such as creating or grading assignments. For example, one respondent noted, "I was amazed the first time I created an online tutorial. I had no idea the amount of time it would take. Many of our tutorials are inserted into WebCT and we have created online quizzes that the students take to prove they have taken the tutorials." Another said, "These questions made me think about our embedded placements -- where we are sort of 'on call.' In some cases we are listed as co-instructor and may even have some grading responsibilities. Up to now we record either group instruction or one-on-one instruction."

On the other hand, this area requires further investigation and analysis, since many respondents noted that the time and work involved in online LI activities is often at the point of creation, after which the time devoted to them can sometimes be less than for F2F activities. For instance, one librarian reported that "it takes more time initially to prepare the online/embedded instruction, but it is less once it is launched in the courseware."

Conclusion

Overall, the survey results indicate considerable variance and confusion about the statistical counting and reporting of online LI activities. At the same time, many respondents reported that online LI activities require a significant time commitment, often equal to or in excess of that required for F2F LI. Finally, some respondents indicated that awareness of these issues is heightening.

Since online LI activities are likely to continue to increase in the future, we believe that further work on the reporting of instruction statistics could become more important for academic libraries, as they struggle to define and explain their mission to stakeholders within and outside their institutions.

Ultimately, it is our hope that our exploratory survey and examination of the relevant issues may be just the first steps in new initiatives to define and count various forms of instruction conducted in the online realm. In the meantime, it is likely that librarians around the nation will increasingly find themselves asking "how do you count that?" when it comes to reporting various forms of non-traditional library instruction activities.

References

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