LIB 101 Meets Blackboard: Overcoming Challenges of
Teaching Information Literacy as an Online Course

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For years, Delta State University's (DSU) instruction program focused on one-shot sessions and course-integrated instruction; however, in 2004, the librarians decided that it was time for an entire course devoted to information literacy. LIB 101: Fundamentals of Information Literacy began as an academic credit course and also a general education elective. Although the instructors originally envisioned LIB 101 working best under the traditional classroom model, they soon tested the course in an online environment in 2006-2007. Not only were the instructors responding to their university's commitment to technological advancement, they also were testing if a "library without walls" could support a semester-long information literacy course.

Despite all of the advantageous online tools at their disposal, the instructors quickly found that they would face many unexpected challenges, including having to account for their students' technology literacy in addition to the intended information literacy skills. Using the software suite Blackboard as the conduit for teaching this course, the instructors had to rethink almost everything, giving special attention to various pedagogies, learning styles, and assessment. Even assignments had to be treated differently for the online setting than when they had previously been delivered in the face-to-face version of this course. This article will highlight some of the trials and experiences of two librarians who were among the first at DSU to convert and teach LIB 101 in an online format.

Pedagogy

DSU has four reference librarians who have instructional responsibilities, such as LIB 101. Currently two sections - one online, one face-to-face - are offered every semester with only one instructor per section, and there has been some trial and error to try and find the best formula for each format. While the instructors modify the course to fit their teaching styles, the overall goals and general assignments in the syllabi remain consistent.

Instructors found the online classroom to be an effective learning environment for students of varying learning styles, including visual (video), aural (podcast), and verbal (chat), while the face-to-face classroom catered to physical (using all senses) or social learning styles (group activities). In the face-to-face class, materials often lacked the technological pizzazz and creative freedom associated with online courses. This shift from the ordinary to the elaborate duly required the instructors to incorporate technology thoughtfully in order to circumvent as much troubleshooting as possible.

Ironically, technological barriers presented the greatest challenge of all for the online course. Instructors found it difficult to present all materials to every student in an easy electronic manner. For example:

- Because of pop-up blockers and browser security, students had difficulty accessing PowerPoint slides of class lectures.
- A JavaScript error complicated downloading any files in Blackboard – CE6, the system used by DSU at the time.
- The system did not recognize or appropriately render MS Office 2007 files without the use of a "compatibility pack" installed through Microsoft.

There were always a myriad of technological issues to be resolved, whether it originated from the student's uneasiness with computers or from compatibility issues (e.g., instructors using current or different technology and software that sometimes could not be supported by either the students' or, frighteningly, even the library's operating systems). Explanations of how to open, print, and manage files became mandatory reminders not easily explained once, nor the same way, to each student.

The installation of PDF web links was most useful to students encumbered with accessing course content. Media resources and broadband connections are becoming prevalent, compelling instructors to incorporate these resources to engage students' varied learning styles and to make the content relevant. However, there are still students using home dial-up connections and - even if it is only a few students - their needs still have to be considered. These students complained of inconsistency when trying to access certain content, especially Web 2.0 applications. One example of this came during the study of copyright and fair use when an instructor required students to watch a YouTube video of a short film by Eric

Faden entitled, "A Fair(y) Use Tale," then relate their understanding of the film's subject in a discussion board. One student posted that the video would not load correctly and simply discussed the topic without reference to the actual assignment.

The dichotomy between information literacy and technology competency was especially evident in one chat session introducing databases. The instructor asked students to open a Wal-mart.com browser window, take a few minutes to find two items that could describe their personalities, put these items into their shopping carts, then come back to the chat room to discuss the activity as a group. One student admitted that he did not know how to open two windows simultaneously, and would just imagine being in the store to locate items that described himself. He missed the hands-on participation, but managed to remain an integral part of the class discussion. The activity's goal sought to motivate students in becoming proficient database navigators. Learning how to browse an online store, which is increasingly the norm, was a basic technology bonus. Like adding contents to a shopping cart at Wal-Mart reflected their ability to navigate the store, the final project for the course, an annotated bibliography, would reflect their ability to navigate academic information.

Assessment

Each assignment and test reinforced the course objectives and learning outcomes and was only available through Blackboard. Ostensibly, assessments were created no differently than when delivered face-to-face; however, it took some time to get used to the online mode of assessment, e.g., not being able to see the reaction and understanding on a student's face. It was efficient that Blackboard's software did allow the instructors to chart progress without too much hassle. From the beginning though, the instructors realized that while all course materials had to be delivered electronically, at some point, the students would have to show their faces in the library – otherwise, a "library course" just would not work. To date, students have yet to be able to search library stacks or browse a specialized print index from their dorm rooms or homes. Although most library tools and resources translate well with technology's help (searching databases or the online catalog), there will most likely always be some resource or collection that cannot be used or evaluated in an online environment. However, given the virtual nature of online courses, instructors did attempt to restrict or reduce library visits to a minimum.

Besides the occasional need for the actual "four walls" of the library, instructors also had to rely heavily on feedback and trust that their students would be open and honest about any trouble that they were experiencing. Unfortunately, the instructors found that students in online courses can be just as laconic and figuratively blank-faced as in a traditional course. For instance, once the instructors provided feedback on assignments or tests, they had no way of knowing whether the students really understood their shortcomings unless one of them contacted the instructor either in person or through email. To satiate the need for the real-time environment, or for "instant feedback," the social applications such as online discussions, chatting, or instant messaging really did shine. Once again though, instructors were at the mercy of their students' commitment to participating in the class. The instructors found that, despite constant reminders of course requirements and objectives, the students did not treat the course as diligently, or with much attention to deadlines, as they would have in a "regular" course.

Testing proved to be fairly hurdle-free. The students received an instant grade upon completing the test in Blackboard and then received more feedback from the instructors once they personally evaluated the work. Since the ultimate goal was to produce information literate students, the instructors were fairly liberal in allowing access to most all materials throughout the semester. They truly and simply wanted their students to learn something.

Conclusion

Teaching information fundamentals in an online course without any technological pre-requisites necessitates a flexible instructor who provides some lessons engaging the latest technology and others in spite of it. Overall, the instructors found that they can indeed train independent, information literate, lifelong learners in an online-only environment, and they will remain committed to the format's potential. That said, following the notion that the traditional way to teach a course involving library resources is in the library, the instructors will continue using the traditional model as well. Depending on demand, both types may be offered simultaneously, or simply alternated from semester to semester.

To reconcile the two approaches, perhaps a better suited format may lie in a hybrid offering where students get the best of both worlds. Initial class meetings in a face-to-face setting will help connect the class, while the

use of Blackboard to encourage feedback and manage course content will ameliorate technological advancement. Future teachings of LIB 101 may incorporate video and audio streamed through a Flash Player or online tutorials with links on the library homepage. Regardless of which format each instructor chooses, the librarians at Delta State University will continue teaching students essential library and technology skills to enhance their academic, professional, and personal lives.

Resources List:

Faden, E. (2007, May 18). A fair(y) use tale [Video file]. Video posted to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJn_jC4FNDo

LIB 101 example syllabus. (n.d.). Retrieved January 14, 2008, from Delta State University: http://www.deltastate.edu/pages/3294.asp

The research process: An outline. (n.d.). Retrieved January 14, 2008, from Delta State University: http://www.deltastate.edu/docs/library/respro.pdf

Additional activities, using RSS feeds and podcasts, also helped students to understand some of the basics of research and relevance. Future experiments will include blogs as research logs and Wikipedia article creation.

For more information about the conference, and the PowerPoint presentations and handouts for many of the sessions, including from all the sessions listed in this article, visit the website at http://www.loexconference.org/2008/sessions.htm

"Besides," I say. "Finding the info is the easy part. It's figuring out what you need, and then figuring out how to use it is where the real work is."

"Everything is different but everything's the same." I sing to myself.

A few minutes later, Jarry says, "I gotta go. The baby's crying."

To this day, I have a hard time remembering that there are real people on the other side of these AVs.

"Ok, Maggie's Cakery at Bloomberg's. 06.10.52 @ 08:00 GMT?

"I'll be there," she says dissolving from the chair that was never really there.

"Flash me if you need anything before then," I say as the others vanish.

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From my sleep, the gentle sound of a Bach ringtone. My daughter has just sent me a new picture of my granddaughter.