

## The Quarterly Interview: Barbara J. Mann

### University of Maryland University College

-Edited transcript-

*Barbara J. Mann is the most recent recipient of the Miriam Dudley Instruction Award. (<http://bit.ly/SxrNmT>).*

**LOEX: Where do you work? What is your job title and main responsibilities? How long have you been there?**

**Mann:** I serve as the Assistant Director for Public Services, Information and Library Services (ILS), at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) in Adelphi, MD. UMUC is one of the 11 degree-granting institutions within the University System of Maryland, serving as the open access, distance learning branch of the system. I came to UMUC in July 2006 and currently work as an instruction librarian while also overseeing our robust reference and instruction program. Because of UMUC's focus on distance learning, our students and faculty are located all over the world. Thus, we provide 24/7 reference service in a variety of formats. Our information literacy instructional program is multi-pronged and we provide facilitated, asynchronous instruction via our learning management system (LMS), embed stand-alone instruction modules into the LMS, and also offer some face-to-face instruction for local students.

Also since 2007 I have taught the required, non-credit, 5-week, asynchronous course *Introduction to Graduate Library Research Skills* (UCSP 611) for The Graduate School at UMUC.

**Why did you decide to become a librarian?**

I discovered librarianship through serendipity. After being a stay-at-home mother, I re-entered the job market rather clueless as to what I might pursue. My undergraduate degree was in music education, but I was not interested in pursuing this avenue. I had applied for some part-time positions at Emory University (my family was living in Atlanta) and was hired for a part-time archives position, which I found fascinating. It took me a few years before I was ready to go back to school for my master's. Emory had closed its library school and I was not mobile. The University of South Carolina was exploring distance education utilizing instruction television (ITV) and twice-a-semester face-to-face one day classes. I enrolled and completed my MLIS this way. When I took the reference and government documents courses I realized this was the area I wanted to be in.

**What would you say is your teaching philosophy?**

My teaching philosophy is that of the old Chinese proverb "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." By helping users understand and build the skills needed to locate, evaluate, and use information I feel that I am equipping them to meet any information need throughout their lives. When I was teaching an online undergraduate information literacy course I had a series of discussion conferences where each student was to take any information need (e.g., planning a vacation, purchasing a prod-

uct) and use a variety of resources (e.g., databases, web sites, and books) to locate information on their topic. The proverbial light bulbs went off as each was able to clearly see that the skills used for academic research were the same needed to meet any information need.

**What are a few books or articles that influenced you?**

I am really interested in understanding how students learn and I have been reading about the ground breaking ethnographic studies conducted in the last few years by University of Rochester and by the ERIAL Project (Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries). These types of findings provide deeper understandings of student research processes and the roles the library should be playing in these endeavors.

Ann Grafstein's 2002 article entitled "A Discipline-Based Approach to Information Literacy" (*Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 28(4), 197-204) is a must read for anyone involved in information literacy promotion in an academic setting. Grafstein advocates for partnerships in information literacy teaching between faculty (the subject experts) and librarians as each brings complementary understandings and skills to be taught, thus enriching the overall experience for the learner.

A book that has had a great impact in my teaching is Ken Bain's book *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Harvard University Press, 2004). This insightful book, written after years of research, including countless hours of interviews, provides down-to-earth understandings of student learning behaviors and the successful philosophies and techniques teachers employ to make these happen.

**What key one or two mistakes, if any, do you see presenters/instructors make that you try to avoid yourself?**

The mistake I see many instructors making is simply lecturing to students instead of getting them involved in the process. In the online environment, engaging students is harder to do as there is not the give-and-take of verbal communication and the accompanying body language. However, online engagement can be demonstrated by being available in the online classroom, responding to students with positive, encouraging, and well-thought-out explanatory comments, and by creating opportunities for interaction and engagement, such as discussions.

The other mistake I see is using library jargon that is not understood by students. The term information literacy, for example, has no real meaning to students. Instead, I focus on the concepts of locating, evaluating, and using information and demonstrate its transferability, i.e., that these same skills are used to not only conduct academic research, but also to do such "every day" things as buy a car, plan a vacation, etc.

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***The Dudley award citation noted you “successfully created engaging tutorials and developed synchronous instruction” for UMUC students, who are in different parts of the world. How did you make this a successful part of UMUC’s IL program?***

People everywhere, no matter in what situation, want to feel a part of a community – they want to feel connected to others. I, as well as a few of my colleagues, have been employing web conferencing as a way of offering “real time” instructional opportunities. Our first efforts were through Adobe Connect as the reference and instruction librarians in ILS held individual consultations with doctoral students who were located in Taiwan. Another colleague and I provided group instruction for two different Taiwan classes. UMUC switched to Wimba Live Classroom and is currently moving to WebEx. I have been using Wimba to offer two real-time sessions in each UCSP 611 course I teach. This course requires two major assignments and I use these sessions as an opportunity to meet with my students in real-time, model the process needed to complete the assignments and reinforce the learning. Students have provided much positive feedback on these sessions as they do feel a sense of community and it helps them to better understand the content. I had one student who came in via phone while she was waiting to see the doctor in the emergency room with her child, who was having an asthma attack. Because finding a time when students, located all over the world, including those serving in the military deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, can meet in this way is a challenge I also record each session and make it available in the online classroom immediately afterwards. I have seen evidence where these sessions have helped students who were failing to pass with flying colors.

***Are there any readily available UMUC videos or guides that you would like to highlight?***

Because of our distance education focus we needed to find a way to provide point-of-need instruction for students for those instances when formal information literacy instruction is not available. As most UMUC students are working adult learners we wanted to make these tutorials relevant and, at the same time, demonstrate the transferability of research skills. To this end, ILS created a major multi-media tutorial based on a story. This tutorial, *Secrets of My Research Success*, is based on the main character of Quentin, a UMUC student whose place of employment is undergoing a corporate takeover. He and his colleagues want to know what a corporate takeover means and how it will impact them and a friend remembers how Quentin found a library instruction session so helpful. Quentin contacts the librarian and as he also has a paper due, he decides that he will use this topic for his paper and also report back to his colleagues. The tutorial then demonstrates the research process through the interactions of Quentin and Mike, the librarian. Originally created in 2009, this tutorial, which runs 35 minutes in length, is modular with an interactive learning exercise included with each module to reinforce the learning. There is also a final assessment quiz that has been set up so that instructors can require this tutorial in their classes to help meeting information literacy instruction and the quiz scores are e-mailed to the

course instructor. ILS had no budget for this product and it was created totally in-house utilizing the technology and voice talents of ILS staff. ILS was proud to receive PRIMO status for this tutorial available at

([http://www.umuc.edu/library/libhow/research\\_tutorial.cfm](http://www.umuc.edu/library/libhow/research_tutorial.cfm)). A sequel was also created to help understand citation entitled *Cite Right* ([http://www.umuc.edu/library/libhow/citeright\\_tutorial.cfm](http://www.umuc.edu/library/libhow/citeright_tutorial.cfm)).

The library has also created a whole suite of short, multi-media tutorials on a wide variety of topics located on our How Do I? page (<http://www.umuc.edu/library/libhow/>). These tutorials are also incorporated into library instruction content and used to answer reference questions, where appropriate.

***What do you think are a few of the biggest challenges for online learning, specifically for libraries?***

Providing online library instruction presents both benefits and challenges. Not being able to see students’ body language and other cues makes it hard to gauge the level of a class’s understanding. Creating the content is labor-intensive as is keeping it up-to-date when there are vendor and/or institutional changes that require content updates. It is also time-intensive to respond to all the postings within the online classroom, especially having to answer the same questions multiple times. However, there are also great benefits such as including active, hands-on learning exercises to serve as a learning reinforcement and assessment, as well as providing more individualized attention to students. Asynchronous, one-week long, online visits give more time for student reflection and librarian feedback.

Creating the instructional content is another challenge. It requires a fine balance between including too much and not enough in order to convey the concepts and help with skill building. Content should also meet a variety of learning styles as well as accessibility needs and balancing this can also be challenging.

Assessment of the online learning is another challenge. While we use a survey that is made available for each instruction session completing it is a self-selecting process. The information we receive has proven to be useful and changes have been made based on it, however more responses are needed. Finding participants needed to conduct more formalized usability studies and focus groups is problematic because users are virtual and global and ways to contact them are more limited.

***What either recent or on-the-horizon technology do you see as being very helpful (and/or harmful) to online learning?***

Perhaps instead the question that should be asked is how are librarians helpful or harmful to online learning? I find that there appears to be “two camps” among librarians in regard to technology use. There are those who are innovative in their thinking and explore ways to integrate and embrace technologies in order to connect with users to enhance the learning experiences. Then, there are those who embrace the “this is how we’ve always done it...” mindset and are more rigid in their online interactions, thus missing opportunities that are presented to them, which may result in missed opportunities to enhance learning.