

Paula Webb

# Meeting the needs of distance education students

## Creating an online-only library instruction course

The thought of an online-only library instruction course will either fill a librarian with fear or curiosity. It has the possibility of taking libraries in a new direction into the world of online instruction for college undergraduates, graduates, and doctoral students.

The fear of online-only library instruction is justifiable. The questions that often arise are associated with the threat that there will be less use of the library by the traditional patron. Most librarians find it important to walk through the stacks, flipping through printed journals and value the one-on-one relationship that defines a library. When something is developed that removes a patron from this experience, we all become a little nervous.

However, there is another need rising out of the academic institution. It is meeting the needs of students who are nontraditional or who take online classes only. It is giving these students the privilege to have access to the same classes and services as those students who are traditional.

These nontraditional and online students have time restraints that will not allow them the luxury of browsing the stacks. The perspective of these students is that they know they need training, but they cannot work on the same schedule as the in-class instruction librarian. In these cases, nontraditional students would have to do without. They would attempt to do the best they could with the library resources available, but still would not have the same benefits of a student who is on campus.

At Delta State University (DSU), this situation is changing. I had consistently seen the need for an online library instruction course grow in my communication with nontraditional students. I wanted to discover a way of informing them of library services, but also meeting their need for time flexibility.

In the fall of 2005, an opportunity came about with the DSU Winter Technology Institute. This program offered training on how to use WebCT to build a class that was either online-only or a hybrid (a combination of in-class instruction and Web-based). I attended the training in January 2006, which prepared me to construct the class that I am teaching for the first time this semester.

### Training

One of the first things I encourage anyone to do is get training. At DSU we are currently using WebCT as our software for providing online or hybrid class instruction. If I had not attended the Winter Technology Institute, I would have been unsure of where to begin in creating my online-only class.

The Winter Technology Institute was a wonderful way of teaching me how to use the software successfully. The institute brought in faculty who are already using WebCT in their classrooms and placed them with those who would be instructing in this

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Paula Webb is serials/interlibrary loan librarian at Delta State University, e-mail: pwebb@deltastate.edu

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format in the future. The training gave me the opportunity to learn from various faculty how to use the tools in WebCT and modify the software to meet my needs.

The Winter Technology Institute lasted five days and discussed almost all of the issues I would encounter when instructing my class for the first time. We went over important issues, such as plagiarism, the best instruction methods, how to manage time, how to create quizzes, and how to place time limits on various tests.

I also used this time to advertise the class I was creating. I knew that everyone else attending the institute was there to teach a class that would either be online-only or a hybrid. This would be the very audience that my library instruction course was created for. Every time a discussion began about classes and who was teaching, I would bring up my Library 101 course and the new online-only format. I explained how it would help them fine tune the research skills of their students and benefit them in the long run.

### **Consult those already instructing classes like yours**

One of the best things I did in creating my online-only course was contact our reference department. The department had already instructed the in-class version of Library 101, and they had a clear plan for teaching the students. I took the time to talk to the reference librarians concerning topics such as tests, materials, and how they view certain issues.

Another place I looked for information concerning creating an online-only library instruction course was the Internet. I did a simple Google search for topics relating to library instruction and found a wealth of information. I discovered that many larger schools in the United States had already created online instruction courses for their students. This information provided me with various ideas of how to lay out the class and how to present the information in a usable format for the students.

Using information I gathered from the reference department, the Internet, and professional articles, I began developing the format for the syllabus. Resorting back to the idea of making the class simple to follow but informative, I took the syllabus format from the on-campus library instruction course and modified it to meet my needs.

I plan on using the syllabus as the main point of reference for my class, detailing each action the students need to take during the week. Using this one-stop format would be less confusing for the students, and would keep them on track as they progress through the course.

Since the class would not be able to come to meet me on campus, I had to develop a method of instructing them about library concepts in an online environment. To accomplish this I decided that my class would require the textbook *The College Student's Research Companion*,<sup>1</sup> which covers the basic information regarding Library of Congress System, Dewey Decimal System, databases and other various tidbits of information about libraries as a whole.

The only problem I had with the textbook was that it did not come with a CD that would contain tests, assignments, or PowerPoint presentations that I could simply upload into my WebCt class. I would have to create all of my instruction material, one PowerPoint at a time.

### **Building the body**

If I had to choose the area that was the most time consuming, creating the actual class presentations would have to fall in that category. Unfortunately, time is also not a commodity that I have a lot of when I am at work. I knew that if I did not start creating this class and the material for it early, then I would have greater things to worry about as I got closer to the fall semester.

I developed a system whereby for each week of the Library 101 course, I would start building it on Monday of each work week. My personal requirement was to have the weeks PowerPoint presentations, assignments, and

any additional material created and added to the WebCT site before the Saturday of the same week.

In building the body, I used the textbook to address library issues as a whole and used the PowerPoint presentations and assignments to take what the students would learn from the textbook and apply it to the Roberts-LaForge Library online materials specifically. I created assignments that the students would have to work with each week, requiring them to use the library Web site and databases at our university.

In creating the PowerPoint presentations, I tried to deal with each library issue from the perspective of a novice. Each presentation is very detailed and specific in explaining off-campus access, how to use EbscoHost, finding a book on the shelf, and other library concepts. When the class actually begins, I will be able to monitor if the presentations are too simple or not complex enough. The plan is to gather the opinions of the students to make decisions and modifications from their input.

I placed special emphasis on sections such as the library catalog, reference materials, and informational databases in the weekly assignments. I required the students to find very specific items in these areas due to how important these areas would be to their academic career. I wanted them to have the ability to find what they needed long after my class. In one of my assignments, I require them to do various searches with their assigned topic in the catalog. I also require them to find information in various formats, allowing them to know how easy the library catalog can be to use.

### **Promoting**

Despite all of my planning, presenting, and other activities that went into developing this class, the most important of all would be promoting it to the faculty and students. As I have mentioned earlier, I made sure to tell the faculty attending the Winter Technology Institute about my class at every opportunity. This was one successful method of getting the word out.

Since the class was created for students who were time challenged or could not come to campus, I knew that placing flyers and such on bulletin boards around campus would not be very useful. Instead, I had to develop other ways of communicating to this special group of people.

One action taken was to e-mail the professors who instructed online-only or hybrid courses. I created a personal list of these instructors by looking at the list of classes offered each semester. Any professor who had *online* under their class description was added to my e-mail list. The e-mail sent out stressed that the class was online only, that it would help the students do a better job of research, and so forth. I also encouraged the professors to inform their students of this class and how it would meet their unique needs.

Another manner of informing students of my online Library 101 course was through the Distance Education Program. At the Roberts-LaForge Library we require students who live more than 60 miles from campus and take only online courses to qualify as distance education students. I e-mailed each of these students directly, informing them of the class and how it could benefit them in their academic career.

### **Conclusion**

The world of academia is changing. As time moves on, more and more classes will be offered online and, therefore, the need of online library instruction will only increase with time. These users should not be ignored or left abandoned to figure out how to use the library on their own.

In constructing and applying this class, I hope to stand in the gap for these students and offer them the same chance as all the other students that go to DSU—the chance to learn and grow.

### **Note**

1. Arlene Rodda Quaratiello, *The College Student's Research Companion*, 3rd Edition. (New York: Neal-Schuman). 