Taking the Library Extravaganza Online

By Anthony Kaiser

The Library Extravaganza has become an institution at the Indiana State University (ISU) Library. Early every fall semester, business as usual stops for a day, and the library is filled with thousands of students, faculty, and staff. At first, this foot traffic was likely due to the offer of free food and prizes, but after a few years, faculty began assigning students to participate in the Extravaganza. The concept of the Library Extravaganza is simple. Tables are set up to promote different library resources and services. Librarians and staff spend the day explaining library resources and services to students and then mark a prize card indicating that the student had listened to the presentation. After a sufficient number of marks are made, the student can turn in the card, get proof of attendance for his or her instructor, and then wait for the prize drawings. This simple concept has worked well for on campus students, but the Extravaganza was missing out on a growing part of ISU's enrollment: the distance learner.

The ISU Library is making an effort to better serve the distance learning student. A reference/instruction librarian has been appointed the distance learning librarian, and the library administration sends out a letter to all distance learning students at the start of the academic year to inform them of our services. As the chair of the reference/instruction department in the Summer of 2008, I began to wonder if there was a way to extend the Extravaganza to distance learning students. I proposed to attempt a Distance Learning Extravaganza and the Extravaganza Committee gave me the go ahead.

The Plan

The plan was to use four points of contact with the distance students. The first would be a meeting room in Adobe Connect. The second would be the library's blog. Videos and tutorials would be posted on YouTube. Finally, I would set up a LibGuide for the

Extravaganza. Adobe Connect is a virtual meeting space provided by the Office of Information Technology. The software and others like it are used for virtual conferences and meetings. The distance learning librarian, Shelley Arvin, and I had been experimenting with using it for online reference. The beauty of Connect was that I only needed to provide distance learners with a URL. I opened the meeting to all visitors, so no passwords were needed for entry. I created a meeting in Connect with the intention of using it to run streaming video of the event and chat with any visitors. I also provided PDF versions of the Extravaganza handouts through the Connect site. Since any computer that was logged into the meeting could send webcam video, I asked the distance learning librarian if she would be willing to run the meeting on the computer she was using for her presentation. I taped a webcam to the top of a coat rack, connected the cam to her computer, and streamed video from both cams through Connect.

The library blog is a simple toll created with a free Wordpress account. Blogging allows you to immediately post writings, pictures, and video. My intention in using it was to live blog the event; write up short entries giving the flavor of the event; post some pictures; and point users in the direction of the other contact points. YouTube is the popular video streaming service. I set up a free account for the library and used it to post tutorials created with Camtasia and video that I took with a FlipCam during the event. The tutorials would deliver the instructional content of the Extravaganza, while the video would provide allow the distance learner to experience some of the atmosphere of the event. Finally, the library had recently acquired a subscription to LibGuides. This service allows librarians to create quick and easily editable online guides. Our distance learning librarian was starting to produce some general library LibGuides, and I wanted to promote the service. The guide pointed users to the videos, tutorials, and

distance learning LibGuides.

Promotion

Promotion of the online event was limited; however I did receive some helpful support from library administration. The Dean of Library Services allocated one of the Extravaganza prizes for the Online Extravaganza. This prize, quite appropriately, was a FlipCam. Distance students could sign up for the prize through the LibGuide. This was useful because it gave us a statistic to help track attendance. To assure that this prize went to a distance learning student, we checked the entries against a master list of distance students. The only other major promotion came through our distance learning librarian. She alerted faculty about the online event. Her promotion prompted at least two faculty members to strongly advise their students to check out the event. The FlipCam contest allowed us to record the students' attendance and report it back to the faculty member.

The Results

Overall, considering the promotional limitations, turnout was decent. It is difficult to calculate the impact on "true" distance learners (those students that rarely, if ever, visit the campus). In the Fall semester of 2008, the Office of Distance Support Services reported that there were 4631 enrollments in distance learning courses. A number of these enrollments may have been on-campus students taking a distance learning class. There were 56 entries for the FlipCam, implying that we reached about 1% of the distance learning students. The FlipCam contest was only opened for a limited time, and that may explain the low count. Statistics for the LibGuide and blog web pages were a little better. In September of 2008, the LibGuide Extravaganza page received 201 hits. The blog received 248 hits. This indicates that between 4-5% of the distance students viewed the websites. (In contrast, the regular Extravaganza was attended by 5566 people. Considering enrollment that semester, we can estimate that nearly half of the student population walked into the library that day!)..LibGuides also allows librarians to track statistics of what pages were clicked on through the main Extravaganza page. The top four tutorials viewed were E-Journals (29), Subject Databases (23), Distance Learning (21), and Interlibrary Loan (16).

In general, the Online Extravaganza accomplished the goal of giving distance learners a better heads up about library services, but the goal of creating an "Extravaganza experience" fell short. Part of the problem was the timing of the event was not conducive to active participation by distance students. From 10 AM-3 PM Eastern Time, which is when the actual Extravaganza runs, many distance learners are at work. Due to this, very few people logged on to the Adobe Connect meeting during the actual event. It was very difficult to live-blog, shoot, edit, and post video, and run a chat at the same time. YouTube failed to upload longer videos that I shot, and I did not have time to edit them into shorter clips. I added very few items to the blog because it was difficult to get material while juggling the other issues.

For future events, and perhaps any distance learning event, I believe that extending the time period for viewing and interacting is essential. While the Extravaganza is a one day event, the online Extravaganza should be a month long event, with many opportunities to interact with librarians. Placing webcams around the library and providing live feeds of the event is clever, but should not be the focus of the day. Instead video should be shot and properly edited before being placed on YouTube. More time should be spent developing online tutorials that match the presentations being given that day. Also, liaison librarians for programs with strong distance learning components could make themselves available through Adobe Connect at times more convenient to the average distance learning student. The window to sign up for prizes should also run several weeks, instead of a day or weekend. Despite these issues, the library and university administration have encouraged a continuation of the event. Shelly Arvin and I continue to work on future events. Although the success of the Online Extravaganza was somewhat mixed, we continue to learn more about how we can improve what will likely be a regular part of the ISU Library Extravaganza.

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