

Making Connections: Reaching Online Learners at the Ball State University Libraries

By Lisa Jarrell and Sara Wilhoite-Mathews

Abstract

This article will describe approaches to managing information literacy instruction for asynchronous, synchronous, in-person, and hybrid course formats and will provide best practices and practical examples of learning objects. Technologies to be discussed include screencast tutorials, LibGuides, and discussion boards and quizzes within a course management system.

Keywords: distance learning, online learning, information literacy instruction

Introduction

Reaching online learners continues to be an important part of the information literacy instruction landscape. A frequent challenge in providing online information literacy instruction is making a connection with students who might never visit campus. Like many other universities, Ball State has seen steady growth in the number of students choosing to take courses off campus in an online format. In the 2007-2008 academic year, 1,985 undergraduates were enrolled in at least one off-campus course. By the 2012-2013 academic year, that number was 3,993. The number of graduate students taking at least one online course increased from 1,512 in 2007-2008 to 3,068 in 2012-2013 (Ball State University, 2014). The challenge in reaching these students at Ball State University is the variety of formats the online courses may take. Courses are offered in an online environment (either asynchronously or synchronously), in person, or a hybrid model.

As librarians have struggled to sort out approaches to information literacy instruction that meet the needs of online learners, many possible models have emerged. This article will describe approaches to managing information literacy instruction for asynchronous, synchronous, in-person, and hybrid course formats and will provide best practices and practical examples of learning objects. The definition of a learning object we are using in this article is “a reusable instructional resource, usually digital and Web-based, developed to support learning” (Mestre et al., 2011, p. 237). Learning objects to be discussed include screencast tutorials, LibGuides, and discussion boards and quizzes within a course management system.

The learning objects we choose and the way we approach each class is contextual and dependent on the needs of the students and faculty members. Therefore, we have adopted the approach advocated by Cheryl LaGuardia and focused on “what [our] students need, and what [we]...can do to fill that need” (LaGuardia, 2011, p. 304). We will describe an agile, flexible plan we have developed to meet the various needs of faculty and students and explain how we have promoted our services to faculty members.

Asynchronous Online Classes

Online education at Ball State can take various forms. One way Ball State teaches classes is through online asynchronous learning, meaning there is not a set time to meet each week. Instead, students are given deadlines but complete the assignment on their own time when it is appropriate to their schedule. At Ball State, these classes include students who live on-campus and choose to take online asynchronous classes as well as students who live at a distance away from campus. Asynchronous online classes allow students to “combin[e] education with work, family, and other commitments” (Hrastinski, 2008, p.52).

There are several problems that librarians must overcome to work effectively with students in asynchronous classes. Often, students choose asynchronous classes so they can complete their work on their own time. Therefore, a librarian should take special consideration of this non-traditional learning situation in which a librarian may receive questions at any time of the day. This can be tricky because a librarian cannot be expected to hold online chat hours and check email at all hours of the day.

Another issue with asynchronous classes is that librarians need to determine the best ways to communicate with students. When librarians are embedded in classes either through the course management system, within assignments, or both, communication can be much easier and a community can be built. Communication may be through various methods including email, Skype or other video service, instant messaging, and discussion boards. The communication may not be face-to-face in the traditional sense and may feel disjointed at times, but it is worthwhile in establishing a rapport with students. While these are all important aspects to consider when working with asynchronous classes, maybe the most difficult is

making sure the online class is not so demanding that it takes over your full work schedule or life.

Ball State offers many asynchronous courses across various departments. One program that has been especially active with Ball State's library is the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. Several of the faculty members of the online graduate courses have added information literacy components into their classes. For example, a professor of FCFN 643: Energy Balance, Obesity, and Weight Control, an online graduate course, has assignments that require students to do research in this field. A librarian-created welcome guide introduces students to a specific librarian embedded in the class and shows students how to utilize the LibGuide tailored to that class. The LibGuide includes contact information for the embedded librarian, basic library services, such as interlibrary loan, assignment assistance, regarding background information, books, and articles, and citation guidance. Screencast tutorials and handouts with screenshots are included on the LibGuide with information provided on how to find specific types of research articles (ex. randomized controlled trial, meta-analysis, and review article) in the MEDLINE database and how to export citations from MEDLINE to EndNote, the recommended citation tool. The librarian created both types of tutorials because various learning styles were considered.

Previous research done by Lori S. Mestre (2012) supports this approach; she found that the students in her study "demonstrated that a screencast tutorial with images can be more effective than a screencast video tutorial." (p. 273) A library quiz is set up in Blackboard that is worth 10 points and asks students basic questions about the LibGuide and on finding articles. Two other assignments that include research are: 1) finding three specific types of articles, doing an APA citation for each, and writing a summary for each, and 2) searching for information related to commercial diets. The librarian embedded in the class offers many options for students to contact her or another librarian including chat (IM on the Ask a Librarian page and Blackboard IM), Skype, email, telephone, texting, and in-person meetings.

Synchronous Online Classes

Synchronous classes are another format for online learning that many institutions provide. Ball State offers very few synchronous classes. The difference between synchronous classes and asynchronous classes is that the students attend class via the course management system at a scheduled time. One major benefit of taking online synchronous classes is that they allow a student to work during the day and take a class in the evening, even if the student is at a distance from campus. A major benefit from a librarian's perspective is that the librarian can host a real-time session through video conferencing software, which is more personal and fluid like an in-person session. In addition, synchronous classes can "help e-learners feel like participants rather than isolates" (Hrastinski, 2008, p.52). This is because the students log in at the same time and can ask

questions in real time. Overall, synchronous classes can do the same activities as asynchronous classes with the added bonus of real-time instruction and classroom discussion as well.

Because Ball State has few synchronous online classes, we have had limited experience in this area. However, one experiment with online synchronous learning at Ball State came in the form of workshops in which students could attend the in-person session or login via the webcast. The idea to offer these webinar-style opportunities for students was suggested by several graduate students and faculty members who were consistently unable to attend in-person workshops. In response to repeated requests, we arranged to offer one of our most popular workshops for graduate students in webinar format. We spread the word and ran the session but had no online attendees. We do offer recorded versions of this session and others. Other workshops have been offered as synchronous online sessions, but those have not been successful either. Despite perceived demand, we have abandoned this format in favor of recordings of live workshop sessions and screencasts for these workshops. We are still interested in trying live sessions with specific synchronous classes as we believe real-time online instruction works better when there is a target audience.

Hybrid and In-Person Classes

Ball State University offers a number of hybrid courses. Hybrid courses contain a mix of in-person class time and designated time for learning online within a semester. Classes typically meet one day each week in person and participate in an online module and accompanying activity in lieu of the other weekly in-person meeting. This model takes advantage of technology to provide flexibility in scheduling for students and faculty, while still providing face-to-face time for instructors and students.

The hybrid classes are well suited for blended and embedded approaches to information literacy instruction. Blended and embedded librarianship are well-documented in the literature. John Shank and Steven Bell (2011) note that "as courses progressively become more blended... , instructors will need to partner with librarians...to develop more effective courses that enhance student learning, retention, and success" (p.107).

Blending online and in-person time is well suited to our information literacy instruction and research help for students. We offer students screencasts, help pages, and LibGuides, as learning objects they can access and use from anywhere. Librarians are also available online via our chat reference service and by e-mail for students working away from campus. However, because the students are expected to be on campus for class meetings at least one day each week, they are also able to make an appointment to meet with a librarian for research help. Many instructors teaching hybrid courses invite librarians to their classrooms during in-person meeting times to teach information literacy concepts face-to-face and to assist students individually with research assignments.

The hybrid course allows for flexibility in information literacy instruction sessions. Session content that once took up valuable in-class time can be moved online. Database demonstrations, discussion of interlibrary loan services, and similar information can be covered in screencasts, a LibGuide, or instructions posted in Blackboard, providing a flipped format for the face-to-face session. The in-class time can then be used to address larger information literacy concepts, to assist in developing manageable research questions, and to work individually with students on their research plans. Each student can work at his or her own pace through the online learning objects, reviewing as much as necessary or skimming through mastered material. The face-to-face help and “big picture” work, the most useful part according to faculty members, now takes up the majority of in-class time. This format has been popular with students and with faculty, providing self-paced learning as well as focused class time for research help and social elements of learning, such as group activities and discussion.

An example of this approach is a hybrid section of English 104: Composing Research. This required first-year writing class has a course-integrated information literacy component that, in a traditional course format, is taught in person by a librarian. There are flipped classroom components in the in-person sessions. An online tutorial provides a baseline of instruction for students in the mechanics of research, while the in-person session allows the librarians and faculty member to focus on specific resources and skills needed for course assignments as well as conceptual topics related to information literacy. The in-person session is integrated into the course at the time most appropriate for the assignment(s) and in collaboration with the course instructor. Some instructors schedule several sessions with the same librarian. The presentation and activities are tailored to the learning outcomes for each individual instructor. Translating this level of customization, integration, and collaboration to a hybrid course format requires advanced planning, but it can be done effectively and is of great benefit to the instructor and the students.

In hybrid format, course- and assignment-specific screencast videos are created for each course section and instruction to supplement the online tutorial modules that all English 104 students take regardless of the format of their course. These videos are designed to assist students with specific elements of their individual research assignments, regardless of whether an in-person session is planned. The librarian embedded in the course is available via e-mail and for in-person appointments as needed. Students benefit from the flexibility of 24/7 access to instructional videos and from personal consultation with a librarian. This model has been found to be successful in addressing multiple learning styles and preferences in a preliminary study by Elizabeth W. Kraemer, Shawn V. Lombardo, and Frank J. Lepkowski (2007) at Oakland University.

In addition to working with students, collaboration with faculty is important for success. A review of best practices by Amy C. York and Jason M. Vance (2009) found a common theme that emerged was collaboration with course instructors. One particular instructor at Ball State created her own set of screencasts to accompany the librarian’s. The instructor’s recorded lecture and slides replicated the comments she would have made in the live, co-taught session with the librarian. In this way, the students get to hear the perspectives of the writing composition instructor about the importance of information literacy concepts and skills.

While the creation of these screencasts and other materials does take time, responses from faculty and students indicate that the materials are a valuable addition to the hybrid courses. In addition to hybrid courses, technologies used for online learning also can be used to supplement courses that meet in the traditional face-to-face format. As noted above, English 104 students do an online tutorial as basic introductory research instruction to supplement their tailored, in-class presentation by a librarian. This model can be used with other in-person format courses as well. The flipped classroom model allows for quick review of the mechanics of searching and basic library-specific information so the class session can focus on larger conceptual issues and individual assistance.

Another example is the library session sequence for English 601: Literary Research Methods. This graduate course is an important introduction to future work in the graduate program in English. For the course, the librarian is embedded for the semester into the Blackboard classroom. In addition, the librarian offers six separate sessions for the course. Each of the sessions is focused on a particular source type or approach used by literary scholars. Because there is so much content to cover, the librarian embedded in this course created a LibGuide to help students keep track of the resources discussed. Students are asked to explore the resources in advance of each session and answer questions using the sources. Again, the technology used for online learning helps in-person students take charge of their learning outside the classroom.

Marketing

Promoting and marketing the Ball State University Libraries’ information literacy instruction initiative to online and distance education faculty members for their classes can be a daunting task. Often, it is difficult to obtain a full list of faculty members who teach online classes because they span across various disciplines. At Ball State, we started promoting our services through newsletters at the beginning of each new semester. The newsletters were online and emailed to a list of faculty generated by going through the upcoming semester’s online class schedule. Very little response was received from faculty, other than encouragement and appreciation for the information.

Next, handouts with information regarding what librarians can do to assist with online classes were placed in faculty members' mailboxes or given directly to faculty in their offices. Using this method, a specific department was targeted. Unfortunately, this approach generated little interest.

Finally, a LibGuide was created that contained examples of learning objects that a librarian can design for faculty to utilize in their classes. This guide served as a toolkit that could be shown to faculty members so that they could see real examples of what is possible. Then faculty members could decide, with the help of a librarian, what is relevant to each individual class. Again, how to distribute this guide was a challenge. Emails were sent to selected departments where the librarians knew of an immediate need. Yet again, we received little response. Ultimately, we have decided based on our experiences and research that our best marketing efforts have been by chance encounters and word of mouth. Interactions with faculty on a more one-on-one basis (ex. already providing information literacy sessions to the in-person classes taught by the faculty member, sharing committee responsibilities, etc.) seem to be the best approach (York & Vance, 2009).

Conclusion

Whether in asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid, or in-person courses, it is important to connect with students in a variety of ways based on the format of the course. From our experiences, we find that every course format can be beneficial in fostering information literacy skills, which is supported by Karen Anderson and Frances A. May (2010), who found that "all methods of instruction can be equally effective" (p. 498). The best approach depends on a variety of factors, including faculty preferences, course goals, research requirements, librarian expertise, and available technology. Getting the word out to faculty about your services is a crucial but tricky step. However, if you have the opportunity to work with faculty to integrate information literacy components into an online or hybrid course, the partnership can be beneficial to students. In the future, we hope to build our online information literacy program, and ultimately, we hope to assess these courses to learn what works best for our students. We continue to experiment and to be flexible, which we feel are important when developing learning objects: one size does not fit all.

References

- Anderson, K., & May, F. A. (2010). Does the method of instruction matter? An experimental examination of information literacy instruction in the online, blended, and face-to-face classrooms. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 36(6), 495-500.
- Ball State University. (2014). *Ball State University Fact Book 2012-2013*. Retrieved from <http://cms.bsu.edu/about/factbook/enrollment>
- Hrastinski, S. (2008). Asynchronous & synchronous e-learning: A study of asynchronous and synchronous e-learning methods discovered that each supports different purposes. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 31(4), 51-55.
- Kraemer, E. W., Lombardo, S. V., & Lepkowski, F. J. (2007). The librarian, the machine, or a little of both: A comparative study of three information literacy pedagogies at Oakland University. *College & Research Libraries*, 68(4), 330-342.
- LaGuardia, C. (2011). Library instruction in the digital age. *Journal of Library Administration*, 51(3), 301-308.
- Mestre, L. S. (2012). Student preference for tutorial design: A usability study. *Reference Services Review*, 40(2), 258-276.
- Mestre, L. S., Baures, L., Niedbala, M., Bishop, C., Cantrell, S., Perez, A., & Silfen, K. (2011). Learning objects as tools for teaching information literacy online: A survey of librarian usage. *College & Research Libraries*, 72(3), 236-252.
- Shank, J. D., & Bell, S. (2011). Blended librarianship: [Re] Envisioning the role of librarian as educator in the digital information age. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 51(2), 105-110.
- York, A. C., & Vance, J. M. (2009). Taking library instruction into the online classroom: Best practices for embedded librarians. *Journal of Library Administration*, 49(1-2), 197-209
doi:10.1080/01930820802312995