Distance Learning and Distance Libraries: Where are they now?

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Abstract:

Libraries are rarely noted in distance education courses and books, other than a referral to online catalogs and electronic resources. Library instruction in research skills is somehow bypassed. But letting students loose on a library web page is almost like letting them loose on the Internet. Without some library guidance and research structure, the distance learning student is being cheated out of a top-level educational experience. Some strategies for libraries to participate in the distance learning revolution are suggested here: developing online courses that coordinate with college courses and developing a portal or gateway presence from their web pages.

> "A review of articles on the topic [of distance education] by faculty shows that only a few mention issues related to library access or resource integration." (Beagle 2000, p. 367)

Distance education is in the news almost daily; *The Chronicle of Higher Education* online has an informative article in each issue (interestingly, these articles are available free, without subscription at www.chronicle.org. MIT now proposes to provide its courses online for free! (*Chronicle* 4/5/2001) But where is the library mentioned in all of these accounts? Does the traditional college library have a place in this new online world, or will the "library without walls" be the future information provider? Although the ACRL (Association of College & Research Libraries) *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* (ACRL 2000) recommends distinct outcomes for distance education programs, these are not always considered in the distance education field.

Searches in several databases -- *Education Abstracts*, *Library Literature, Ebsco Academic Search Premier*, and *WorldCat* -- for "distance-education" yield some remarkable statistics. Percentages show that there is almost no interest in the education field for studies about library resources. The added search term "librar*" (to obtain library, libraries, or librarian) yields less than 4% of the records in *Education Abstracts* (253:10). There is of course a far greater interest in *Library Literature* with 416 records for "distance-education," but adding the search term "college" yielded only about one-quarter of the records (416:111). Searches in other databases provide equally discouraging results. WorldCat <firstsearch.oclc.org> yields 4322 records for DE, but only 141 combined with libraries. These figures seem to indicate that hopes for the future of libraries in the distance education explosion are dim. Searching the *Chronicle of Higher Education* online for "distance-education" yields correspondingly low results for libraries (357 for DE; only 52 combined with library, from Sep. 2000 to April 2001).

Libraries have been so successful in acquiring and promoting their online resources, that most learners now seem to feel that they can access them successfully on their own. For best results, however, a librarian intermediary is still the best source. But how can libraries convince users of this? Two resources that are being used at some libraries may provide solutions: the web portal

or gateway and online courseware.

WEB PORTALS or GATEWAYS

There are several possibilities for libraries to climb onto the Distance Education bandwagon. One technique is to become the chief content provider for all online resources, an initiative that is already underway with library "web portals" or "gateways" becoming convenient access points, perhaps more often for public libraries than for college libraries. In fact, college libraries with their relatively captive audience may be more tradition-bound than public libraries, which must constantly solicit new patrons to subsist. *Library Literature* yields 161 records in a search for "web portal," but only four records for "web portal and college." Virginia Commonwealth University has had such a web presence for a few years now <*http://www.library.vcu.edu/mylibrary/*>; the University of Washington Libraries <*http://www.washington.edu/uwired/*> and North Carolina State University <*http://my.lib.ncsu.edu/*> also provide customizable web gateways (Jordan 2000; Graphery & Ream 2000; Pace 2001). *Education Abstracts* yielded only ten records for "web portal," and none are with libraries. The usefulness and added value of the web portal must be promoted to the education field. There are over 3 billion Web pages to search, and even librarians cannot keep up with the steady increase (Pace 2001).

Fig. 1 "My Library @NCState"

Web portals or gateways take advantage of the fact that libraries excel at organization since the ancient days of clay tablets in Mesopotamia and papyrus scrolls of the great library of Alexandria

in ancient Egypt. The library web page can provide structure for the myriad of choices available for just one subject search. A database of databases can provide searching across products to locate the best resources for the particular subject requested. Such systems are indexed variously under "knowledge management" with185 records in *Library Literature* or "database management systems" with 229 records (Tripp 2001). Librarians can learn these techniques from the business world, which has had to manage complex databases for some years now (Cargo 2000).

By providing ease of access to selected resources, the library portal in effect guides users to specific searches, since users do not care whether relevant resources are paid subscriptions or free online databases. For example, PsychInfo (paid) and Medline (free) both provide extremely useful and relevant results, and similarly for Education Abstracts (paid) and Eric (free). Patrons simply want the resources that have been selected to match their information needs. Careful choices of selected Internet products combined with the library's paid subscriptions will provide patrons with the best resources, no matter what the media. Librarians need to become more adept at locating and evaluating web resources for specific subjects, much as they have been able to do for print resources. Distance educators should insist on no less.

DISTANCE LIBRARY COURSES

Another possibility exists for librarians. They too can provide distance learning courses of their own, which can be linked to other college courses (Crowther & Wallace 2001; Curl, Reynolds, Mai 2000). It may take slightly more time initially than preparing individual library instruction classes, but the potential for usage is much greater. Each traditional class may take two to three hours preparation for a one-hour session and may reach 20-30 students. The online course may take many more hours, but it can reach potentially far more students and over a longer time span. More importantly, the base course is adaptable to a variety of situations. Many classes are repetitious in several aspects, such as those for basic freshmen English courses, where students are required to locate one or two books and one or two articles. Some library instruction courses are already online at scores of colleges and universities, and these may provide both inspiration and legitimate borrowing sources. Courses that are modular in nature can be expanded or contracted depending on the particular class needs. Online courses are also good for in-person courses, as students who are distracted or fail to pay close attention throughout the library instruction hour can then continue at their own pace at a later time.

Online Courseware

Library instructors often use PowerPoint presentations to provide a visible systematic approach to choosing a database and the best search terms. These PowerPoint shows can be put directly on the web, or they can be modified into a series of web pages. Rather than a PowerPoint demonstration, which has a limited and non-interactive online lifespan, Blackboard or WebCT provide a more course-oriented environment. These are only two choices for the easy production of online courses, but there are others (Cartwright 2000).

A program held this year at the College of Staten Island/CUNY to train classroom faculty to use Blackboard courseware for their classes was attended by library faculty as well <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/TEC/>. Several library courses were developed during the week-long workshop, and many were used in non-credit teaching situations during the semester <http://www.csi.cuny.edu:2112>. For LIB101, LIB110, and LIB111, use "guest" as user name and password to enter. There are distinct advantages to using the online system, rather than presenting a PowerPoint show or following library web pages. First, students will have a learning structure that is familiar from their other courses. Secondly, students may continue the online

course at a later time, which reinforces the initial library lessons. And lastly, librarians may find that sequential learning is not always appropriate for today's students. In a traditional library instruction class, students enter with many different levels of competence for both computer skills and library skills. The opportunity to advance through sections of the online course at their own speed allows students to match their attention span to the material at hand.

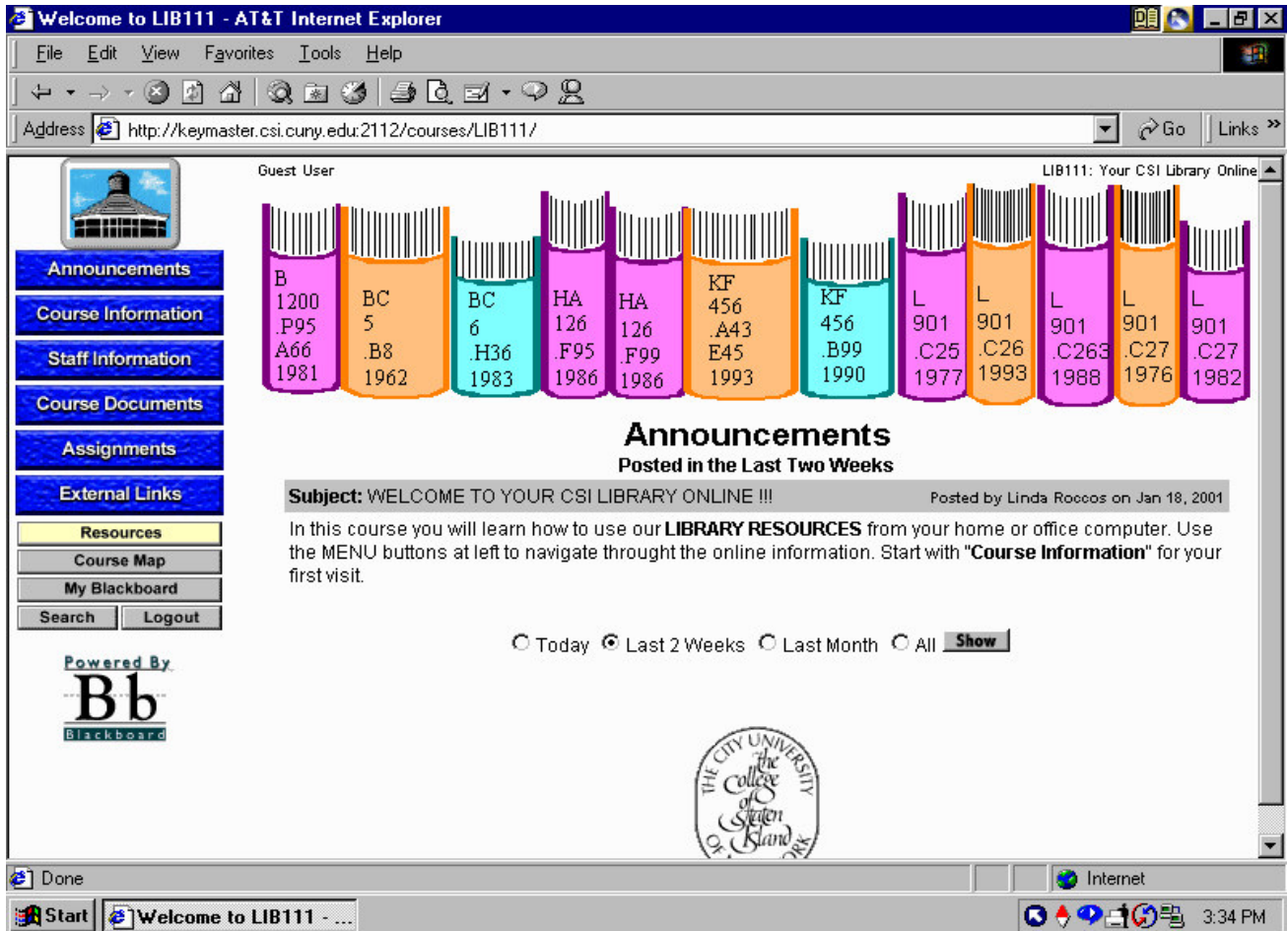Fig. 2 Blackboard Course LIB111 at the College of Staten Island/CUNY

Fig. 3 Blackboard Course LIB111 with Magazine/Journal page.

A magazine is popular and written for the general public, it usually has lots of ads and pictures. The writers rarely reveal their sources, in fact journalists who write for most magazines often promise their informers that they will remain anonymous.

A journal contains articles of interest only to specialists, and it has few or no ads and pictures. Scholars publish their research in journals, which are peer reviewed (or refereed), and the articles provide footnotes and/or a bibliography.

EBSCO Databases: Academic Search Premier
Search the **EBSCO** databases, which have many full text articles as well as citations to additional magazine and journal articles.
1. Click on **"Academic Search Premier"**
2. Check the BOX for **"Full Text"** to read the entire article online.

CONCLUSIONS

The college library of tomorrow will be very different from the college library of yesterday, and we cannot even imagine what changes will arrive in the very near future. To remain chiefly a repository of books and magazines is simply not an option, and libraries now heavily promote their computers and databases. However many libraries are still not following recent trends in distance education, much less providing leadership in new ways of dealing with this increasingly popular feature (Coffman 2001). Developing web portals to provide structure and user-friendly access is one way that libraries can meet future demand. Developing online library courses that coordinate with other online college courses is another technique that can be successfully utilized. By presenting an online presence in two areas that librarians already excel at - classifying and evaluating resources and providing research instruction - the librarian of the future will directly enhance student learning while participating in the rapidly growing distance learning environment.

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PROJECTS:

Annenberg/CPB's Top Ten Distance Education Sites:
http://www.learner.org/edtech/distlearn/topten.html

CETUS Project: Information Resources and Library Services for Distance Learners (Consortium of the California State University system, the State University of New York, and the City University of New York) http://www.cetus.org/index.html#projects

COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY WEB PAGES FOR DISTANCE LEARNING:

George Washington University Educational Technology Leadership program:
http://www.gwu.edu/~etl/

SUNY Buffalo WWW Library Support for Distance Learning Project Page
http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/course/dlproj.htm

Texas A&M University: Library Handouts online:
http://library.tamu.edu/reference/handouts/helppage.html

University of Saskatchewan WWW Virtual Library Handbook
http://library.usask.ca/ustudy/ustudy.html

University of South Florida Distance Learners Library Services
http://www.lib.usf.edu/virtual/services/distancelearning.html

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