The Roles that Librarians and Libraries Play in Distance Education Settings

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Abstract

This article explores the literature that focuses on the various roles librarians and libraries play in distance education settings. Learners visit libraries either in person or via networked computing technology to ask for help with their online courses. Questions range from how to upload a document with a learning management system, to how to use software and hardware, to more complex questions about how to locate and research articles for term papers. The literature reviewed provides a glimpse into the historical roles, current roles, as well as possible new roles that libraries and librarians may play in the future. This article identifies various library services that are essential to distant learners and distance education settings, and will explain how librarians and libraries are providing these services online.

Introduction

Distance education is a growing global industry in today's world. People from all walks of life are venturing into online education to expand their knowledge and skills. Online distance education is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week from anywhere in the world. Because their location makes distance education particularly attractive to them many students do not have local access to a library; that is where distant librarians and the library resources come in. Students need help locating resources for their coursework and distance-education librarians and the library's web-based services provide information and links to obtain the information they need. Libraries and librarians have always been focused on providing resources and helping expand learners' skills and knowledge; however as online education became mainstream the focus shifts to how librarians and libraries will continue to meet their mission, goals and objectives providing electronic resources to meet the growing demands coming from distance education students along with serving in-house or on-site learners. Librarians need to identify ways to assist learners according to their schedule, time, and learning environment.. As we see distance education growing; libraries and librarians need to focus on the basic fundamentals of librarianship and determine how best to meet the needs of these non-residential distance education students. (Groeling & Boyd, 2009).

Definitions and Historical View

In this article the terms distance education, distance learning, online education, and distributed education will be grouped together and refer to education that is facilitated using online, networked, computing technology. In Ellison's 2000 article we see that the definition of distance learning and distance education are interchangeable and refer to any method of organizing and delivering instruction that does not require the learner to be with or near the instructor. With the growth of online instruction the roles and responsibilities of libraries and librarians have also changed. Groeling and Boyd (2009) state that not only have the type of available resources been changing in academic libraries, the role of the librarian has been changing as well. Twenty years ago the work of a librarian was generally centered on a specific task (cataloging, reference, circulation).

Many institutions are using an "embedded librarian" in their online courses; Hoffman (2011) surveyed six institutions about how they are incorporating librarians and libraries in their courses. Students, faculty, and instructors were asked to complete a survey about how effective the inclusion of library services was to their programs and the overwhelming results were positive. Hoffman states, "Embedded librarian services are often created with a goal of providing online instruction," (2011, page 453).

As a greater number of people enroll in distance education each year it is important that library services are available to them just as if they were typical seated students. We live in a virtual world and students are utilizing technology to enhance their learning; it is important for libraries and librarians to incorporate these technologies within the library, how they provide library services, and as embedded librarians or reference librarians. The description of an embedded librarian varies from institution to institution. The need for library services not only varies between institutions but between various courses within an institution.

Lebowitz (1997) provides a historical glimpse into the early stages of providing library resources and services online for distance education students. Lebowitz stresses the need to extend library services beyond the physical boundaries of the academic institution (1997). Certainly as the growth of online education has increased and become the popular over the years the need and demand for library resources and services has also grown.

In the past DE learners received limited services (email reference, document delivery, and inter-library loan) from the academic libraries and mostly relied on obtaining information and guidance from a local library near them. Lebowitz (1997) observed the push for institutions to change with the times and provide expanded services for their online and distant students; this is even more necessary today. Libraries and librarians are using the increased sophistication of computing technology and the Internet to help identify and change their services and to meet the demands and needs of online users.

Oldham (2008) showcases how computers impacted the delivery of service to the online distance community by providing libraries and librarians the capability of providing documents and other resources via the Internet and talks about how these services and resources at the University of Scranton changed in the 1990s to having a virtual presence in the 2000s. According to Oldham, "A library's Web site literally is the library for distance education students" (2008 page 221).

As LMS services such as Blackboard and other ILS were launched, the technologies allowed course content to be accessed anywhere and any time. The roles and responsibilities of libraries

and librarians changed over the years as well so that they could meet the demands and needs of these online distance education students. Reference services joined the virtual world as students began to email questions to the university's library (Oldham, 2008).

Distance Education Today

In their 2012 article, Cassner and Adams state that distance librarians, "…work in a complex environment of changes in technologies, user expectations, and instructional goals," (page 117). They discuss the ways that libraries and distance librarians are keeping up with the technological trends of online instruction and how they are building skills, competencies, and knowledge so that they can continue to help and support the needs and demands of online and distance education students. The librarian of today does not have the luxury of focusing on a single, specific task; they need to focus on the user (Groeling & Boyd, 2009).

Cassner & Adams identified some of the roles that librarians and libraries play with the distance education students, which include: (1) helping with searching and locating resources for assignments; (2) teaching them learn how to use these resources; and (3) supporting their educational needs. Another role is that of technological assistant, providing things like tutorials on the library's webpage to hands-on training of various programs. Librarians need to know how software programs work so that they can help answer questions, and the library needs to have these programs installed on the public computers so that students can utilize them when needed.

Learning opportunities for librarians are identified as they strive to meet the growing demands of their complex work environments. Current technologies are being utilized such as webinars and blogs to help distance librarians stay current with the trends, communicate, and share ideas among academic libraries. Further information concerning these roles is found as Cassner & Adams (2012) discuss the ACRL (Association of College & Research Libraries) standards, which provide librarians and libraries guidelines to follow as they continue to build and provide online resources and library resources. The ACRL is a division of the American Library Association.

The delivery of library resources and services has adapted to include delivery via online instruction, websites, videos, tutorials, television, blogs, etc. Online and distant students come from all walks of life and will access course content at a time that is convenient for them, meaning that library resources and services need to be available twenty four hours a day, seven days a week (Ellison, 2000). Ellison (2000) states, "Distance learning is so new that most instructors are still experimenting with the carious delivery methods to determine one or a combination of techniques that work best of their course content and type and level of learners," (page 241).

As technologies are developed and introduced to the world librarians are expected to know how to use these technologies as they are incorporated within the distance learning setting. Communication, conferences, networking, and professional journals are key elements, which provide insight and resources for those that work within the online and distance education community (Cassner & Adams, 2012).

Digital library resources, which provide learners with information on how to access and use library resources are essential and will fulfilling the mission of the library along with meeting the

ACRL guidelines. Learners need "finger-tip access" (Ellison, 2000) and many libraries today have developed authentication programs (user name/password) that will allow students to access and use the resources found on the library website.

Oldham states that even in 2006 users frequently did not know what user name and password to use to access library databases and because of this confusion there was a need for institutions to develop a single sign-on (SSO), which would allow users to use one user name and password for their online educational portal (e.g. Blackboard) and the same one to sign-in and use the various library databases. This SSO would essentially provide users with the authentication to view and access multiple records on the university's website and would resolve the problem of users not knowing what user name and password to use for the library.

In, *The theory and practice of online learning,* Johnson,Trabelsi and Fabbro (2011) talk about the "growth of e-learning or online learning" and that this growth is changing how academic libraries provide resources and services for the distance education student. Johnson, Trabelsi, & Fabbro ask probing questions about what exactly e-learners need from the library and how libraries should go about providing these services (2011). Johnson, Trabelsi and Fabbro continue to examine these roles and responsibilities, and how libraries respond to the challenges related to delivery of core services and resources to e-learners (2011). The services that libraries and librarians provide include helping learners with research and reference questions, along with teaching basic computer, information, and technological skills.

Academic libraries are continuing to expand their services as more students enroll in online and distance courses. The roles of these libraries and their librarians are expanding as libraries are evaluating, changing, and adding services and instruction to meet the growing demand. The growth of online instruction challenges academic libraries to meet the needs of a diverse group of users from varied, often remote, locations (Ritterbush, 2014).

Social media (e.g. Facebook; Twitter) has become a valuable resource and tool, because these technologies help connect and link libraries and librarians to distant learners. Instruction, communication, and interaction help guide learners to the resources they need; the videos and other forms of content provide the tools necessary for how to use and locate information for their unique needs.

Guidelines and Competencies

In the 2009 Groeling and Boyd discussed the changing role of academic libraries and that for libraries to remain relevant: (1) librarians must evolve from print media to focused media and become information specialists; (2) the culture of libraries and their staff must change from a mindset of primarily ownership and control to one that seeks to provide service and guidance in helping users find information regardless of format; and (3) libraries must assert their evolving role not only within their institutions but share their information dissemination and retrieval expertise in other markets. In other words libraries and librarians need to enhance their skills and knowledge so that they are capable of helping learners with their research and technological questions.

Hoffman (2011) mentions the Association of College and Resource Libraries (ACRL; a division

of the American Library Association) guidelines, which state that provision of library services to distance learners must be similar to those students and faculty receive in traditional campus settings, and the use of an "embedded librarian" as part of the strategy to provide equivalent library access, resources, and services for distant learners. The roles that an embedded librarian plays in the DE setting will vary depending on the actual needs of the course itself. These roles range from limited, to teaching assistance, to developing lesson plans and assignments as a co-instructor.

Oldham (2008) reports that in 2002 the university designated one librarian specifically as the distance education library services coordinator with the task of providing resources and services to the growing online distance education community. Guidelines, standards, and policies were developed to help guide the distance education librarian and the library as they strive to meet their needs and provide support for distance education courses equivalent to that provided for traditional courses.

Ritterbush (2014) introduced the American Library Association's Standards for Distance Learning Library Services, providing guidelines for each library to follow as they expand and seek ways to meet the needs of online and distance education students. A majority of libraries reported that they have distance librarians and staff dedicated to serving distant learners, and these library services are blended so that they are available to all students (Ritterbush, 2014).

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) developed "Standards for Distance Learning Library Services", which were approved by the ACRL Board in July 2008. These standards found on their website state that, "every student, faculty member, administrator, staff member, or any other member of an institution of higher education, is entitled to the library services and resources of that institution, including direct communication with the appropriate library personnel, regardless of where enrolled or where located in affiliation with the institution," (http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/guidelinesdistancelearning).

This website is a valuable resource because it provides guidelines, standards, management, and requirements for library services and resources that librarians and libraries need and should provide for online and distance education students. Definitions of distance learning library services and essential personnel are given to help identify the roles that they play in providing services and instruction within the online educational setting. The role of libraries and librarians are defined as they develop guidelines and strategies for how to deliver library services to online and distance learning students. The use of technologies and resources are discussed along with how students access and use these various resources. As libraries are developing services and hiring distance librarians to provide these services the knowledge or skill level of these librarians range from beginner to advanced; therefore many distance education librarians need guidance on how to organize and provide these services (Wyss, 2008)

Benefits

The benefit of having an embedded librarian within a distance education setting is that they provide learners with instruction on how to access and use library databases and how to effectively search and choose more reliable resources. Hoffman (2011) mentions another advantage is that instructors spend less time answering questions and report a higher quality of work and success from the learners. As students interact with the embedded librarian they

become aware of the resources available to them and feel more comfortable using them for research purposes.

Lebowitz (1997) states that an advantage to having a specific librarian dedicated to helping DE learners is that learners receive all services provided by the library, including: education and instruction; reference and research guidance; referral assistance; document delivery and reserve/requested materials; and assistance with the documentation of papers. Also, by providing effective educational opportunities beyond its campus boundaries, an institution shows its resourcefulness and innovativeness. As well as providing a complete array of library services to distant students, the institution shows that it understands its responsibility to distant students and that they are being proactive in meeting their unique needs.

Challenges

Librarians and libraries play an essential part within a learner's distance education experience, a role that is often overlooked, however, it may be unwise for a local library to ignore the distant learners needs (Ellison, 2000). With distance education the learner need not be in the same location as the online distance program; because public libraries are funded using tax dollars Ellison goes on to state that since distant learners live in these local communities and that these libraries and librarians must be prepared to meet the needs of these unique citizens. Some of the challenges that librarians see range from how to access and search for materials, to locating and using various formats, to the distinctive technologies used within the online educational platform such as Blackboard or Moodle.

Libraries are challenged with the task of serving people both locally and at a distance. Groeling and Boyd (2009) talk about the need for higher education institutions to determine whether they are meeting the needs of all students today. Library resources and services have changed over the years to reflect the growth of online and distance education and with the influx of new technologies students expect to see them incorporated in their instruction. Oldham (2008) observed that more students taking online DE classes from a greater distance has created an assortment of new challenges for libraries and librarians.

The primary challenge today for libraries and distance librarians is to provide library services and resources that equal those that are available on campus for the traditional student. This article provides a historical glance of how library services and resources changed from being in-house in the early 1990s to being online in the 2000s. The roles and responsibilities for libraries and librarians have changed as new guidelines and standards have been adapted and incorporated.

Many libraries are also tasked with how to change the mindset of a librarian from using print resources to using online resources that better meet the needs of the learner. Another challenge is that librarians need to keep up-to-date with the new technologies so that they can in turn use them in distance educational settings. Librarians need to basically become subject matter experts so that they can meet the growing demands and needs of the online and distance educational user (Groeling & Boyd, 2009).

With older adults venturing into online education another problem is that many of these learners are unfamiliar with using online resources, which requires additional instruction on how to use

the various technologies, instead of just how to search for and use the library resources. Libraries and librarians need to develop instruction and tutorials to meet this unique need so that the learner can access the information when convenient.

Information literacy is also important because librarians provide guidance for how to determine which resources are the most valid and reliable resources to use for the chosen topic. Over the years users have relied on the Google search engine; although it is one of the best resources for locating information users have become complacent and tend to accept the first resources found, they do not want to access and research using reliable databases found on the library's website or ask a librarian for help. Groeling and Boyd (2009) point out the popular website Wikipedia as an example of an unreliable resource, due to the ability of anyone to contribute information.

Johnson, Trabelsi, and Fabbro (2011) state that when developing online resources and library services the library and librarians also need to realize that faculty, staff, and other people will be using these resources and services as much as students will, if not more. One challenge discussed by Lebowitz (1997) was how to change the perception of the faculty toward using library materials, resources, and services. "Although many consider the library to be the heart of the university, the use of the library is often not incorporated into courses being prepared for distance delivery" (page 303). To summarize, the libraries of that time were tasked with changing the perception of faculty, incorporate new technologies, and how to provide services to online learners (Lebowitz, 1997).

A disadvantage discussed by Lebowitz (1997) that remains true today is the inability of learners to access adequate library resources along with the fact that the number of online learners is drastically increasing. Libraries need to develop strategies to help build services to meet the growing demand and needs of their service population. They also need to develop support and communication with the educational institution to ensure that adequate funding is put into place to develop and implement services and technologies. Additionally, librarians and libraries found in the DE setting are faced with problems that may include: "instructional issues related to working with the remote user, reserve and copyright issues specific to distance education, work flow, staffing, developing effective ways of working with DE faculty and administrators" (Lebowitz, 1997, page 305).

Students rank online reference, access to full-text databases, and home delivery of books and articles as their top three library services (Ritterbush, 2014). Ritterbush goes on to identify the obstacles that librarians and libraries face as they try to provide online library services; one misconception is that many respondents believed that students already had the library research skills they needed to be successful. However, students were relying on the Internet and familiar search engines for research purposes (Ritterbush, 2014).

Wyss (2008) states that library services for students will have to keep pace as more universities are offering online programs so that the quality and validity of the degree programs are maintained. The task of libraries is to make resources and research materials available to off-campus students. Wyss goes on to say that with the growing demand and need some libraries will have to hire someone specifically for the new position of a distance librarian (2008).

Continuing Education

It is essential for librarians to keep up-to-date with their research and technological skills and knowledge so that they in turn can help learners. The continuing education and professional development opportunities such as conferences, webinars, workshops, seminars, library-related self-paced Web courses, blogs, chats, networking, committees, and professional journals, associations and organizations provide valuable information on distance education, learners, and skills that librarians need and/or will need in the future (Cassner & Adams, 2012).

Good learning resources for librarians include the free webinars and tutorials that are produced and provided by the various database vendors the library has subscriptions for, or those provided through a consortium with their state library. An example is NC Live, which is free to academic and public libraries in North Carolina and includes access to more than 100 databases and online resources. By obtaining information on these databases librarians will be capable of guiding DE learners with their research questions. It is also important for librarians to know how to conduct a reference interview by asking questions to determine what is needed before guiding students to information that would be of help.

State libraries are also a good resource for free and low-cost webinars, workshops, and self-paced courses. The continuing educational portal for the State Library of North Carolina is known as the *Train Station* (http://statelibrary.ncdcr.libguides.com/trainstation); librarians can search and register for events on a variety of library-related topics. Organizations such as the American Library Association (http://www.ala.org/), Association of College & Research Libraries (http://www.ala.org/acrl/), and the North Carolina Library Association (http://www.nclaonline.org/) all provide a wealth of information that will help guide libraries and help librarians obtain and build their skills and knowledge.

Distance education is a growing industry. With new students joining existing students, the library and librarians need to develop new skills and competencies to reflect learners' expectations and to help shape the future of higher learning (Cassner & Adams, 2012). Ellison (2000) offers another perspective, suggesting that distance librarians can develop their skills, knowledge, and understanding for distance learning by taking a course and becoming a distant learner themselves. New technologies influence how institutions facilitate course content, but also how libraries and librarians provide resources and services to online and distance education students. Personal experience as distant learners may help librarians and staff understand and serve the distant learner population.

Ellison goes on to say that many of these continuing education and distance learning opportunities can be an advantage for busy librarians because they do not require driving a long distance to attend workshops or leaving the office short staffed because they can be conducted online either at work or home using a computer and an Internet connection (2000). As Ritterbush (2014) brings up the misconception that students already have the necessary skills needed to conduct research in the library, he suggests libraries should teach information literacy skills, and offer courses relating to the evaluation of information.

The Future of Distance Education

Just as the Internet has changed the way that institutions deliver education libraries need to adapt and change because they are at the forefront of delivering access, resources, and services that meet the needs of the distance learner (Ellison, 2000). Furthermore, distance education librarians

are not limited just to educational institutions; they may worth for or with business and other organizations that provide distance learning courses, workshops, and seminars to their employees.

Librarianship is changing from managing books to connecting people and quality resources while at the same time delivering resources effectively and providing the best customer service possible (Groeling & Boyd, 2009). The trend is to shift the emphasis from what librarians do to how they do it to meet the continuing needs of distance education users. The academic librarian provides added value to the teaching and learning process; as long as there is a need for learning resources, there will be a need for a guide to navigate those resources (Johnson, Trabelsi, & Fabbro, 2011).

Oldham (2008) posits the library can better serve distance education students by increasing the number of full-text options found on the various databases subscribed to by the library and that because technology is ever changing it is extremely difficult to gauge what and how these technologies will benefit the library, librarians, and the DE community. In the foreseeable future libraries and librarians need to focus on ways to improve access and some areas that could be considered include regularly redesigning the library website so that resources and materials are found easily. Learners need to be able to contact and communicate in real-time, and with current and new technologies this is relatively easy to achieve and should be added as a service. Furthermore, Wyss rightfully observes that the typical library services such as reference, interlibrary loan, document delivery, access, and basic library instruction have been adapted for the technological world so that online and distance education users can access and use them just like a typical student does (2008).

Libraries and Librarians are also using tutorials and videos for instructional purposes to help bridge the gap from the traditional classroom to the virtual world. These tutorials are designed to assist DE students with using the Library's resources, including: how to search the catalog, how to find articles in the Library's databases and how to retrieve electronic reserves and that with each new technological development it has made library research easier for distance education students. (Oldham, 2008). Digital video production and distribution continues to evolve and becomes ever easier to create and distribute; it will continue to grow in importance.

Conclusions

The articles and resources reviewed in this article provide a glimpse into what the roles and responsibilities of libraries and librarians are for learners and faculty in distance education settings. As technologies are changing, the library is faced with the challenge of funding, access, and incorporating the new technologies along with effectively training library staff on how to use the resources and technologies so they in turn can help the learners with their informational and technological questions. As we see distance education growing; libraries and librarians need to focus on the basic fundamentals of librarianship and determine how best to meet the needs of these non-residential distance education students (Groeling & Boyd, 2009).

Libraries and librarians need to focus on learners' needs and utilizing new technologies along with following the ACRL standards and guidelines to develop a plan of action on how best to meet the growing demands of the distance education community. Continuing education and

development are a great place to start building and expanding skills and knowledge. While this article has only briefly touched on new roles and responsibilities, it is important for administrators to remember that library services are a critically important part of the overall online learning experience (Johnson, Trabelsi, & Fabbro, 2011) and it is vital that institutions provide the same degree of support for distance education as for traditional courses and programs.

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