

When You Can't Send Students to the Campus Library

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By Jennifer Burek

Among the many things that faculty members worried about in our Covid-19 switch to remote teaching was how to provide course materials when students could no longer walk into a campus library. The distance between our students and every volume, every assigned reading, every computer station seemed to underscore what was different and newly difficult about teaching and learning in a pandemic.

Across Facebook and Twitter this spring, I read any number of posts by faculty members — sometimes puzzled, sometimes plaintive — looking for reliable digital sources of information or wondering how students in homes without Netflix or Hulu would watch an assigned movie. Even now, friends post laments about their inability to enter the stacks, or the lengths they've gone to in order to acquire some necessary text. Lately, although I rely on print documents in my own work, I've been feeling like an evangelist for digital resources: *Have you heard the good news about the HathiTrust's emergency-access provisions?*

As someone who teaches the people who will become librarians on your campuses and in your towns, I want to assure you that librarians can guide you and your students to — and through — the multitude of material available online from libraries, publishers, authors, vendors, and government agencies. They can do so swiftly and effectively via chat, Zoom, or other means, too.

Libraries have responded to this crisis by providing high-quality online materials capaciously, and their responses will serve us as we proceed with remote education during summer sessions and, in some permutation, this fall. Setting aside for now the issue of students' broadband access (more on that below), there are two broad categories of course materials you can rely on if you are planning for the possibility of more remote instruction:

- Subscription-based sources of e-books and journal articles. The cost of such resources and databases — among them, Academic Search Elite and ABI Inform — is paid by your institution and its library.
- Free sources on the open web — as different as the Occupational Outlook Handbook and the Crash Course videos — that cover everything from composition to chemistry. This category includes work shared via different kinds of open-access publishing, and it complements rather than replaces library resources, although some libraries will link to free materials from their websites and LibGuides.

Don't overlook paywalled sources. Even the ones your institution doesn't subscribe to. In the Covid-19 crisis, many subscription-based purveyors — for example, OCLC.org and JSTOR — recognized that online materials would have to stand in for course reserves on library shelves, and made expanded content available, some to participating institutions and some to everyone. Included in the material moved out from behind a paywall was some of the often costly journal literature supporting STEM fields. Notably, the National Library of Medicine and its partners have been making coronavirus studies available.

In April, to help deal with the limitations imposed by library closures, the HathiTrust announced its Emergency Temporary Access Service. The service allows professors and students at member colleges and universities to use digitally scanned copies of items in their campus library's print collection until some time in June. On many campuses, that service opened the door to thousands of potential course materials via your institution's online library catalog.

Likewise, your institution's own digital archives (sometimes known by the acronym IRO, for "institutional repositories online") can offer fast access to publications. If you want to assign a recent journal article, IROs may offer a researcher's backlist of publications as well as what's hot off the press, sometimes in prepublication formats. For example, Harvard University's Digital Access to Scholarship at Harvard allows users to search tens of thousands of articles.

As days passed this spring, we saw more and more institutions find ways to reduce online barriers to information. Admittedly, the sheer volume of material can be overwhelming when you are trying to sort through it, in real time, as a student waits for help in locating some critical material needed for an assignment. At times, you might feel like Harry Potter

in the scene in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when he has to navigate a veritable storm of flying keys in order to grasp the one he needs to get through a locked door. Just as he had help, help is available to you, too.

Work with primary sources online. Plenty of digitization projects have made collections of rare books, historic maps, and other unique materials available without a trip to the archives or special-collections library. A couple that crossed my desktop this spring included [Abigail Adams's letters](#) and the University of Otago's [A Middle Eastern Odyssey](#), which offers access to 17th-century maps and a 19th-century Quran. The [Museum of Indian Arts & Culture](#) also has a series of digital exhibitions, some of which include videos as well as images of artifacts.

Those resources, some of which are digitized as part of a thematic overview of a library's resources on a subject and others of which represent a specific collection, are only a glimpse at what libraries, museums, and archives have made available online. Yet another source of digital versions of historical material is the volunteer transcription projects organized by the [Smithsonian's Transcription Center](#), the [New York Public Library](#), and others. Your own institution may have a crowdsourced transcription project (for example, at my institution, the University of Iowa, it's [DIY History](#)). Typically, institutions post digital scans of primary-source material from earlier eras, and readers submit their interpretations of those documents.

While faculty members welcomed those expanded resources, another effort to provide access generated controversy: Free access to works still [protected by copyright](#) were denounced as "piracy" by authors and publishers who weren't consulted before the release of the protected material. Help your students understand that it matters how material has been made available, and steer them toward libraries and vendors that respect copyright in trying to make more material available to remote users.

Urge students to look to local, state, and national libraries. Some digital resources offered by the campus library — electronic databases like [Academic Search Elite](#) — may also be accessible through a student's local library. Both public and campus libraries may subscribe to resources like [Kanopy](#), a streaming movie service, as well as other digital collections that provide e-books, audiobooks, and music. Make sure your students know that some local public libraries now issue library cards [by phone](#) or online to help residents use digital resources.

Information produced by state and federal agencies is, increasingly, provided digitally. Statistical information derived from the [U.S. Census](#), for example, can be searched, and the [CIA World Factbook](#) is recognized for the perspective and information it offers on nations around the globe. Likewise, state libraries collect and post statistics that can help students understand their state and city. For example, [Iowa's State Data Center](#) makes all sorts of statistics and other information about the state available online.

What about students who don't have internet access? As demographic statistics from the [Pew Research Center show](#), internet access is not universal and varies by race, age, and income, among other factors. Some students rely on their cellphones to use digital course materials. Forthcoming [research](#) from a graduate student in my own department, Shu Wan, shows that people in small towns both have fewer digital resources and are less likely to make use of those tools.

Both campus and public libraries are trying to create connectivity for those whose broadband access is constrained. For example:

- Some institutions have created hotspots in designated parking lots, so that students could drive to the campus and get online from their cars. Indiana University, for example, [created such sites](#) around the state, welcoming the public as well as its students.
- Some public libraries that are temporarily closed have left their Wi-Fi available, and the [Iowa Library Association](#) has urged them to try to boost signal strength, to make it accessible from parking lots.
- An [April issue](#) of *AL Direct*, a digital publication of the American Library Association, identified a number of local efforts to offer internet access in the Covid-19 crisis, including a library whose staff drove bookmobiles to designated sites on a regular schedule and so created mobile hotspots for community use.

Such efforts show some of the ways that colleges, universities, public libraries, and library associations are working to keep fulfilling their roles of meeting community needs with information and resources even amid a public-health emergency. Their efforts support our students, too, and are worth mentioning on syllabi and online course sites.

Just ask a librarian. What if you are looking for digital materials outside your field and simply don't know what's available online? You don't have to just rely on lucking into the right materials via a Google search. Reach out to campus librarians: They can help, whether they are working in a recognizable building on the campus or at home with their dogs at their feet.

Librarians visited my virtual classroom via Zoom this spring to share digital resources specific to my course on the "History of Readers and Reading." They talked about the university's digital library and located specific resources that would help my students complete their final assignments. Offers of support from other librarians, too, still sit in my email inbox while I consider how best to draw on their expertise.

Part of what we need to teach, in this digital and distanced world, is to look to the library as a virtual place to seek out facts and ideas online — not just as a building. If you encourage your students to think of their campus IDs and passwords as keys that open the library's

virtual doors, and librarians as their expert guides, they will find much to support their learning.

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