Chapter 12

Librarians and the Evolving Research Needs of Distance Students

James J. Thull
Montana State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Well-developed research skills are essential to a student’s educational success. Students, who have not known a world without internet access often feel their research skills are good enough but usually fail to determine what the best information is and how to find it most efficiently. They have been raised in a world of instant access and instant gratification. Today we can book flights, buy cars and communicate across the globe with a keystroke. But asking Google for an answer is not equivalent to doing research. While these tools are constantly improving, and in our lifetimes will replace the need for research skills, the time has not yet come. Today our students still have a need for finding reliable scholarly information and online library research classes and services are the best methods for providing students with the skills they need to succeed. Designing, implementing, and teaching library research classes and embedding online research services into all online class offerings allows librarians to communicate research skills that meet our students at their point of need.

INTRODUCTION

Information literacy is defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries as “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.” (ACRL, 2000) We all have different information needs and therefore information literacy is unique to each one of us. You may know your daughter only eats the breakfast cereal with the Tiger on the box, that is information that is relevant to you but not so to me, fortunately in the age we live in accessing most non-immediate family related information is done through the Internet and therefore the skill set is transferable and teachable on a large scale.

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Distance students need information that is relevant to the class as a whole as well as information that is relevant to them alone. Class schedules, assignment information, due dates, etc. is information that should be presented directly to the class through the class management software or website. Librarians, while not typically creating this information should be familiar with its content and location in order to direct students as needed. Where librarians can play a larger role is in helping students conduct research and locate relevant external sources of information to help add context and clarity to online discussions and lessons.

Just who is a distance student needs some definition as well. In many ways, all students are distance students. While we used to define distance students as those who took classes remotely from areas outside of a commutable distance to campus this is no longer true. On-campus students will access library resources from outside the library arguably more often then they will from inside the physical building. In addition, on-campus students frequently also take online classes or have online components built into on-site classes. Libraries need to provide the same ease of access to all our users and assume all users will be in some form distance users.

In many respects, we are unlike any others that came before us. We have the vast majority of the sum of all human knowledge available to us through our internet enabled devices in our homes, coffee shops, and classrooms anywhere 24 hours a day. Our students live in a world where access to information is rarely the issue. Open source resources are more common as are pirate scholarly information sources like Sci-Hub. With larger databases, more e-journal titles, an increase in the number of books available electronically, and of course the sheer volume of information available through individual WebPages, blogs and websites students have access to more information than any students before them in the entire course of human history. While there is certainly still an information divide as the internet becomes more accessible to all it is quickly fading away.

It is estimated that we currently create more information about every two days then we did from the dawn of human history to 2003 and that we continue to double that amount about every two years (Gantz & Reinsel, 2011). The concept that too much information would become a problem, even an acronym based saying i.e. TMI, is likely something researchers just a generation or two before us would have had trouble conceiving. Just reflect on that fact for a moment. Nearly every question a student will have, outside of the “I wonder if she likes me?” or “What’s for dinner?” type, can be found, or at least likely exist in an internet accessible version. Research skills are the keys our students need to unlock the information held in this vast sea of data. We all know searching for the needle in the haystack gets more and more difficult the larger that haystack becomes. Having effective research skills is like having the ability to use a metal detector to find that needle.

Not every student wants to take an entire course on library research so another option for meeting their research needs is to have library services and librarians embedded in online classes. This can take many forms. It can be as basic as a link to the library website or as in-depth as having a librarian lead a component of the class or create and grade a research based assignment. Having a librarian as a partner in online offerings in any discipline, but most importantly entry level classes, increases the likelihood that the students will develop the research skills they will need to succeed in their college careers.

Librarians help our students make the most of the research tools and access they have available. Like having a swimming pool in your backyard but never taking the time to learn to swim, our students often never learn how to effectively use the information resources available to them through their institution’s library. Distance education classes, designed and taught by librarians, can make learning these skills easier and more convenient for our students. Librarians have, through necessity, honed information
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