Rachel E. Cannady, Britt Fagerheim, Beth Filar Williams, and Heidi Steiner

Diving into distance learning librarianship

Tips and advice for new and seasoned professionals

Distance education is not new. The ACRL Distance Learning Section was formed more than 30 years ago, for example, but online learning is now growing rapidly. From 2002 to 2008, undergraduates enrolled in at least one distance education course rose from 8% to 20%.[1] In turn, more librarians are connecting with online students and faculty, often without truly knowing where to start in a strategic, meaningful way. This article, based on our panel presentation at the 2012 ALA Annual Conference, contains tips and advice for new distance learning librarians, presented in four categories: Create a relay team, Be brave and dive in!, Plunge into the deep, and Swim with the current. These tips can also serve as a good refresher for seasoned distance learning librarians.

Create a relay team

When first starting as a distance education librarian, one of the first things to do is stop and listen. Listen to what is going on at your institution, in your library, and with your peers. Arming yourself with lots of research is an excellent way to listen. Learn from others' mistakes and what others did successfully. Become very familiar with the ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services.[2] When you are asked for your professional opinion on distance education, you will be well equipped by knowing what is done and expected elsewhere.

Upon listening to what is happening with your peers, you can focus on what is going on at your college or university. What are the goals and plans for distance education? How can your library assist in these plans? Meeting with your library's administration at the very beginning will ensure everyone is on the same page. Once this step is completed, see if you can put all of these pieces together and create an environmental scan so you are acquainted with internal and external factors, stakeholders, strategic plans, etc. The more you know before you dive in, the better off you will be.

After listening, building relationships will be crucial. Meet with stakeholders to start creating your relay team; these will vary by institution. They might be university administration, library administration, centers for teaching and learning, centers for distance education, program coordinators, and/or course developers. Meet with people outside the library so they can begin placing a name and face with their new advocate. Never underestimate the power of casual conversations with people across campus. Conversations inside the library are also imperative, as you never know what vitally important silos of information others might have. Conversing

Rachel E. Cannady is assistant professor and distance learning project manager at Mississippi State University, e-mail: rcannady@library.misstate.edu, Britt Fagerheim is coordinator of regional campuses and distance education library services at Utah State University, e-mail: britt.fagerheim@usu.edu, Beth Filar Williams is coordinator of library services for distance learning at University of North Carolina-Greensboro, e-mail: efwill3uncg.edu, Heidi Steiner is distance learning librarian at Norwich University, e-mail: hmsteiner@gmail.com

with many stakeholders (and don't forget—students are stakeholders, too) will give you a greater perspective and build a strong relay team on your campus.

Building relationships involves reaching out. Too many distance students and faculty automatically assume that the library is only for those on campus. We all know this is flawed, but how do we correct this misperception? Marketing. Marketing can assume many forms: e-mails, surveys, printable flyers, bookmarks, and brochures are just a few forms. Since you've already started to create a team, you'll know which formats will best resonate with your target audience.

One last part of creating a relay team is advocating. When you are meeting formally and informally with those stakeholders, make sure they're aware of distance education needs. Distance faculty and students have specific needs, tell others about them. You're an important part of the equation, so don't forget to advocate for what you must have to meet those needs, too.

Be brave and dive in

In addition to building relationships, essential components for a distance education librarian include taking risks, trying new ideas, and trying new tools and techniques. The ability to improvise can be key, as you never know when you'll need to move to Plan B midstream. One issue is that what works for on-campus students doesn't necessarily work for distance students. This requires either modifying an existing program or instructional offering or creating something completely new. Also, it is important to document what you are doing and why. This is where good data can come in. If you're basing your ideas on research, or evidence you've gathered about the needs of your students, or proven instructional design, then you can develop a solid plan for your activities.

New distance education librarians are likely to feel they are being pushed outside their comfort zone. For example, conducting a session over interactive broadcast is very different than working with a face-to-face class. It can be helpful to have a short debrief with yourself after a class. This debrief can be useful for evaluating what worked with the class, what didn't work, and what you might want to change for the future. If you can find a flexible professor to work with, he or she can be ideal for trying out new ideas and seeing what works best. If you try something and it's not successful, you might consider modifying it instead of starting over from scratch.

Another area that potentially calls for some amount of bravery is collaboration. It might feel risky to put yourself out there and suggest an untested plan, particularly with people outside your organization. Valuable collaborators might include librarians in other departments, teaching faculty, student coordinators, online learning coordinators, and instructional technology consultants or instructional designers. You might start with collaborations between yourself and a faculty member or with other departments in the library.

As described earlier, you'll likely start building relationships and reaching out to people beyond the library early in your career as a distance education librarian while you're learning more about your constituency, and you can use these contacts to collaborate on learning initiatives. Hopefully you'll find yourself in a position to work with groups inside and outside the library or create something new with faculty or others connected to distance education at your institution.

Plunge into the deep

Equally essential to building a team around you, making connections, listening, advocating, taking risks, and improvising are plunging into the deep and thinking big. Distance and online constituencies can no longer be an afterthought and must be considered in all decision making as the new normal. Strategically planning services for distance learners, marketing, and collecting are essential pieces of libraries that serve distance learners well.

Serving distance and online learners should not be a singular endeavor. Though

a dedicated distance education position is not always possible, aligning yearly plans for services and resources is imperative. Take into account the needs of distance/online patrons. Listen to them, whether through surveys, conversations, or focus groups, and use this in planning. Also consider plans within the library's missions and goals; make this constituency part of librarywide strategic planning and decision making. The university is a big piece, too. Is your institution particularly focused on assessment, for example? Where does this fit into your plan for distance learners? Lastly, the ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services mentioned earlier stipulate equal access for learners at a distance. These are our guiding values and can aid in advocating for distance learners.

There is an inherent disconnectedness for students and faculty working in an online or distance environment. As already noted, distance patrons may assume the library is not for them. Librarians, thus, cannot expect these populations to remember us, and marketing to people we may never see has significant challenges. These students and faculty must be part of overall strategic and marketing plans, but also do not underestimate the simplest form of marketing—word of mouth. Foster a positive user experience, provide great customer service, and, with time, positive word-of-mouth should follow. There are also plenty of basic ideas like sending e-mail blasts to students and faculty. Think about your relay team, identify stakeholders, and build relationships with whomever does marketing on campus. You never know when you might be included in a larger feedback campaign or asked to be in a promotional video.

Simultaneously easiest and hardest when plunging into the deep may be collecting; identifying great resources is easy, but the sky doesn't rain money. Most libraries have already moved to as many e-journals as possible, and e-books are saturating our resources; focus should now be on strategy, knowing our populations, and advocating for appropriate resources in content and format. With e-books, for example, consider the most effective and appropriate mechanism for e-book delivery at your institution for your populations. Also, be aware of holes in electronic content for particular programs, work to ensure they are still represented in the print collection, and keep up on e-resource opportunities and issues.

Swim with the current

After learning the importance of building a relay team, bravely diving in, and taking a plunge into the depths of planning to support distance education, it's time to launch off the diving board and keep stride with the currents of technology. The following tips suggest uses of technology for outreach, technologies for asynchronous and synchronous instruction, and methods for how to keep up.

Users expect an effective, efficient, and satisfactory digital user experience (DUX). For students who never step foot in the physical library, the DUX is their only connection. Developing a portal or Web site for distance students creates a personalized space for discovery, access, and help while letting students know the library understands their distance situation. Campus policies, brandings, and restrictions might limit what can be done, but creating a winning campus relay team may assist with these challenges. Try usability testing, from surveys to hosting focus groups, to know your institution's users when creating the portal.

Orientations are rare for distance students, so creating a personal welcome video will help ease their anxiety and shape connections with their online library. Meeting students at their point of need is critical. Consider embedding a library chat widget on major library Web pages, in databases, or in failed searches in the library catalog. Another option is a "Not Finding it?" drop down widget on strategic library Web pages to suggest tutorials, guides, or library chat.[3]

It is a challenge to reach distance students for instruction. For synchronous instruction, acquire a Web conferencing room to offer online workshops, such as Tools for Research or Using EndnoteWeb. Try a free room if your campus doesn't have a license. When

synchronous sessions are not possible, create effective tutorials instead. Stick to the Rule of Three: teach simple or complex skills (from a quick how-to to the peer review process), but keep it to three concepts and three minutes.[4] If purchasing software is not an option, try freeware,[5] link to tutorials from other libraries, or reuse existing Creative Commons licensed content from sites like ANTS[6] or PRIMO.[7] When conducting sessions or building tutorials, engage users through interactive tools like Poll Everywhere,[8] and remember to include transcripts and closed captioning to make videos ADA compliant. Position asynchronous instructional content at the point-of-need or in a How Do I page.[9]

Finally, don't forget to keep up. Our Lib-Guide[10] suggests Webinars, conferences, blogs, RSS feeds, and key people to follow on Twitter. Or why not create your own informal online monthly chats with a few other librarians in your area?

Conclusion

As online and distance learning programs grow at many institutions, an increasing number of librarians are involved in various aspects of distance education programs and perhaps even moving into positions as distance education librarians.

We hope these tips, based on our experiences coordinating distance education programs, are useful if you find yourself diving headfirst into a new role or teaching a few online courses. Please visit the Diving In LibGuide for additional information on all of our tips. Now you have some hints to help you dive in, embrace distance education, and become swim champs at your own institutions.

Notes

1. Radford, Alexandria and Thomas Weko, "Learning at a Distance," Stats in Brief NCES

---

topics can be flipped. From class assessments, we have also come to realize that in the future, we need to make sure that students are actually completing the activities outside the classroom. This will increase the effectiveness of the technique and improve the level of class discussion. We could increase their motivation with short, in-class quizzes, or require a quick presentation on the readings. One option to consider is working with faculty to make completion of the out-of-classroom activities part of the students' grades. Greater collaboration with faculty might give us more information on how effective these techniques are in the long term. Also, we discovered that running a flipped classroom means developing a whole new skill set and way of being in the classroom. It requires the librarian to relinquish control and authority over the classroom, which can be difficult. But the rewards are worth the risk.

Notes

1. Dan Berrett, "How 'Flipping' the Class-room Can Improve the Traditional Lecture," *Chronicle Of Higher Education* 58, no. 25 (February 24, 2012): A16–A18, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 19, 2013).

2. Sarah D. Sparks, "Schools 'Flip' for Lesson Model Promoted by Khan Academy, (Cover story)," *Education Week* 31, no. 5 (September 28, 2011): 14, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 19, 2013).

3. Berrett, "How 'Flipping' the Classroom Can Improve the Traditional Lecture," A16–A18.

4. Joyce Kasman Valenza, "The Flipping Librarian," *Teacher Librarian* 40, no. 2 (December 2012): 24, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 19, 2013).

5. Nancy Fawley, "Turning the Tables: Using a Flipped Classroom Method Approach to Teach Information Literacy" (poster at the 2012 Georgia International Conference on Information Literacy, Savannah, GA, September 21–22, 2012). ✎

enables distance learners to participate in the improvement of library Web sites and tools, by providing valuable input to the information architecture of library created objects. Libraries and librarians will need to suss out for themselves if online card sorting techniques will meet the needs of their library, project, and patrons. For us, digital was better than analog. OptimalSort was the right tool at the right time and at the right price.

Notes

1. Erica Reynolds, "The Secret to Patron-centered Web Design: Cheap, Easy, and Powerful Usability Techniques," *Computers in Libraries* (June 2008).

2. Nina McHale, "Toward a User-Centered Library Home Page," *Journal of Web Librarianship* 2 (2/3): 139–76; Dominique Turnbow, Kris Kasianovitz, Lise Snyder, David Gilbert, and David Yamamoto, "Usability Testing for Web Redesign: A UCLA Case Study," *OCLC Systems & Services* 21 (3): 226–34; Laura Robbins, "What a User Wants: Redesigning a Library's Web Site Based on a Card-Sort Analysis," *Journal of Web Librarianship* 1 (4): 3–27; Richard Rogers and Hugh Preston, "Usability Analysis for Redesign of a Caribbean Academic Library Web Site: A Case Study," *OCLC Systems & Services* 25 (3): 200–211; Krystal M. Lewis and Peter Hepburn, "Open Card Sorting and Factor Analysis: A Usability Case Study," *The Electronic Library* 28 (3): 401–16.

3. Thea van der Geest and Nicole Loorbach, "Testing the Visual Consistency of Web Sites," *Technical Communication* 52 (1): 27–36.

4. Philip Hider, "Library Resource Categories and Their Possible Grouping," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 40 (2): 105–15.

5. Caroline Sinkinson, Stephanie Alexander, Alison Hicks, and Meredith Kahn, "Guiding Design: Exposing Librarian and Student Mental Models of Research Guides," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 12 (1): 63–84.

6. Hider, *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 105–15.

7. OptimalSort, www.optimalsort.com.

8. Optimal Workshop, www.optimalworkshop.com.

9. Screenshots of dendrograms, similarity matrix, and participant-centric analysis from the project are available at http//dr.archives.pdx.edu/xmlui/handle/psu/9246.

10. Kari D. Weaver and Kimberly Babcock Mashek, "Creating Usability Tests That Work for Your Web Site and Other Web Applications," in *Brick and Click Libraries Symposium,* 51–57.

11. Cassi Pretlow, "10 Web Tools to Create User-Friendly Sites," *Computers in Libraries* 28 (6): 14–17.

12. AM Wichansky, "Usability Testing in 2000 and Beyond," *Ergonomics* 43 (7): 998–1006. ℘

2012-154, US Dept. of Education (October 2011), http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012154.pdf.

2. "Standards for Distance Learning Library Services," www.ala.org/acrl/standards/guidelinesdistancelearning.

3. "Not Finding It?" widget example, http://library.uncg.edu/borrowing/.

4. Kathleen Pickens-French and Krista McDonald, "Three's Company," presentation at the ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, June 20–25, 2012.

5. "UNCG Libraries Instructional Tech Toolkit: Present section," http://uncg.libguides.com/content.php?pid=298104&sid=2497737.

6. "ANTS: Animated Tutorial Sharing Project," http://ants.wetpaint.com/.

7. "Peer Reviewed Instructional Materials Online Database," www.ala.org/cfapps/primo/public/search.cfm.

8. "Poll Everywhere," www.polleverywhere.com.

9. "A Short List of How-Tos," http://libguides.usu.edu/how.

10. "Diving in and Learning to Swim as a New Distance Education Librarian," http://guides.library.msstate. edu/divingin. ℘