

Librarians and Academics – Partners in Learning and Teaching

Sue McKnight, Nottingham Trent University

Context

Students are demanding digitally enhanced learning environments to supplement traditional face-to-face teaching. In some countries, such as Australia and Canada, many students undertake entire degree courses without regularly attending a university's physical campus. These off-campus students are supported by print and multi-media resources, and virtual learning web sites. In Great Britain, because of the expectations of current and forthcoming generations of university students, online learning spaces that provide a virtual door to the university campus are becoming mainstream. These 'Net Generation' students expect and demand flexibility in their studies: alternatives to on-campus lectures; online access to lecture notes and resources; and online access to all the traditional university campus services, including library, student advice and support services.

With expectations of 24/7 access to virtual learning environments, to library catalogues and to digital resources, there is a great opportunity for academic colleagues to work with librarians to enrich the virtual learning space and thus enhance student learning opportunities. This article demonstrates the importance of forming multi-disciplinary teams, including academic discipline experts, educational and curriculum designers and librarians, to design and deliver online learning spaces and integrated services.

Student Expectations of a Virtual Learning Environment

Research undertaken at Nottingham Trent University in 2005 and 2006-2007 provided an insight into the expectations of students for an 'excellent virtual learning environment' (Enzyme International, 2005, Nottingham Trent University, 2008). In addition to flexible access to lecture notes and discussion forums, students described an online learning space that incorporated many library services and resources, including access to relevant reference resources, reading list items and full-text journal articles. They did not differentiate between service providers, as they described their interactions as 'with the university'. Their 'excellent' space had everything available in a seamless manner from a single sign-on to the virtual learning space.

As the expectation increases for students to engage in more online learning, it is important that these student perceptions are considered in the initial design phase of a virtual learning environment at the module, course and subject level. Good design requires a full understanding of what needs to be incorporated, based on how students are expected to use the learning resources and services. It should not be tacked

on at the end as something that has been forgotten or neglected in the initial design phase.

Librarians making a contribution

Librarians can supply range of services and resources to academic staff to help them enhance student experiences. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it does illustrate the value of bringing a liaison or subject librarian into the learning and teaching team.

Reading Lists

The Reading List needs to be embedded in the virtual learning space and, where at all possible, linked to the library's catalogue so that students can click on an item to check its availability and loan status. Access to items on a reading list is the most valued service provided by a library.

Academic staff must make sure the reading list is appropriate: not too long or too short; identifying the textbook (if recommended); and differentiating between recommended and background reading resources. If librarians have early access to the lists they can advise on newer editions of titles, check availability and perhaps order more copies. Many libraries have formulae for how many copies of a reading list item to purchase, based on the total number of items on the reading list, the number of students likely to enrol in that programme, whether the item appears on other reading lists (and therefore will be in higher demand), and the mode of study of the potential students. Flexible attendance indicates that more copies of an item should be made available. So, timely advice on reading lists is very important if students are to have the best possible chance of accessing resources. Librarians can also ensure that high use items are made available through short loan collections so as to maximise access. Librarians also provide other services, such as current awareness services and benchmarking collection levels and usage, for instance, that help academics in compiling and reviewing reading lists.

eBooks

The potential for providing access to digital versions of textbooks and recommended reading resources is expanding rapidly as publishers make more and more resources available in an online format. Librarians can advise what eBooks are available, and these items need only be a click or so away from the embedded reading list.

The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has a two year observatory project under way on the availability and use of e-Textbooks in the United Kingdom (www.jiscebooksproject.org). This research will provide valuable data on the reading habits of students and the

usage made of eBooks. Anecdotal evidence thus far indicates that students do value 24/7 access to eBooks where the licence provides sufficient (or unlimited) simultaneous access to the same item. Online access was the highest value item identified by students, 'easy access to resources when and where I need them', in the research at Deakin University and Nottingham Trent University (McKnight and Berrington, 2008, McKnight, 2008).

Reference Resources

In the same way that reading list material can be made accessible from the module page of the virtual learning environment, so too can links to subject-specific reference databases, indexing and abstracting services, online dictionaries, encyclopaedias and handbooks. However, cooperation between the academic staff and the library is required to ensure that these resources are available and can be made accessible through the subject/module site.

Full Text Digital Journals

The proliferation of online full-text peer-reviewed journals means that there is a wealth of articles to consider for inclusion on reading lists. Where journal articles are required, liaison with the library can ensure that there are direct links to the online resource, license permitting. The aim is to provide seamless access to resources, enabling the student to work from the virtual learning environment without having to negotiate separate applications.

Depending on the copyright statements, individual articles in eJournals can be added at anytime to the virtual learning space, as new resources become available that are relevant to the course of study. Again, liaison with the subject librarian can make the inclusion of additional items easier and ensure that it is done in compliance with license provisions.

Online Tutorials for using Library Resources and Self-Help Guides

Librarians have been developing online tutorials for providing just-in-time training for library customers on using the myriad of services and resources available through the library. Increasingly, the efficacy of these tutorials is being enhanced by the qualifications of librarians who undertake post graduate courses in adult learning. The skills of librarians as teachers, in addition to their professional library qualifications, make them ideal partners with lecturers and tutors. Simply by adding links from the virtual learning space to these online tutorials provides added value for students.

Bibliographic Management Tools

Libraries can facilitate access to appropriate bibliographic management software (such as RefWorks and End Note) and provide training to students (and academic staff) on using the tools to manage references to articles and books included in essays, dissertations and theses. Advice to students on managing their information appropriately should be included in the virtual learning space, along with the training resources.

Virtual Reference Services and Library Chat Channel

Library reference services have been provided through a variety of media over the years. In-person queries at the reference desk were most common but librarians, especially in universities that provide off-campus or distance education, have been providing reference services by telephone, email, fax and post. Today, virtual reference software, such as Live Person, enables real-time chat between library staff and students to help solve information problems.

Online links to a virtual reference service are possible within the virtual learning space. Lecturers and tutors should be aware of this service so that they can encourage their students to use it.

Virtual learning environments (such as Desire2Learn, BlackBoard, Moodle) provide a multiplicity of communication tools to facilitate interactions between student and teacher, students and students and staff and staff. A 'Library Chat Channel' can be enabled, monitored by library staff, to facilitate discussion on reading resources, information queries and the like. While many discussion groups involve peer support and students respond to queries posted by fellow students, librarians can moderate the discussions and also add information when required, thus adding an additional service that cannot be provided without the online learning system.

My Library Services

All these services and resources have been described as if embedded into the virtual learning environment and/or links provided from it to the library. The catalogue link from the reading lists is an example of this. These are not personalised services but relate to the services and resources appropriate for a particular course of study.

It is possible to embed a link to the 'My Library' page from the virtual learning environment where the identification of the user is known through the sign-on information. This can provide access to services for an individual to renew items on loan, request books on loan to be reserved, receive notices about loan periods, or the availability of inter-library or inter-campus loan items.

Librarians and Academics – Partners in Learning and Teaching

The concept of librarians and academics working in partnership is not new, nor is the concept of working together to support e-learning. In 2005, SCOUNL, the peak body for university librarians in the United Kingdom, held a conference with the theme 'E-learning strategy through partnerships: the art of the possible' (Reading, 2005). It covered a broad range of topics and highlighted the importance of librarians being engaged with e-learning.

Many librarians have dual qualifications in library and information science and in teaching and are equal partners in learning and teaching with their academic colleagues. Here are just a few areas where a proactive partnership

can enhance the experience of students, and also support academic staff in their scholarship and research.

Subject Blogs

There are numerous examples of librarians providing access to up-to-date information on new resources and services to provide added value to the academic community. For example, see:

- University of Bath Library: Health News (<http://bathhealthnews.blogspot.com>)
- Cambridge University Medical Library Blog (<http://cambridgemedicallibrary.blogspot.com>)
- Princeton University Engineering Library Blog (<http://blogs.princelton.edu/englib>).

By being in close contact with library colleagues, academic staff can advise on the most important subject areas or services in which to concentrate blogging effort. They can also provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness of the blog so that the communications can be constantly improved.

Plagiarism versus Correct Citations

Academic staff are wary of the potential for plagiarism when marking assignments. The web opens up a vast quantity of information that can easily be cut-and-pasted by students into assignments. Services such as Turnitin can help detect plagiarism after the piece for assessment has been submitted. However, librarians can help teach students how to correctly cite information and so tackle the problems of using other's work in essays. By working with librarians, academic staff can reduce their own workload and students can be better informed about using intellectual property created by others, which is a very necessary skill at the postgraduate research level.

Embedding Information Skills into the Curriculum

Librarians are expert in helping students gain skills in seeking, assessing, using and managing information, which is a graduate attribute that most universities hope their students develop. The best way of achieving this is to embed information literacy training into the curriculum so that it becomes part of assessable learning activities (Lupton, 2004).

By inviting librarians into the classroom, to introduce the basics of information literacy and then to extend the level of skills and knowledge of students over the course of their study as assignments become progressively more challenging, is the most effective way of delivering this learning outcome/graduate attribute. The alternative is for librarians to offer non-compulsory training programmes in the library that may not be directly related to a piece of assessment. The number of students gaining the skills will be far fewer than if the training is conducted in the classroom, whether virtual or face-to-face.

Working with the Educational Developers and Academics

Librarians can be 'additional hands' in the work of educational development /learning and teaching support units in universities. Their proactive role in the academic

community necessitates regular communication with lecturing and tutoring staff and so can be an adjunct to the services provided by specialist central units involved with curriculum design, development and support in the online environment (Agyei, 2007).

Supporting Academic Use of the Virtual Learning Environment

The training of academic staff in using the virtual learning environment is often provided by specialist learning and teaching support staff. These specialist units normally have a small staff to serve the entire academic community. By training the librarians to 'train the trainers', the resources available for providing academic staff with initial training, refresher training and training on new features of a virtual learning environment is probably more than doubled.

In the one-on-one interactions with academic staff, librarians may be able to answer a particular query about the virtual learning environment, its use, or the resources embedded in it. Alternatively, they can put academic colleagues in contact with the right specialist.

Additionally, the library information desk can provide first line support for student queries that relate to the virtual learning environment, thus freeing the educational developers to help academics to use the online environment to enhance their teaching and their students learning.

Legal Compliance: accessibility and copyright assistance

Libraries can also play a valuable role in helping raise awareness of and compliance with legal obligations, particularly over copyright and accessibility. The library's role in copyright matters can include: making intellectual property and copyright information readily available to the academic community; providing services that obtain permission for use of copyrighted resources that academics want to include in the virtual learning space; managing copyright clearances for audit purposes; digitising copyright print material for reuse and managing the administrative data required for this to be done under specific licences.

It is because librarians have been informed about legal and ethical obligations regarding managing information (in addition to copyright, they are involved with data protection, censorship and freedom of information, for example), their understanding of the need to provide accessible information resources for disabled and disadvantaged library customers helps them work with academic colleagues on raising awareness of disability discrimination legislation, especially in relation to online learning and teaching. While it is not normally the role of the library to provide assistance in accessibility compliance, librarians can refer academics to those who can assist in this important matter.

Excellence in Learning and Teaching

The aim is to help students learn. Librarians and academic staff must work together to truly enhance the academic experience of students whether it be on-campus or in the virtual learning environment. Academic staff have a variety of challenges in their working day: helping students with

varying degrees of capability and dedication; mastering a blend of pedagogic styles to cater for individual learning preferences; delivering lectures and marking assignments; maintaining the currency of their discipline expertise and their course content; balancing commitments to combining teaching, scholarship and research; and supporting university administrative and community obligations.

The information world is becoming more and more complex. Many of the services and resources provided by the library may not be clearly badged as 'library provided' when access to these is provided through the virtual learning environment. The 'rich resources' do not 'just happen': they are purchased or licensed; the information is tagged to facilitate retrieval and evaluation; the variety of formats and technologies that have to be mastered is increasing, not decreasing; and the library's role is to make this access as easy as possible.

Librarians are there to help academics and students be successful. Library services are for everyone and librarians can add a great deal of value to the learning experience if they are embraced as partners by the academic community. Their skills and expertise can be harnessed to reduce some of the workload of academics and to provide important training (and assessment) in information literacy that will help students progress through their degrees. Librarians will make sure the needs of the academic community are addressed by new library services and resources.

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Sue McKnight is Director, Libraries and Knowledge Resources and Professor of Knowledge and Learning Management at Nottingham Trent University.

A liminal space about liminal spaces

Caroline Baillie, Queen's University, Canada

Ok, so we have now had our second international conference on 'Threshold Concepts'. Now we know what they are, sort of. We were delighted that 90 attendees came to Canada, from 9 countries, 47 universities and 27 disciplines to explain everything to us.

Note: I can get away with saying this in the UK as no-one would ever take me seriously. I have to be more careful in Canada where I have been told, quite literally, by my head of department 'Caroline, if you are going to be sarcastic in Canada, you need to smile while you are doing it.'

The threshold of culture is an enormous one, transitioning space, time, values and influencing ways of

thinking. It was in fact one of the areas examined at the 'Threshold Concepts: from theory to practice' conference, during the summer of 2008. Dagmar Kutsar and Anita Karner were exploring the 'liminal space' (Latin 'limen' - a threshold) of societal transitions in Estonia, whilst sitting in our Integrated Learning Centre, interestingly located at the corner of Division and Union Streets in the small town of Kingston.

One of the most amazing things about the educational focus, framework, field, lens or idea of threshold concepts is that we get to enter the world from so many different disciplines. Variation theory would suggest that we are doing the right thing if we want to pass through the

threshold of threshold concepts. At the conference we learnt about academic numeracy in biology (Rosanne Quinell and Rachel Thompson), personhood in philosophy (Coward), comparative advantage in economics (Pete Davies and Jean Mangan), context driven practice in educational development (Susan Wilcox and Andy Leger), confidence to challenge in industrial design (Jane Osmond and Andrew Turner), transformational learning in education (Leslie Schartzman) and surface area to volume ratio in nanoscience (Eun-Jung Park, Greg Light, Su Swarat, Denise Drane and Tom Mason).

It's clear that we have a long way to go before we start to make sense of the insights learnt in each of these