From Two Dot to Turkey: Reaching Online Library Users via Web Conferencing

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Abstract

Librarians at Montana State University (MSU) find themselves in a dual role with respect to urban versus rural distance students. MSU librarians serve students at a distance in both metropolitan communities much larger than MSU's home, Bozeman, and in tiny rural towns of a couple hundred people or fewer, such as Two Dot, Montana. Regardless of where they reside, students and faculty want access to the full spectrum of the institution's resources and services, including the library, and MSU librarians strive to provide equivalent services to all. For the past two and a half years, librarians at MSU have utilized Adobe Connect web conferencing software to teach research skills to online students in real–time. This article will describe the MSU library's services to all library users including the successful implementation of synchronous library instruction. The discovery of best practices, the use of assessment involving both students and faculty, and institutional support were integral components of this project. After several years of using web conferencing, MSU librarians realized the need for marketing to grow support for the program.

Keywords: web conferencing, online library instruction, real–time library instruction, marketing (library services)

Introduction

Librarians at Montana State University (MSU) often find themselves remotely serving both rural and urban patrons. They may assist distance students in metropolitan communities much larger than Bozeman, the home of MSU, or in rural towns such as Two Dot, Montana, with a population of a couple dozen people and no local library. Some students are overseas, taking courses from places such as

Turkey or Dubai. The urban students may have access to large academic libraries while rural students may not even have access to a public library. Students on campus also now frequently take online classes for a variety of reasons. These students have physical access to the library but may not be able (or willing) to visit in person.

Librarians at MSU would argue that providing different services for rural and urban students is no longer necessary. Advances in technology have helped diminish the differences between on–campus and distance students and urban and rural students. MSU, like many academic institutions, has been significantly increasing its online course offerings in the last few years. According to MSU's Office of Planning and Analysis, ten percent of students took an online class in the spring of 2010 and thirty percent did so during the 2010 summer semester. That makes narrowing the gap in services for on–and off–campus students even more important.

Live library instruction has only recently become available to online students. Web conferencing software has allowed MSU librarians to provide synchronous instruction to these students. While MSU librarians have successfully implemented online services for all students, including live instruction, they have discovered the need to market these services because many online students are unaware of the assistance available to them. Faculty members, too, don't always realize that real–time library instruction is available for their classes.

Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed little in the way of pedagogical or marketing research specifically on real–time, online library instruction. The use of web conferencing for library instruction has been discussed intermittently in the literature since the 1990s, but with relatively few articles on the topic. Lietzau and Mann (2009) reported that "There appeared to be a scarcity of research conducted in the past five years on the topic" (p. 109) and the review for this article confirmed that. Barnhardt and Stanfield (2011) also found that not many libraries use web conferencing for instruction "or, at least, very few are writing about it" (p. 60).

Pival and Tuñón (2001) described the Einstein Library's 1997 experiment using NetMeeting software to provide instruction to remote sites in Florida and beyond. The experiment met with limited success because the software was not reliable when more than four sites tried to meet at the same time. However, use of the software reduced the need for librarians to travel to remote sites, enabling them to provide library instruction at other sites and also save travel costs. Student evaluations in this case, however, did indicate a preference for face–to–face instruction.

From 1998 to 1999, the University of Wyoming Libraries participated in a three–state trial of desktop video conferencing sponsored in part by the National Libraries of Medicine, Midcontinental Region. Involvement in this project inspired future experimentation at the University of Wyoming Libraries using CU–See–Me software for video conferencing. Despite many technical issues, those participating were "cautiously optimistic about the process" of this virtual experience (Henning, 2001, p. 244). McCarthy's 1998 study (2004) concluded that "interactive video technology is an effective pedagogical tool" (p. 25). The study involved library science students in a graduate level class taught at two sites. The sites were connected using PictureTel System 4500 video conferencing with a planned upgrade to HorizonLive in 2005 to allow for more simultaneous participants. One drawback for instruction noted in the study was the reliance on technology working correctly.

According to Black (2000), the University of North British Columbia Library's LearnLinc trials suffered from a number of unexpected technical issues both with equipment at university satellite sites and with students' home computers. In addition, some of the library's databases would not work with the LearnLinc software. After the trials, the library decided to discontinue use of the software for remote library instruction. Docherty and Faiks, in their 2004 review of the status of web conferencing technology, concluded that webinars could not replace face–to–face instruction but could be effectively used when face–to–face is not an option (p. 225–226).

The Regent University Library used Live Classroom software from Horizon Wimba to provide synchronous virtual instruction. Kontos and Henkel (2008) described the project as successful. In spite of some technical issues and low attendance, both students and faculty showed great interest in the mode of delivery. This was reiterated in Lietzau and Mann's (2009) article; they, too, found that students and faculty "consider web conferencing an enhancement to learning in the online environment" (p. 116). Graham (2009) goes further, saying that "bibliographic instruction is bibliographic instruction be it delivered face–to–face or via a podcast" and that in the information age, "there is … no longer a distinction between distant and local" (p. 46).

Librarians at the Rochester Institute of Technology Libraries reported that, while they used many tools to meet the needs of distance students, Adobe Connect software (web conferencing) was used when "a live interactive session is optimal" (Bower & Mee, 2010, p. 479). Web conferencing or webinars have become a feature of embedded librarianship. In a 2010 article, Hoffman and Ramin include web conferencing for library instruction as one tool for use in an embedded librarian program (p. 294), as does Montgomery (2010, p. 309). The research of Anderson and May (2010) provides support for web conferencing; their research showed no difference in the retention of information literacy skills whether students were taught in a face–to–face class, a blended class, or an online class (p. 498).

Most recently, Barnhardt and Stanfield (2011) described issues that came up during their trial of Wimba for online instruction. Like most involved in web conferencing, they encountered some technical issues. They also discovered the need to adapt face–to–face instruction to work in the new medium but enjoyed the synchronous nature of the software and the ability to teach in real–time. Because of "the limited response" to the Wimba trial from faculty, Barnhardt and Stanfield stress the need to market this means of instruction to faculty (p. 63).

There is little in the library literature about marketing real–time library instruction to distance students and faculty, most likely because this is an emerging area. However, there are a number of useful articles on marketing to distance users in general that can be applied to the marketing of synchronous library instruction as part of a larger outreach strategy to inform users of all library services and resources. Several articles on marketing library services to distance users focus on the issue of branding one's library, through a comprehensive, methodical and ongoing plan for communicating library services and resources to distance students and faculty (Dermody, 2005; Fisk & Summey, 2004; Gall, 2010; MacDonald & vanDuinkerken, 2005; Smith, 2011; Summey 2004; Taddeo, 2008). Effective marketing of distance library services requires a continuous and consistent plan for making distance students and faculty aware of the library and the services and resources it can provide. Additionally, Lillard (2006) emphasizes the marketing of relationships with online users through the promotion of personalized and customized library services. In sum, the task of marketing to distance users takes a more concentrated, well–planned effort because there are fewer venues for reaching them than are available on the physical campus where one has access not only to webpages and email distribution lists, but also to campus newspapers and newsletters, kiosks, bulletin boards, and more.

Background/Standards

The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services* state that academic libraries must serve all of their users, wherever located. The Standards also state that academic libraries should have "a library user instruction program designed to instill independent and effective information literacy skills while specifically meeting the learner support needs of the distance learning community" (2008). Librarians play an important role in the academic success of students and therefore must provide instruction in a variety of ways. Those at MSU provide instruction to classes at faculty request; through their Research Assistance Program, or RAP, which encourages students to consult one–on–one with a librarian; and by answering student questions at the point of need at the reference desk. In addition, the library offers the LIBR 121 Library Research Skills credit course, taught completely online. But how can equitable academic library services be provided when students attend classes both on and off campus and in both rural and urban environments? The library at

Montana State University has endeavored to blur those distinctions and bring library resources and services to all students and faculty, wherever they are located.

In response to technological change and the increase in distance education in the 1990s, MSU Library administration appointed a librarian as liaison to distance education. Investment in electronic resources became a priority and much of the library's collection is available remotely to anyone affiliated with MSU. For those items still in print, the library provides a quick–turnaround interlibrary loan service; patrons can also request electronic delivery of book chapters and articles in print journals. Librarians are digitizing unique materials in the library's Special Collections; cooperation with other libraries and groups has made collections such as the proceedings of the International Snow Science Workshops available online. Most reserve materials are now electronic and students can find those reserves using an online e–reserve program. The members of the reference team field questions face–to–face at the reference desk but also answer questions via phone, email, chat, texting, and instant messaging. Librarians have created tutorials and LibGuides to provide asynchronous online help. All of these changes have been positive. Unfortunately, many of these transactions lack the face–to–face dimension that students and faculty enjoy on campus. Face–to–face instruction sessions provide opportunities to get personal help from a librarian, get questions answered in real–time, and get to know a librarian who often becomes a resource for the rest of a student's MSU career. Such interactions can help students discover that the library is not an impersonal place and establish relationships with librarians and other library staff members.

To further expand equitable services to online students, MSU librarians are now using web conferencing software to provide real–time library instruction in an effort to reduce the disparity that distance students have encountered. At MSU, two librarians were able to secure, through a campus grant, access to Adobe Connect web conferencing software. The grant enabled them to conduct a pilot project providing instruction for the university's online students. This software allows for live, face–to–face instruction, an opportunity that was not available for those students just a couple of years ago. Librarians use web conferencing to personalize online instruction, giving students faces and voices instead of static web pages. Student questions can also be answered in real–time, and a relationship with the library established.

Web Conferencing Project

MSU librarians are now in their third year of using web conferencing for instruction having received one–time grant funds to launch their project in 2009. After the pilot project funding ended, the library's administration agreed to continue funding the Adobe Connect subscription. Why was a subscription product rather than a free

option chosen for this project? Adobe Connect offers features such as the ability to record (and edit) instruction sessions, interactive polls, desktop sharing, and an online whiteboard. Participants can communicate via chat; there is an audio option available but because it is an additional cost, that feature is not enabled at the MSU library. In addition, the campus's Burns Technology Center bought an Adobe Connect subscription and the library was able to partner with the Center for much less that buying its own subscription. Librarians have found the software easy to use, for both instructors and students, but it also includes a great deal of functionality.

MSU librarians have conducted more than three dozen instruction sessions for 360–plus online students. Students who completed a survey about the instruction sessions were very positive about their experience. The main issue mentioned by students was having a technical problem during a class. Technical issues, while still occasionally present, have decreased over the time of the project. Since all of the instruction sessions are recorded, those few for whom the issues persist can access the recording. This student's response on the survey was typical: "Dialogue was helpful—allowed students to get questions answered and made direct link to library personnel for future help. Thank you so much!" Typical of those who had technical difficulties: "The screen was hard to see even after changing views and using the toggle feature." However, the survey results show more in the former category and fewer in the latter.

Another benefit of the project is that it has helped provide a partial solution to the MSU library's limited classroom space. But more importantly, web conferencing has helped blur the distinction between rural and urban students and on–campus versus remote users where the library is concerned. Location matters less if the resources and services of a library are accessible to all, everywhere. This project is leveling the playing field for online students whether in state or out, rural or urban.

In addition, librarians have discovered other uses of web conferencing. As previously noted, the library's reference librarians manage RAPs for students and faculty to schedule one–on–one appointments with a subject specialist. Web conferencing has improved RAPs for distance students; instead of trying to lead a student through a database over the phone, librarians can now demonstrate such a search on screen. Librarians have used this software to meet remotely to plan conference programs or to allow a librarian who is absent for any reason to still participate in meetings. This fall, the librarian who taught the library's online credit course successfully used web conferencing with her students, enabling them to present their final projects synchronously. An upcoming use by Library administration will use the Adobe Connect software to conduct monthly meetings with three sister campus administrators, a meeting that to date has been held via telephone.

MSU librarians have developed some best practices for using web conferencing in library instruction. Having the faculty member present, just as in a face–to–face instruction session, makes for a more productive session. If the faculty member can't attend, as Chakraborty and Victor (2004) state, "[c]ollaboration between the faculty and librarian is imperative in maximizing the student's learning" (p. 105), and that has held true with this project. Developing faculty relationships is key to the success of instruction using web conferencing.

Having students log in before the class starts for technology checks has helped minimize technical issues during a session. Often just logging off and logging back in can solve lack of sound and other problems. Over the course of the project, only a handful of students have had to view a recording rather than take part in the live session. The optimal length of a web conferencing session is an hour or less. It becomes difficult for participants to concentrate on a screen for much longer than that. Docherty and Faiks also found that keeping the length of a class to under an hour was important (2004, p. 215). MSU students taking courses online can be as close as the dorms on campus just down the road at Two Dot or they can be as far away as Turkey. Because of this, a best practice is to schedule at least two classes, at different times, to accommodate all the possible time zones. So far, this has proved sustainable.

To engage students in the session as it starts, the use of interactive polls is very effective. Polls have been used, for example, to find out how many students have used the MSU library or to find out where students are located. It has been interesting to see students use the chat feature to interact with each other, some meeting for the first time during the class session. Librarians also try to greet each student personally as he/she logs on; however, this is not practical with a very large class with students logging on at the same time. Another optimal practice is having two librarians at each class. This allows one librarian to concentrate on instruction. The other librarian is logged in to the student view to monitor chat, possible lag time, or other issues. The second librarian can also answer questions that are not directly related to the session.

Assessment has been an integral part of this project. After each session, the web address for the session recording is sent out to students in the class along with a link to an evaluation survey about the class. Because answering the surveys is optional and not every student completes one, the results are a sample. However, several years of collected data has provided important feedback on both what went well and what could be improved with the project. Faculty feedback has also been very positive.

While this project has been successful, librarians did encounter some issues. Grant money funded the first two years of the project and the library's administration, convinced of web conferencing's potential, paid for the third and it will be a decision

for library administration from now on. However, with a new dean search in the works, it will be up to librarians to convince a new dean of the project's value.

Another issue is that only two librarians have conducted most of the web conferencing classes thus far. While they have shared information about web conferencing enthusiastically with their colleagues, in general other librarians have not embraced this technology as eagerly as those who started the project. This is largely due to liaison assignments because of MSU's relatively low number of online classes. A number of faculty members responded to personal offers of such instruction and one program, the Master of Science in Science Education, has requested online library classes since the beginning of the project. However, recruitment of new faculty and their classes has been more challenging. For this project to really impact distance education at MSU, librarians must be more active in marketing to other librarians and to faculty members as well as maintaining relationships with those who are already participating.

Marketing

Academic librarians should serve the information needs of students and faculty wherever they are. Web conferencing allows real–time, authentic contact with students and faculty, and those who have worked with MSU librarians via web conferencing have found it to be valuable and worth their time. Over the course of providing library instruction and one–on–one research assistance via web conferencing for almost three years, MSU librarians have discovered that the central issue in reaching students and faculty is effective marketing in order to create an awareness of library services, including real–time library instruction and research assistance. While a core group of web conferencing library instruction users has been established, MSU librarians have struggled to get the word out to other distance library users that this service is valuable. Synchronous library instruction for online courses has been integrated routinely into one online graduate program at MSU, yet librarians are still striving to gain ongoing support and adoption from other online programs and courses across the curriculum.

Adopting this somewhat invisible means of teaching students about library resources and services has amplified MSU librarians' need to explore and improve upon marketing techniques in order to get the word out about real–time library instruction. According to the American Marketing Association, marketing is defined as " the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (2007). Essentially, communication of services and resources is the librarians' challenge. One piece of the challenge lies with courses that are not regularly taught by the same person. In this instance, requests by new instructors for web conferencing library instruction often come when the previous instructor proactively encourages the new instructor to utilize this service. Often

this chain of communication from instructor to instructor is absent. Another piece of the marketing puzzle until recently has been in identifying which courses are truly online and which are perhaps hybrid courses or merely using the learning management system as a supplementary resource. This issue has been addressed—online courses are now marked "online" in the course catalog and no longer listed under the more vague designation of "web component."

Knowing which courses are fully online helps librarians identify which courses should be targeted for real–time sessions each semester so they can contact incoming faculty and attempt to arrange web conferencing instruction sessions. Some attempts at this have been successful, but librarians have determined through experience and a reading of the library literature that a systematic marketing effort needs to be adopted not only to continue providing online library instruction but also to grow the service and reach more online courses and programs whose needs are going unmet.

How can librarians determine whether some online student research needs are going unmet and thus direct comprehensive marketing toward fulfilling these needs? First, the feedback gathered from students who have attended live sessions state that they are much more aware of MSU library resources and how to use them. Additionally, many of these respondents stated that they never knew they could use MSU library resources even though they are paying MSU tuition for their online programs. Additionally, librarians regularly receive emails and phone calls from online students asking, for example, about remote access, how to research various topics, or how to get copies of articles.

The number of such inquiries is few compared to the total number of students enrolled in online courses and programs; thus there is a definite need to market services to meet the research needs of online students by increasing their usage of MSU library services and resources. Many online students are in programs that require little if any time on the MSU campus, and so they may not think of the MSU library as the first or most obvious place to start their research. Distance students often turn to their local libraries, whether public or academic libraries, though they may not realize that their local libraries often have far fewer academic resources than the MSU library. Additionally, many online students do not realize that the MSU library allows remote access to most of its subscription academic resources so they can do their research from home rather than at a local library (unless they don't have internet access at home). Yet another reason why many online students do not use their academic library's resources is the perceived difficulty of using subscription databases. According to Kim and Sin's (2007) study asking students to rate online information resources, "online databases were viewed as rather difficult to use" (p. 661). Instead, students found the open web easier to use for their research.

How can librarians get the word out about library services and resources in order to reach remote users who don't know to ask as well as those who think library resources are too difficult to use? According to Melinda Dermody, "marketing strategies for distance learning need to take a multi–faceted approach in order to reach as many users as possible" (2005, p. 45–46). Distance users are potentially distributed across the globe and thus harder to reach, making this kind of approach essential in order to reach them all. Dermody (2005) also stresses the need for concerted outreach efforts targeted at distance instructors because they are the ones with direct contact with their students each semester and are in the position to help librarians gain student buy–in for using library resources and services. Online faculty can be reached most easily by email, through either an external account or one that is built into the course management system, or both for a more comprehensive effort. MSU librarians have adopted targeted contact with online instructors while also implementing Lillard's (2006) strategy of promoting relationships with distance users by encouraging faculty to have their students contact "their very own librarian" for a specific course or discipline.

In addition to asking distance faculty to post librarians' contact information in the online course shell and/or the syllabus, another way to reach students is by asking instructors to create a librarian role, adding a course librarian to each specific class they are teaching. Having a librarian role in a course allows the librarian to monitor student discussions and respond appropriately when library–related issues and questions arise. Additionally, this gives students direct email access to the librarian from within the course shell.

University staff members who interact with distance students each semester through informational emails and other correspondence can also help librarians reach these students. At MSU, new distance students are sent a welcome email with instructions for logging into the course management system along with other information. Librarians have arranged for these staff to include a link to a LibGuide for online students in this orientation email each semester. Gall also suggests utilizing key campus staff as additional venues for helping librarians establish relationships with distance learners, a valuable means for getting these students to utilize the library's services and resources (2010).

In sum, through experiences gained in the web conferencing project along with a reading of the marketing literature, MSU librarians have confirmed the need to create a marketing plan. The plan should include the strategies described above and a timeline for implementing them regularly in order to grow synchronous online library instruction. Librarians serving distance students have more options than ever for providing them with resources and services equivalent to those of on–campus students, especially with the availability of web conferencing options to provide real–time instruction and research assistance. Comprehensive, strategic marketing of library services to distance students and faculty is essential in order to

make them aware of and more inclined to take advantage of all that the library has to offer. Whether online faculty and students are in Two Dot or Turkey or rural or urban, they need to know that library services and librarians are available to them to help them meet their information resource needs.

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