The Changing role of Librarians and the Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

The online teaching and learning environment arising in response to the need for distance and flexible education provides new opportunities for librarians to work with students to develop their information literacy skills. At the University of Waikato librarians are included as information coaches in the virtual classroom for several online courses. Their role is to provide students with guidance in the processes underlying tertiary learning. The collaborative relationship between students, teacher and librarian in this new environment provides students with a greater understanding of how the research (or assignment) process works. An understanding of this process is essential for the transfer of learning from one situation to another.

Information coaches have access to the coursework, the readings and class discussions, thus giving them a better understanding of students' academic requirements. In the traditional on-campus, lecture-dominated environment, library staff would need to attend all course lectures and tutorials to gain a comparable understanding. This paper discusses the changing role of librarians in the online environment and the benefits for students after twelve months of course-integrated information coaching at the University of Waikato.

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INTRODUCTION

In the traditional university environment, course-integrated library instruction is usually considered to be the most effective way of increasing the information literacy of students (Todd 1995, Parks and Hendrix 1996). However, in most cases, the role of the librarian is to provide course-based library instruction (often one-off classes) that is a component of a course, but is not integrated throughout it. While valuable and necessary, course-based instruction does not address the full range of skills and knowledge needed for information literacy, such as how the retrieved information is used, or indeed, even whether students are seeking the right information in the first place. The online environment provides opportunities for librarians to address information skills within and during an entire course.

Much of the recent literature concerning libraries and distance education focuses on the problems and initiatives arising in the struggle to meet the resource needs of students who are unable (because of time or distance constraints) to come to the library (Fulcher and Lock 1999, Peacock and Middleton 1999). Consequently, new roles that have been suggested for librarians tend to focus on supporting or teaching the use of the technologies needed to deliver resources to off-campus students (for example, Ashton and Levi 1998, Heller-Ross 1999). While some authors (Ashton and Levi 1998, Rosenquist-Buhler 1996) identify the need for librarians to have greater participation in the planning and teaching of online classes, there are few examples of how this would work in practice. This paper describes an initiative at the University of Waikato where librarians are included as information coaches in online courses. Their primary role is to work in collaboration with academic staff to increase the information literacy of students.

At the University of Waikato the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) definition of Information Literacy used:

the ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources…...

An information literate person is a competent, independent learner who recognises that accurate information is the basis for intelligent decision making.
Such an individual can identify and organise potential information, is competent with computer-based and other technologies and can both apply and evaluate the information relevant to their needs.
To use information effectively, such a person can:
Recognise a need for information
Construct strategies for locating information
Locate and access information
Organise and apply information
Evaluate the information process and product.

INFORMATION COACHING: WHAT IS IT?

In the summer semester of 1998, Nola Campbell, senior lecturer in the School of Education included a librarian as part of the teaching team for her third year online course *Distance Education & Online Learning in School Classrooms*. The term 'information coach' was adopted as it emphasized that the librarian's task is to 'coach' students in finding and using information for themselves, whereas for many people (particularly those less familiar with academic libraries) the term 'librarian' is associated with someone who finds information for others. (For the background to the development of information coaching and this team teaching approach see Campbell 1999.) There are now four librarians at the University of Waikato who are, or who have been,

information coaches in five different courses involving more than 200 students. (This includes two masters courses: Computers in special education and Discourse and counselling psychologies; two third year courses: Distance education & online learning in school classrooms and Special projects in school and classroom computing and one first year course: Learning and teaching language.)

While the role of the information coach will vary with the type of course and style of the lecturer, one of the most successful implementations occurs when students must submit outlines or plans of their work to the information coach and wait for feedback before continuing with the assignment. The coach then suggests strategies for identifying and locating relevant information or redirects students if they have misinterpreted the question. Guidance at this point gives the student the opportunity to discover where improvement is needed. It is this aspect that appears most useful in encouraging students to develop skills that can be applied to future assignments and other learning environments. Because feedback is provided one-to-one via email, each student receives personal feedback that directly addresses his or her learning. Thus, even whole class activities area addressed personally. Another activity undertaken by coaches is to monitor and assist with the facilitation of the course discussion, which is conducted online. Students are expected to provide support from the literature for their arguments and to reference these appropriately. The coach is able to identify misconceptions about, or misuse of information resources. For example in a contribution to a discussion on the way computers could be used to support learning for children with special needs, one participant stated that there was almost nothing written about using computers with behavioural children. The coach was able to suggest strategies for finding the needed information, such as rephrasing 'behavioural children' and using the thesaurus in ERIC to identify appropriate descriptors (behavior problems; children) and to be aware of the alternative spellings (behaviour/behavior). This reply was posted to the discussion, which allowed the group to learn from an individual's problem.

Not all information skill development is best addressed by the coach within the course . At Waikato, coaching activities are supported by a collection of resources which supports the learning of specific skills. (Videos on how to use the Library catalogue and the online course software; Internet guides to WWW searching; a CDROM (Guide to online learning which provides basic instruction in the use of Internet browsers, email, information and study skills; and print guides to specific databases designed for students to work through while logged on to a given database. In addition, where courses have an on-campus component classes are held covering 'how to' skills such as how to search relevant subject databases; advanced use of the Library catalogue and Developing Internet Search skills. Information coaching generally does not attempt to step students through the use of various search tools, but will rather point them to the relevant resource guide, suggest the need to work through it, and explain why the tool is appropriate in the context of their own need., or where they have gone wrong in the use of the tool. The approach stresses students' need to take responsibility for their own learning, but at the same time recognises that they may not be aware either that they are not making the best use of a tool or that other search tools or strategies may bring them more success.

Differences Between Online And Traditional Library environments

There are significant differences between the traditional on-campus and online teaching environments that enable librarians to expand their roles to provide more effective information literacy education.

Access to resources and students

Information coaches have access to the course readings, lectures, tutorials and discussion. The advice, support and explanations therefore, are given with a full understanding of the context in which the student is working. In the traditional environment librarians would need to attend all lectures and tutorials to get the same background information and understanding of the course. Ideally, the librarian teaching in a particular discipline would have a degree in that subject,

however this is seldom possible and most librarians have responsibility for some subjects that they have never studied. Because information coaches have access to the coursework, they have a greater understanding of the discipline and consequently, their students' needs.

Information coaches can easily direct comments, advice or questions to the whole class when needed. This is particularly valuable when the coach is repeatedly addressing the same error or misunderstanding. Although similar problems arise in the Library, the solution is usually reactive, with librarians finding ways to inform each student of the problem when (and if) they arrive at the information desk. In the online environment the coach can contact the whole class with clarification or suggestions which forestall such problems. Explanatory material can be posted on the web for students to access as needed. Furthermore, the ability to email students individually allows the information coach to be proactive where there has been no contact with students. Information or library related issues that come up during class discussions can be addressed with individual students if necessary.

BROADER SCOPE OF QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

One of the major differences between the traditional library reference desk and information coaching is that the coach can often identify when a student's approach to the learning process is problematic even if the student is unaware of the inadequacy of their information or research skills. On-campus students need to know that they have a problem before they can receive help, or wait till the marked assignment is returned. Even then, there may be little indication as to which part of the process needs improvement.

Questions received often related to technical problems concerning connectivity, formatting or the use of various software packages. Some of the questions could be answered by a technical or computer expert (as usually happens on-campus), however, if the information coach is able to answer such questions there should be less delay for students in obtaining the solutions they need.

Other questions or problems covered writing skills or required an explanation of the course activities. This area is usually considered to be outside the domain of librarians and more appropriately addressed by those responsible for 'study and writing skills'. But as information literacy is inextricably linked with other tertiary literacies, providing guidance in any of these skills in the context of the course is more realistic and effective than having different people teach each skill independently.

NATURE OF COMMUNICATION

The need to conduct almost all communication in writing is often perceived as a chore by both students and coaches, but there are benefits: By the time students have expressed their problem in writing, they often have a better understanding of what they need to know. Similarly, information coaches have time to think about the problem and an appropriate response. Unlike the library reference desk, there is a record of the interaction, which enables both parties to pick up from where they left off without either librarian or student needing to backtrack. Another advantage of the medium is that replies and instructions can be copied and pasted from one student to another without reducing the quality of the personal interaction. This lessens the tedium of the repetitive nature of many reference questions without decreasing the effectiveness of the response.

Just as students in this environment are not tied to working on campus, neither are librarians. The increased mobility means that staff can work from home if appropriate, or maintain contact with students when off campus. Because the information coach is committed to the course for its duration, libraries will need to consider how they enable their staff to meet this commitment. Unlike shifts on the reference desk, information coaches are not easily interchangeable.

BENEFITS OF USING AN INFORMATION COACH

Information coaching helps provide some equity for distance students by combining library instruction with a reference service. It is a new way of working and the inclusion of a librarian as part of the teaching team has advantages for librarians, students and academic staff. The primary benefit for all parties is an increase in students' information literacy. One of the main revelations for the information coaches has been the students' need for assistance in planning and in defining their information needs. For example, one activity in *Distance Education & Online Learning in School Classrooms* asks students to send the information coach a plan outlining how they would locate an online course for a friend. The plans submitted were, with only a few exceptions, very 'light'. Despite the need for some extensive searching, most students' plans described their friend's situation in considerable detail with the rest of the plan addressed in a sentence such as: 'Then I'll go online and find a course for my friend.' If left to do this, most came back frustrated, often without the information they needed, or having spent far more time searching than was necessary. Some students may have hoped that the coach would miraculously return enough information for them to sign their name and hand the work in, but in most cases they simply did not realise that time spent planning and clarifying what they need to know would reduce the time spent searching. With encouragement from their coach, students learn that the task can be much less onerous. Many students reported that the improvement in their searching skills was one of the highlights of this course.

Another positive aspect of having a librarian as part of the teaching team is that there is a third person that students can use as a sounding board for ideas or to check the appropriateness of their approach. Because the information coach is not grading their work some students may perceive that there is less risk of embarrassment, or of being judged by their lecturer and thus be more willing to ask for help. Furthermore, the development of a personal relationship with someone in the Library makes the institution less formidable. If students have any library-related problem they can contact their information coach for advice on what to do, or who to contact. This appears to be particularly important for distance students who cannot come into the library.

For librarians, the personal contact and relationships with both staff and students that arose from the new working environment, and the enhanced status that came with it, was professionally very rewarding. For information coaches in the School of Education, one of the greatest benefits has been to work alongside good teachers. Many librarians have no formal teaching qualifications and so the opportunity to learn 'on the job' from an expert is invaluable. Not to be overlooked is the fact that the library benefits from the cheap professional development!

Academic staff could benefit from the shared workload and increased administrative and personal support that comes with this approach. With distance learning, the teacher tends to be the first person contacted when students have problems. With a team approach, students learn that they may get a faster response by sending their queries directly to the most appropriate person. The teacher is then able to spend more time on the course content and facilitating class discussion (Campbell 1999). Academic staff teaching online for the first time may appreciate support from a librarian who is experienced in the online environment. Having someone as part of the teaching team who is familiar with the class software and the sorts of information and technology related problems that are likely to arise may lessen the stress of taking a course into a new environment. Furthermore, with an information coach working with students and including academic staff in their conversations, teachers have an ongoing opportunity to develop their own information skills. As the roles in the teaching team are established and the differing skills and knowledge recognised, course activities can be adjusted or even redesigned to make the best use of the expertise available.

Factors contributing to successful information coaching

An analysis of the interactions between students and the four University of Waikato information coaches indicated that are several factors that help to make the information coaching role successful.

A specification within the course that students use the information coach

As students are mostly unfamiliar with this new concept, some specification within the course that students use the information coach is important for establishing that the coach is a significant member of the teaching team. Initially, some students sent work to the information coach somewhat reluctantly; (comments were received such as: 'Apparently I have to send this to you, so here it is'). In most cases, once students received some feedback, they become enthusiastic users of the expertise the information coach provides. Clearly it takes time for trust to build and for students to understand the role of the coach and the sort of help that he or she can give.

Participation in class discussion

The ability to do this will often depend on the subject matter of the course, however, once the coach has participated in the course, they usually have enough understanding of the content to take part in the discussions. Coaches found that appropriate participation in class discussions contributed to an earlier acceptance of the role of the coach and an increase in the percentage of students using the coach voluntarily.

Copying messages to the course teachers

One of the aspects of information coaching is that the emails between the coach and students are openly copied to the course teacher. There are two good reasons for this: Firstly, it is clear to both parties what the students are being told, which forestalls attempts by students to play members of the team off each other (e.g.: 'The information coach told me I had done a great job and didn't need to do anything else so I should have received an A'). Secondly, it provides a safety net for the coaches. In order to explore the boundaries of this new role, librarians need to take some risks. They can do so knowing that if they inadvertently provide incorrect information or inappropriate advice, the lecturer will pick this up and let them know. This underscores the need for good communication and trust between team members, particularly as the various roles are being established and explored.

The need for trust

With most new partnerships, librarians found it better to start small, especially until they understood the course culture and requirements. As the team roles and relationships develop, the role of the coach can be expanded appropriately. Librarians need to recognize the risk faculty take by including someone in their classes. How comfortable would librarians be with an academic staff member sitting at the reference desk in case students needed clarification of the course content? At times it would be very useful, but would librarians trust them not to give students the wrong advice about information resources? Acknowledging the need for trust and recognizing who is in charge while still being proactive as an information coach, is perhaps one of the more challenging aspects of this new role.

Conclusion

The increased involvement by librarians in courses can be time consuming, but information coaches have found that this lessens with repeated sessions of each course. Ultimately, if the time spent results in better-educated students then the increased time is an investment worth making. This is particularly true in teacher education programmes, where students will eventually be responsible for the information literacy of their own students.

One of the most positive aspects for librarians working in an online environment, is that there exists the opportunity to make a real difference to the information literacy of students. In order to take full advantage of this opportunity however, librarians must be prepared to expand their traditional reference roles to give advice and coaching on all aspects of the assignment and research process. The skills gained and the lessons learnt are carried back into the traditional environment as librarians gain a better understanding of student needs and course content, cultures and requirements, and thus can provide a better service to all students.

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