

How to you spell “support”?

Multiple methods of library support to distributed education programs

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Abstract

This paper consists of librarians from two universities, one in the US and one in Canada, discussing and demonstrating the various ways they offer support to multiple distributed education programs. Because different programs on the same campus often offer distributed courses in different formats, libraries are required to become expert in all formats offered. This presentation will discuss library support via WebCT, Blackboard, FirstClass, proprietary courseware, email, the web, and Conferencing software. Where appropriate, differences between library support in the US and Canada will be noted and examined.

Key Terms: distributed education, academic libraries, library support, course management software

Introduction

Because of the high number of course management software packages used on any given campus, distance education librarians must learn to be jacks-of-all-trades when offering support to students in these programs. While professors must learn to be proficient in the single course management package they're using to teach their course, librarians must learn to use each package offered on campus in order to be able to provide support to all students. The authors of this paper have supported distance students at two universities, one in Florida and the other in Alberta. This paper will discuss several of the software and course management packages we have learned to use, along with any nuances or best practices we have learned to deliver library support through each one.

Background

The University of Calgary supports approximately 25,000 students, about 1,200 of whom are enrolled in distance programs. The University of Calgary Library has taken a leading role in recognizing that information resources are critical to the success of a student's educational experience. The Library's mandate states that all students, regardless of location, will receive the same resources and services and it strongly advocates equal access to information for all distant learners. The Library has provided both financial and professional support, including the creation of my position of Distance Education librarian, to develop and deliver services for users outside the physical library, across Canada and outside our borders.

The U of C offers full library support to distance students through a service known as Library Connection. Library Connection strives to offer all the services of a University Library to students who are at a distance, including instruction and tutorials, research assistance, and document delivery.

Nova Southeastern University, located in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has been a pioneer in distance education and offering courses in a distributed format since 1969. Currently enrolling over 19,000 students, NSU is the 12th largest private academic institution in the country with approximately half of these students considered distance students. The main library has an entire department, Distance and Instructional Library Services with five librarians and one staff person, dedicated to providing support to the

site-based and online students. Another 13 librarians in the Reference Department help with phone and email reference as well as local bibliographic instruction. The NSU libraries are well known for collaborating with faculty and other institutions to provide a high level of library support to distance students.

Course Management Systems and Library Support

WebCT

The University of Calgary is predominantly a WebCT shop. WebCT (<http://www.webct.com>) was originally developed in British Columbia, and as a result has a large following in Canada.

WebCT is fairly straightforward to use, offering students a virtual version of the traditional classroom environment. Students may participate and interact with the course by accessing the course syllabus and course description. The library makes use of the interactive features of the software in the course discussion, chat and email areas. The course discussion area is where most of the library instruction and interaction takes place.

In my first semester supporting Post Diploma Nursing students who were using this software I simply added a discussion thread to the main discussion area in which I introduced myself and my services. This was relatively successful as an introduction, and I received several emails from students stating that they were glad to know I existed. Students in this course also met synchronously once per week in an online text chat, and for the first few weeks of the semester I logged in as well to offer a “virtual reference” service to any students who had burning questions. Again, this was well received by the students, and appreciated by the Instructor.

I felt that I could do a better job introducing myself and the library services though, and during my second semester of support to the Nursing program I was more proactive. I asked the two Instructors I would be supporting if I could create a separate topic area within the Discussion Board just dedicated to Library information. This suggestion was warmly received, and I posted three messages in each class under the Library Discussion Topic. (See Appendix for original postings). The main intention of these messages was to provide the students with some basic background about the library

services available to them, but even more importantly to ensure them that the librarian was friendly and approachable.

One of the biggest drawbacks I found to using WebCT is that it's not possible to email outside the courseware system. This means that even if you include your "normal" everyday email address, students within the WebCT course can't reach it. They either have to use a separate email system to reach you, or you have to remember to check WebCT on a regular basis to make sure there's no new mail waiting for you there. This was not a major problem, but there were a few queries I would have been able to respond to more quickly had they been sent to my primary email account. The librarian supporting a WebCT course needs to make it a habit of logging in to the course at least once a day, and more frequently if the course is a high-volume one. This is also a problem when you need to broadcast information quickly to students to alert them to a problem.

As is the case with the University of Calgary, Nova Southeastern University primarily uses WebCT for its course management software, but the librarians' experiences with using these for library instruction were somewhat different. All WebCT classes have a link to the Electronic Library and the online help pages. Distance and Instructional Library Services works with online programs to also provide customized help sheets. Like the University of Calgary, NSU librarians provide chat sessions and student feedback on the WebBoard discussions. The WebBoard discussions were used with two sections of doctoral students in conflict resolution. When the librarian posted information on the course's discussion board, students were appreciative of the library information. Students were appreciative but having a librarian participate did not generate a lively discussion about research strategies, much to the disappointment of the librarian facilitating the discussion.

NSU's most ambitious library effort with WebCT has been to develop two online classes. The challenges to develop these courses had more to do with the politics of collaborating with academic programs and course design than problems with WebCT, *per se*. *New Student Experience* was a collaborative effort with the Farquhar Center (Undergraduate College) to integrate an information literacy component into a new three-

credit elective course for NSU freshman. Unfortunately, the library was unable to convince the Farquhar Center to offer the information literacy component as a separate, one-credit course, and the content got paired with general content to help new students adapt to college life. The end result was that, after a major investment in time developing the modules with the library's part of the course content, the course never generated enough student interest to be offered even once in three terms.

A more successful WebCT library course is offered to doctoral students obtaining their EdD degrees in higher education (Tuñón, 2002). This course is a one-credit, elective course designed to prepare the students for their literature reviews. The library has delivered six sections of this course online and one section in a face-to-face format. The course got off to a rocky start because of problems with the design of the course. The designer made the mistake of assuming that doctoral students did not need mini assignments that walked the students through a series of learning activities. Instead she tried to incorporate active learning through a team project and discussion topics. The problem was that students were not always able to take searching skills, apply them to a variety of databases and always be able to successfully identify the types of resources located and cite them appropriately using APA (American Psychological Association) style. The students in the first couple of terms had difficulties understanding the various types of materials retrieved in databases like ERIC, WilsonWeb Education Full Text, Digital Dissertations, and WorldCat and therefore had problems citing such things as unpublished and published conference papers, unpublished and published dissertations, Web sites, books, government reports, and articles retrieved full text online from aggregated databases. Once less emphasis was put on active learning and more on having students complete a series of self-paced activities that built sequentially and developmentally, the students had much more successful experiences.

WebCT does not support embedded images, making it difficult to include screenshots for clarification when responding to student queries or posting initial information. The Chat feature is a useful tool, as long as it's been prearranged that you and the student will meet at a particular time.

A final limitation for library support is that self tests and quizzes cannot be embedded within Web pages. Thus for example, then you want students to practice using Boolean operators, they must leave the page with the course content and do the activity elsewhere and interrupt the natural flow of learning.

What WebCT does well for the library:

- Chat sessions allow for live librarian participation.
- Generic tutorials.
- Threaded discussion boards.

What WebCT doesn't do well for the library:

- Can't email search results to user addresses within WebCT.
- Doesn't support the addition of screenshots.
- Can't email to and from the system, all email is within WebCT.
- Can't edit or delete a posting once it's on the system - too bad if you later discover a typo or change your mind about that brilliant idea of yours.

Blackboard

Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com/>) is the other major player on the course management software circuit, and the U of C Faculty of Social Work uses this package. To date the library has not been able to integrate itself into courses using this software. NSU does not use Blackboard for any of its programs.

FirstClass

A third course management package that is heavily used by the U of C Master of Continuing Education program is called FirstClass. FirstClass (<http://www.firstclass.com/>) is slightly different in presentation and use from the two major players, giving students the choice of logging in via client desktop software or via the web. As when accessing email via the web, the desktop version doesn't offer the same level of robustness, and the majority of students use the desktop version of the software to connect to the FirstClass servers.

FirstClass presents a series of folders on the student's virtual desktop, which is created upon login. Students see a folder for each of their classes, several with administrative information, and a separate one for library support. The Library Support folder contains a series of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) on library issues such as document delivery, tutorial and reference assistance. The folder itself acts as a threaded discussion, so students can ask and receive answers, and others can follow along. FirstClass also supports private email, and the librarian receives numerous queries through this format.

FirstClass also supports real-time interaction. The software allows each user to see who is currently logged on to the server, and it is a simple matter to invite any individual or group to an impromptu chat session, not unlike an instant messenger service. On numerous occasions the librarian has noticed a student he's been helping is currently logged in, and rather than send a series of emails back and forth, the student is invited to chat. This usually answers questions or resolves problems much more quickly than asynchronous email exchanges do.

What FirstClass does well for the library:

- It's a synchronous system, which allows for individual spontaneous chat sessions.
- It offers group chat sessions in which the librarian can be a participant.
- Threaded discussion boards.

What FirstClass doesn't do well for the library:

- While the librarian can email into and out of the system, the email feature doesn't support embedded images, so an email containing screenshots doesn't work as well (all images show up as separate attachments).

Embanet

At NSU, an online program for the National Graduate Teacher Education Program (GTEP) used Embanet (<http://www.embanet.com>) because of its 24-hour help desk. Chat sessions were used for several classes of GTEP students with more interaction and

questions. However, the most promising development in this area has been having students conduct live searches in a second window while participating in the online chat sessions. Students were able to successfully open a second window and conduct searches in ERIC and then discuss their search results online. This approach, however, also had some glitches when a couple of students got confused between the two windows and had difficulties back to the chat session. However, in future sessions, careful instructions about what to expect should help mitigate this problem. However, all programs are mandated to begin using WebCT so these issues will have to be addressed using the WebCT chat feature.

World Wide Web

It should be safe to say that every library supporting distributed students today makes use of the web to deliver information. Most Distance Library websites also allow students to place document delivery requests, either through basic CGI web forms, or through more advanced integrated systems that also allow students to check on the status of their requests.

Both the U of C and NSU use the web to deliver manuals and tutorials to their distributed students. The web excels at providing graphic information, such as screenshots, and is advantageous in the ease and speed with which web pages can be updated. This allows libraries to inform distributed students of policy changes or new services as soon as they are implemented.

There are of course limitations to using the web to support distributed students, chief among them being a lack of interactivity in simple web pages. Most library web pages present information in a static format, and when delivering manuals to students in this format there is little opportunity for students to interact with the material, making for a rather bland educational experience.

What the web does well for the library

- Good basic information, including screenshots / graphics.
- Easy to update.

- Can be accessed without any special password – available to all.

What the web doesn't do well for the library

- No threaded discussion boards or capability to do quizzes, or activities without extra or high-end software.
- No interactivity.

Compressed Video

NSU has tried using compressed video for more than five years without much success when it comes to delivering library training to distance sites (Pival & Tuñón, 2001). The problem was that in the 1990s compressed video did not transmit compressed images of computer screens without loss of legibility. The screens refreshed too slowly for the fast pace needed for demonstrating online search skills, and the compression/decompression kept the transmission of the small fonts of computer screens from being very legible. Librarians experimented with using PowerPoint as a substitute with only moderately improved success. In the last year, NSU librarians have been using compressed video with somewhat better results to students in a Speech Language Pathology program partially based in Florida and the rest in Mississippi. However, the newest generations of equipment that has started to be manufactured since 2000 seem much better. The problem with this equipment is it is only as good as the weakest link in the system. Using this equipment for the high demands of library instruction will only become truly feasible when all sites are equipped with the new, high-speed equipment. The fact of the matter is, however, that budget constraints will prevent this goal from actually coming to fruition at NSU for several years.

What compressed video does well for the library:

- Synchronous voice and video interaction.
- Multiple sites easily supported.
- Improving capabilities for use to do computer demonstrations.

What compressed video does not do well for the library:

- High cost of equipment and trained personnel make this an expensive option for synchronous interaction.

- The compressed video system is only as good as its weakest link.
- Interaction between sites constrained to group interactions.

NetMeeting

NSU was one of the first libraries to experiment with using NetMeeting, collaborative software that is free with the Microsoft software package (Pival & Tuñón, 1998). NetMeeting (<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting/>) was used to deliver library instruction to 12 sites in Florida plus one in Las Vegas in 1997-1998. We ran into several problems at the time. Although we were supposed to be able to offer simultaneous training at several sites, we found that the lack of T1 connections at the sites except at the main campus meant that we needed to deliver sessions one at a time. Also, in spite of good student evaluations, the feedback we received from the faculty and technology staff at the sites was that students did not like the lack on interaction, the lack of hands-on training, and the “talking head” aspects of NetMeeting instruction. Because the sites started to get equipped with their own computer labs and the classes we had to teach got reduced from 5 to 3 times a year, the librarians dropped the use of NetMeeting. However, recent experiments with using NetMeeting at several of these sites simultaneously were much more success now that they all have T1 connections. As a result, NetMeeting may become an option again, particularly for small sites.

What collaborative software packages like NetMeeting do well for the library:

- Inexpensive software solution for providing simultaneous synchronous interaction.
- Can support multiple sites if have high-end telecommunication connections and effective for on site at a time if not.
- Allows collaborative interactions.

What collaborative software packages like NetMeeting do not do well for the library:

- Does not provide good solutions for simultaneous synchronous interactions with high numbers of end-users.
- Requires high-speed connectivity at all sites to be used to its full capabilities.
- Requires facilitators and equipment at all sites.
- Collaborative interaction somewhat constrained in a synchronous environment.

Conclusions

Distributed education is often a decentralized endeavor on the university campus, and different programs often deliver programs through different course management systems. The academic library is one of the few support systems that offer support to distributed students while they are participating in their courses (as opposed to the bookstore or Registrar, who also deal with distributed students but usually only once each semester). Because libraries are supporting students through these different course management systems, librarians must become proficient in several different platforms. Course developers and faculty should include librarians in their course planning and delivery, and both teaching faculty and librarians need to be aware of the strengths and difficulties of each system when planning content.

References

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Appendix

U of Calgary WebCT Initial Library Postings in support of Post Diploma Nursing program (3 postings)

Subject Welcome from the Distance Education Librarian

Message no. 305 Posted by **Paul Pival (ppival)** on Thu Dec 13, 2001 15:52

Hello!

I'm very pleased to have been invited to participate in this course. It's my intention to quickly answer any library-related questions you may have, but also to pipe in from time to time if I think there's anything I can help with library-wise.

You can learn more about various library services and policies at the Library Connection website at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/library/libcon> I've started posting some short interactive tutorials and am quite interested to hear how they work for you distance folks.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions, problems or concerns (ok, they should be library-related, I can't solve ALL your problems ;-). Incidentally, while I'll try to check WebCT every day, if you want the fastest response you should email my regular account at ppival@ucalgary.ca

I should mention you also have a Subject Librarian for Nursing - Alix Hayden, who can be reached at ahayden@ucalgary.ca If you ask me a question related to nursing I can't answer, I'll probably go to her :-)

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Web: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/library/libcon>

Subject How to use Library Connection**Message no. 306** Posted by **Paul Pival (ppival)** on Thu Dec 13, 2001 16:02

Hello Again

I wanted to post some more general information about Library Connection, which is what we call our service to distance students. The Library Connection homepage is at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/library/libcon> -- visit it for online document delivery request forms (we'll send you journals and books at no cost!). You'll also find online tutorials and answers to questions relating to database access, ID cards, etc.

A tip for you when requesting documents is not to wait until the last moment - make your requests as soon as you know you need something - if we have to get it from another library it could take a couple of weeks (or more in some cases) for it to arrive. If we have the material in our collection, we'll have it in the mail to you within 2 working days.

The best place to search for articles is in the Nursing databases. Pay particular attention to CINAHL - the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health. Very few of the Nursing Databases offer full text, but we have some excellent full-text databases that will contain Nursing-related material as well, most notably Ebsco Academic Search Premier.

For those of you close to the main campus, the Information Commons here in the library offers a number of courses not only on how to do research, but also on Productivity Software Training - things like Microsoft Office, Email Essentials, and Computer / File management. If you're having some trouble with WebCT, some of these courses might be helpful to you. There's a little more information and some training available for WebCT at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/webct>

Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help you in your research - don't hesitate to contact me - you're the reason I have a job here at the library! :-)

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Subject Library Tips and Tricks**Message no. 307** Posted by **Paul Pival (ppival)** on Thu Dec 13, 2001 16:17

OK, last message for today. I wanted to let you in on some secrets that will make your lives easier when dealing with the library. Follow these tips and you'll end up with far fewer grey hairs by the end of the semester (me too! ;-)

Plan Ahead!

If you're requesting material from Library Connection, we may or may not have the material in the U of C Libraries. If we don't it may take as long as 2-4 weeks for us to get your material to you. There's nothing we can do to speed that up - it's up to the lending library to deliver it to us. Having said that, we do have an awful lot of stuff (that's official library jargon) here at the U of C, and we'll be able to have that in the mail to you within 2 working days of your request.

Send us complete citations

When requesting books or articles, be sure to send us a complete citation. You'll learn all about these critters if you don't know already. Basically, for journals we need the Author of the article, Title of the article, Title of the journal, date, pages, volume and issue. We don't need (or really want) the abstracts you'll get in the databases, so if you can delete those from your requests we'd appreciate it :-). For books, we need the Title of the book, Author of the book, Edition, and Date of publication. If you have the publisher and ISBN that helps us, but they're not necessary.

Be sure to request stuff from the right people

If you should find yourself on the U of C Library homepage, you might find the links for Document Delivery. You don't want those links because those fine people won't send stuff to your doorstep. You want to use the request forms found on the Library Connection website. OR, you can email your requests to libcon@ucalgary.ca. The advantage of the email route is that you can send a whack of citations all at once in the same email instead of filling out the request forms over and over.

Tell us who you are every time

We'll get to know each other, and you'll really get to know and appreciate my assistant, Marvel Nash, but the two of us deal with around 1,500 of you distance students! Whenever you send us email, or send in a request, please give us your full contact information every time you correspond. It's not that we don't remember you, we just can't remember all your phone numbers and mailing addresses! :-)

Hopefully those tips don't sound too daunting - they really will make your dealings with the library go much more smoothly. As always - don't be afraid to use us, we're here for **you!**

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