Blending In: Collaborating with an Instructor in an Online Course

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Abstract
Blended and embedded librarianship describe efforts by librarians to integrate information literacy more closely into courses, especially online. In this case study, online tutorials replace a librarian-taught research skills session for a course that has moved from face to face to online. Issues discussed include ways to integrate research skills in an online course, collaboration with faculty, and assessment of that instruction. Though successful, more research is needed to understand how students respond to online tutorials, and instructional design is affirmed as necessary to make online tutorials effective and engaging.

Introduction
As more faculty take their courses online, traditional support such as library instruction sessions can fall off the schedule unless librarians also actively connect with faculty and students where they are working. If learning goals are the same regardless of the mode of instruction, students need information literacy as much—if not more—while they pursue their program of study without setting foot in the library. But several challenges confront librarians who are establishing their role in this service frontier such as collaborating with faculty, computer assisted instruction (CAI), and pedagogies that engage students. This article is a case study of a successfully embedded research skills session in an online Freshman Composition course. It
explored questions such as how best to collaborate with teaching faculty, how to deliver instruction in a content/course management system (CMS), and how to assess it. Given that creating online tutorials can require a substantial initial investment, a central question is the degree to which an online tutorial developed by one institution can be effectively repackaged to meet the learning goals of another. This case affirms embedded or blended librarianship as an effective approach to online instruction.

California State University (CSU) Stanislaus is a commuter campus that serves six counties, so it has always had a commitment to distance education. Recently the administration has facilitated an expansion of online courses so that in the past four years, the number of fully online and hybrid offerings has undergone a fourfold increase from 28 to 121 per year.1 The CSU system-wide 2005 Libraries Strategic Plan also includes as one of its goals to “integrate library resources and services in learning management systems.”2

In addition, librarians at CSU Stanislaus agreed that online tutorials could deliver information literacy in a more flexible way. Several roadblocks had to be negotiated including allocating resources, innovating curriculum to fit online pedagogies, purchasing software, and training librarians to use it. These are issues faced by most libraries that venture into online instruction.3 An English department faculty member spurred the initiative forward when he asked the librarian who normally conducts the in-person research skills session to develop something equivalent for his new online freshman composition course. To get started, the librarian employed freely available tutorials before creating new ones in-house. This allowed them to experiment with what works in others’ tutorials before building their own.4
Literature Search

The literature praises many benefits of computer assisted instruction (CAI) for students, librarians, and faculty, though it acknowledges drawbacks. Today most students thrive on digital technologies, so online instruction can engage them more effectively. In addition, online instruction can be more interactive and customizable for diverse learning styles, and it can give immediate feedback, all potentially increasing instructional effectiveness. CAI is advantageous for librarians because it is scaleable, offers instruction just in time, and offers opportunities for librarians to share their technology expertise. As resources migrate increasingly online, so too must librarians, lest they be marginalized.

Teaching faculty can embed online tutorials into their own instruction, giving them more flexibility. However, self-contained online tutorials would give librarians fewer contacts with students, perhaps leading to more shallow research. On the other hand, faculty can collaborate with librarians to build more effective library research assignments by working with librarians in a course/content management system (CMS).

Bhavnagri and Bielat saw the collaboration between faculty and librarian within the CMS in terms of Vygotsky’s “scaffolding” and “zones of proximal development” theories. Not only do the librarian and faculty member support each other and students to higher zones (levels) of knowledge, skills, and independence, but also the CMS technology itself “scaffolds” novices toward these higher zones by offering self-paced instruction, peer teaching opportunities, and communication forums. One difficulty with such technology is that librarians must climb the steep learning curve to learn systems that, in early versions, sometimes proved not worth the time commitment.

Librarians at SUNY Oswego built online instruction to reduce their teaching load, but faced with faculty resistance, librarians ended up teaching in both modes.
Their experience highlights the complexity and time-intensive nature of building CMS content, collaborating with individual faculty, and sharing instruction.\textsuperscript{14}

Librarians are exploring the many ways to teach in CMS. Shank and Dewald describe librarian interaction with faculty in CMS on both administrative and course levels.\textsuperscript{15} Administrative refers to librarians involved in implementing the campus system or building common course shells that include links to library sources. For instance, a librarian for a distance engineering program at the University of Florida built her own “course” in WebCT for tutorials, instructional videos, and other library resources specific to the program. A link to this Library Lounge was then added to each Engineering program WebCT course shell.\textsuperscript{16} At Oakland University, freshman composition students were co-enrolled in the librarian’s supplemental WebCT course which consisted of three modules introducing them to the library, catalog, and databases, each with quizzes.\textsuperscript{17}

Course-level integration in CMS courses seems to be more common. In this method, librarians negotiate with individual faculty members over how much presence the librarian might have in his or her course, either to supplement or replace the in-person session. An advantage is that library links or research guides appear in the CMS workspace—students don’t have to look for them elsewhere.\textsuperscript{18} Also, these links allow more interactivity during the in-person session than listening to a lecture.\textsuperscript{19}

As with administrative-level integration, there are several ways to go about course-level integration. At the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, the components of the librarian-
taught research skills session were dispersed throughout the Blackboard course: tutorial objectives in the Course Information folder, the tutorial itself in several folders of the Course Documents section, a bibliography in the Books section, and practice exercises in the Assessment Manager section.\textsuperscript{20} At Prince George’s Community College, librarians’ links were pasted into a forum, and librarians were given access at the assistant level with the responsibility of monitoring student questions posted to the site.\textsuperscript{21} At the University of Central Missouri, librarians were responsible for monitoring such forum questions in addition to delivering synchronous distance instruction sessions, evaluating student rough drafts, and grading papers!\textsuperscript{22}

Such collaboration with teaching faculty is gaining credence as the best way for librarians to deliver information literacy instruction and remain relevant to teaching and learning. In their “Characteristics of Programs of Information Literacy that Illustrate Best Practices: A Guideline,” Academic, College and Research Libraries (ACRL) suggests librarians work with faculty as a best practice to disseminate information literacy.\textsuperscript{23} Mounce’s annotated bibliography of librarian collaboration with English instructors illustrates how these collaborations between faculty and librarians differ along institutional and interpersonal lines.\textsuperscript{24} Although there is often resistance from faculty,\textsuperscript{25} the consensus among librarians is that building bridges and improving communication with faculty is worth pursuing.\textsuperscript{26}

In this atmosphere of diverse challenges and responses to delivering information literacy, the trends of blended and embedded librarianship offer focused, empowering roles for librarians. These librarians lead rather than follow faculty, and they embrace technology for developing new services and relationships. Elements of these strategies include building an online presence,
promoting expertise in instructional design, assessing, and becoming problem-solvers for faculty working in CMS. The goal is to partner with faculty, not simply support them.  

**English Composition 102**

After the freshman composition instructor and librarian agreed to develop an online research skills session for his new fully online course, they began the back and forth communication to develop appropriate learning outcomes, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The goals of the in-person session, which supported two assignments requiring sources, typically included turning a topic into keywords, locating and retrieving relevant information from general databases, and the difference between library sources and the World Wide Web. In addition to these learning goals, they wanted the tutorials to be brief, easy to access, and to include active learning.

There are a few places on the Web to look for peer reviewed online tutorials, such as Merlot and American Library Association’s Primo. The librarian opted for a meta-database of these freely-available tutorials available from the CSU librarians’ learning community Website “Information & Communication Technology (ICT) Literacy.” Called Digital Learning Objects (DLOs), these are quality tutorials searchable by title, keyword, subject, or ACRL Information Literacy Standard. A search of this database revealed the most useful tutorials for the purpose. Though all of the tutorials in the database were well designed, some included more interactive elements and graphics than others. Particularly important were tutorials in which students had a high level of control over navigation. Four of the tutorials in the University of Washington suite were chosen (Basics, Information Cycles, Topics, and Evaluating Information) and an engaging Web evaluation tutorial called the Web Detective. To those were added a static html guide to
Academic Search Elite available from the CSU Stanislaus library homepage. The faculty member agreed to all after comparing the Web Detective with another Web evaluation tool that he had used before.

In addition to the interactive elements, he also wanted some form of engagement with the tutorials which could be submitted to him as verification of learning. The quizzes built into many of these tutorials could not be used, so question prompts were suggested asking students to relate what they learned in each tutorial to their own research topic. He liked the idea of this research log, a set of reflections on the steps in the research process. It showed higher level learning in the analysis and synthesis that are necessary to make decisions about students’ evolving topics based on what they learned in the tutorials. These question prompts were written and added to the CMS quiz manager as free text questions.

For access to this set of tutorials, the instructor proposed a folder within his Blackboard CMS course assignment section. Within this folder were assembled links to the tutorials and the question prompt for each on an html page. The librarian also contextualized these links with a brief introduction to basic library services and followed them with ample library contacts in order to welcome students’ questions (see Appendix). The research log questions would be given a “check off” credit when turned in with the research papers.

**Assessment**

Students in this class typically fill out an evaluation of the course at the end of the semester, so the question about the in-person research skills session had to be re-worded slightly. To the
question asking whether the library tutorials were helpful, three students strongly agreed, nine agreed, and two were neutral. Four students left additional positive comments in the free text area. The instructor also completed a survey to after the papers were graded in order to give direct assessment of students’ research skills as reflected in their work. He either strongly agreed or agreed that students found enough sources, they were relevant, authoritative, and of the appropriate type. Their citations were not always correct, but correct citations were not a learning goal of the tutorials. His responses reflected the responses of 30 faculty who took the same survey after evaluating student research assignments facilitated by a librarian-taught in-person session. At least 90% of those respondents also strongly agreed or agreed that students’ included enough, relevant, authoritative sources of the appropriate type. They agreed with this faculty member that citations were less satisfactory, with only a third indicating “strongly agree” to correct citations. Additionally, he said students expressed no difficulty in using the tutorials or answering the research log questions. He thought it would be useful to survey students about their research process: how they thought about and used sources. He was satisfied with their responses in the research log, though a couple students did not complete them, and he speculated that offering more than the “check off” credit might engender more motivation. On the whole he was pleased with the tutorials, especially as they seemed to give students an improved sense of what constitutes a good source.

Discussion

The instructor determined the appropriate level of librarian interaction for his course. The librarian did not have shared control of his CMS to engage in ongoing monitoring, collaboration, or interaction with students that the above literature suggests is possible. On the other hand, the
librarian’s time was not consumed by the project once my package was delivered. The librarian was highly engaged in assembling the tutorial, and it did seem like a shared task, but this instructor was quite capable of leading with technology. Given the relatively minor role of research skills in the overall course goals of this freshman composition course, this situation did not merit a significant presence by a librarian. More research intensive courses would find more involvement by a librarian useful. For example in an upper division history course at the University of Central Missouri, important connections between students and the library were forged through the librarians’ proactive participation in the CMS as the student needs unfolded.\textsuperscript{28} Nor was there resistance to collaboration described in the literature above. This knowledgeable and friendly faculty member was quite willing to give the librarian much latitude within boundaries he established. Other faculty may want a fully “blended” librarian to be a CMS problem solver.\textsuperscript{29} As librarians attempt to integrate more, they must balance their agenda against the larger course agenda as set by the instructor. The full suite of blended librarian services gives librarians much power, but they must negotiate for that power based on trust and diplomatic communication.\textsuperscript{30} In an Association of Research Libraries survey, librarians indicated personal contacts are the most successful way for librarians to collaborate with faculty.\textsuperscript{31}

One difficulty with using tutorials from another institution is that they are usually specific to the institution. Some tutorials will discuss unique facilities, policies, or tools and cannot be borrowed by another institution without limited usefulness or downright confusion. On the other hand, a tutorial for a generic concept such as Boolean searching can have universal application. The University of Washington tutorials chosen were of the generic type, while the Academic
Search Elite tutorial from the CSU Stanislaus library included information helpful to local students’ navigation to it from their library’s home page. The slightly borrowed look of most of the tutorials in my suite was deemed acceptable, but next semester the student survey will be augmented to glean more of students’ affective and cognitive responses to this patchwork of links. This feedback will contribute to the design of purpose-built tutorials to replace them.

Given that the assessment measure indicates success of this research skills collaborative effort, the most important issue remaining is the motivation factor that contributes to whether students engage in these tutorials. The suggestion by the instructor in the Assessment section above that students could be more motivated uncovers a persistent issue for online research skills instruction. Students may show “dismal completion rates if not graded”32 or skip it entirely.33 When the tutorial moves online, students’ motivation to engage in them is even more important: “Generally it is easier to assume that students will see tutorial use as another assignment rather than as something that will affect the quality of their assignments and research.”34 These students’ attitudes influence how effectively we can deliver information literacy: “We recognize that students are more motivated by the prospect of a grade that counts rather than the fact that information skills are transferable and can make a positive contribution to lifelong learning.”35

At issue here is the relative importance of information literacy to other course goals, as well as the way the instruction is delivered, both of which have dogged librarians’ IL efforts. Many studies have tried to determine whether online tutorials are more well-received by students or more effective than in-person instruction.36 Results rate both modes more or less equally disappointing. Three studies compared in-person with online library research skills instruction,
and they all showed equally mediocre post-instruction test scores, though confidence levels where higher for online. Another study showed only half of students preferred online instruction, and only one in four faculty did. Love and Norwood’s poll determined that half of the students felt the online instruction was helpful. Prorak, Hill and Hunter weathered comments of “boring” and “I already know this stuff,” and Lo and Dale found few students completed all tutorials, though they had similar reactions to the in-person and online. To increase engagement and appeal to multiple learning styles, best practices suggest building interactivity and feedback into tutorials. In addition to more engaging design, the instructor also has a role to play in making the tutorial relevant to students.

Relevance should be a focus of librarian/faculty collaboration for research skills instruction. One of the reasons students in this pilot and other tutorials may not finish tutorials, or learn much from them, is that it is an extra, appended to the important (graded) assignments. One of the skills students must learn well in college is time and task management, such as weighing the time spent on an assignment against the credit it produces. In this calculus, a suite of several tutorials about information concepts and finer points of searching databases may be perceived as a barrier to achieving the main task. One could say that the student must “pay” for the online tutorial in time spent, whereas if the research skills instruction is part of a physical class meeting, students have already conceded the time to the instructor, who in turn pays for it in valuable class time. At minimum, librarians and faculty should make clear the gain in skills, gain in credit, and brevity of this research skills “extra.” More deeply, the instructor and librarian should discuss just how much information literacy is relevant to the course goals, and what aspects merit integration into instruction, discussions, and assignments. Perhaps only a brief tutorial for an
online database is needed for the course, even though the librarian feels this course is the opportunity to deliver the whole gamut of skills. If the instructor agrees that a range of research skills from the creation of information to changes in copyright is warranted, then they may be integrated into several assignments, not delivered all at once. Information literacy topics can be presented as timely and thought-provoking. For example, ownership of information and authority issues can be taught using rule-bending new media such as Youtube and Wikipedia. Issues surrounding the migration from the print world to digital can use as examples Google Books or Kindles. In this way, the coin by which IL skills are valued in students’ perception could become curiosity generated rather than time expended or credit earned.

Such integration would require an even greater partnership with teaching faculty. Faculty would have to revisit the relationship of the research skills instruction to other course goals. Librarians may have to give up their framework of a full suite of tutorials that, as a unit, are comprehensive but daunting. In a learner-centered, distributed learning paradigm of online instruction, students tailor the learning experience to meet their needs, including when, where, and at what pace. Librarians can blend this experience through collaboration, design, and assessment.

Conclusions

The faculty/librarian collaboration for this course continues. The assessment instrument will include more questions to explore students’ attitudes and motivations surrounding the online tutorials. User feedback is important to design a user experience that facilitates more independent online learning, rather than assuming that in-person pedagogies work well. Using this experience as a springboard, CSU Stanislaus library is working with an instructional
designer to build online tutorials tailored to its resources and to specific courses. This pilot proved that online tutorials can work, even if cobbled together from other institutions, and that building tutorials is worth the effort, especially if designed with student engagement in mind. As librarians discuss what services will be needed in the future, they certainly must include instructional design, assessment of learning, and collaboration with faculty as pillars of effective information literacy instruction.

Appendix

Library Research

For some of your papers, outside sources help support your thesis. Possible sources include newspaper articles, other people, popular magazine articles, scholarly research studies, textbooks, encyclopedias, and books. The World Wide Web can also be a source if your instructor allows it, and if you are able to certify the quality of that information.

In the library we have books, encyclopedias, and both popular and scholarly articles. All of these can be either in print or electronic format.

- Books are searched through the library catalog.
- The library home page has many resources, including online reference sources (encyclopedias and dictionaries).
- Journal articles are found through entering keywords into the best library journal databases for your topic.

Online Tutorials

The tutorials below will walk you through the research process, including the differences between types of information, translating your topic into keywords, and using keywords in databases. Record your responses to each tutorial in your research journal.

**Tutorial 1:** University of Washington Research 101- The Basics [http://www.lib.washington.edu/uwill/research101/basic00.htm](http://www.lib.washington.edu/uwill/research101/basic00.htm)

**For your journal response:** For your topic, which types of information mentioned in the tutorial may be useful (Free Web, library databases, primary, secondary, popular, scholarly)? Why?

**Tutorial 2:** University of Washington Research 101- Information Cycles [http://www.lib.washington.edu/uwill/research101/intro00.htm](http://www.lib.washington.edu/uwill/research101/intro00.htm)

**For your journal response:** For your topic, which information sources from the eight described might not work well? Why not? Review the strengths and considerations for each to help you decide.
Tutorial 3: University of Washington Research 101 - Topics
http://www.lib.washington.edu/uwill/research101/topic00.htm

For your journal response: The tutorial broke a topic into keywords for database searches. For your topic, list as many keywords as you can think of (broader, narrower, and synonyms) that may be useful for database searches.

Tutorial 4: CSU Stanislaus Academic Search Elite Guide - Tutorial

Academic Search Elite is our most popular database. If you access it from home, you will be required to log in with your campus Id. This database has information from popular magazines and academic journals across the disciplines, and often the full text of the article you want.

When it does not have the full text, the Find It button will look in our other online sources for your article in PDF or HTML format.

For your journal response: Use the Academic Search Elite database to find articles based on different combinations of your keywords. Explore the database’s advanced features described in the handout to improve your result list. Which features and keywords helped the most to reveal good articles? Feel free to ask a librarian for help if you are finding too much or not enough hits.


For your journal response: Based on the tutorial’s strategies for evaluating credibility and usefulness, what are some points you can list to defend each of your chosen sources?

Tutorial 6: The Internet Detective
http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/index.html

For your journal response: Explain which criteria for evaluating Web sites in the “Detective Work” section of the tutorial persuaded you that your chosen Web sites were quality.

We invite you to come to the library to study, search for information, and ask the reference librarian questions. You can also contact a reference librarian through email, phone, or chat. We want to help empower you in this complex information world!

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Notes

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38 Michel, “What Do They Really Think?”


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