

Fifteenth Distance Library Services Conference – Memphis, Tennessee

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The biennial 15th Distance Library Services Conference (DLS) in Memphis Tennessee April 18-20th was attended by close to 300 librarians (200 first time attendees) from coast-to-coast including several international ports of call made it the second largest attended DLS conference in thirty years. Unlike most library conferences DLS focuses specifically on distant delivery of library resources. The specialized nature of this event is helpful and exhilarating on many levels, but none so as much as getting to meet and talk shop with distance librarians from every type of institution, all with similar and unique experiences in providing library service and personal assistance to wide-ranging sophistications of student/faculty patrons and all of us asking the same question: How might we improve what we do in distance library delivery?

The special nature of the DLS conference and the work we have been doing at Benedictine Library with the burgeoning blended graduate programs prompted my former colleague, Ariel Neff, and I to propose a conference paper titled Collegial Librarians: The Faculty-Librarian Partnership in Distance Education. The paper was accepted and we were honored to present a 50 minute discussion as part of the conference proceedings.

Some of the sessions I found useful for my area of work interest:

Literature Review at a Distance: Improving Doctoral Student Information Literacy and Increasing Research Self-Efficacy - Jacqueline Courtney Klentzin, PhD, Robert Morris University, Philadelphia, PA

Dr. Klentzin developed a one-credit literature review workshop for distance Educational Leadership students at Robert Morris University. Her intentions were to orient students to resources and services of the library by using the review of literature as a guide to resource discovery and through their discovery understand their study as a part of the larger research stream.

Following a seven week structure describing the literature review and using all information resources in a measured way, she covered finding appropriate books, articles, advanced searching, dissertations, organization and citation. She did this through creating email modular lessons that were emailed to students in easy to digest bite-sized lessons, where she also had them retain all their completed corrected submissions to form their personalized research handbook to refer to in the future.

Embracing a Customer Service Mindset: A Fresh Examination of Services for Distance Learners – Heidi Steiner, Norwich University Northfield, VT.

Ms. Steiner firmly believes that people don't talk enough about customer service and distance learners and believes we should all adopt business models and ideologies to support distance service. She believes that distance librarians should adopt the mindset of retailers and the ethos of selling in order to provide our customers with the finest service.

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Ms. Steiner extolled the principles of Seth Godin the grandfather of permission marketing who stated that “customer service is the cheapest form of marketing and that functionality is the new marketing.” She says that approachability, interest, and positive attitude when performing digital reference is essential calling it meaningful activity and believes there should be “mystery shoppers” for digital reference much like there is for brick and mortar retail shopping as a way to guide to better service.

She argues that website design and functionality should provide distance learners the same or a higher level of customer service as is provided within the library itself. Through this process a better user experience will translate into word-of-mouth marketing to other students and users. Steiner believes that the first words out of the mouth of the distance service provider should be friendly and reassuring. When answering a call or chat, she gives her name and her philosophy of service is very much as is taught to Zappo’s employees in making the customer feel significant and their question important.

Off the Self and Out of the Box: Saving Time, Meeting Outcomes and Reaching Students with Information Literacy Modules – Jenn Kelley, College of DuPage Glen Ellyn, Illinois

It was a difficult task for the College of DuPage librarians to gain a foothold with information literacy for their large bevy of 300 online class offerings covering 16 disciplines until the college-wide adoption of revised General Education Outcomes in 2009 the first of eight outcomes addressed was information literacy.

The COD Library Instruction Committee was tasked with developing a method of delivery for their online and distance classes. They wanted COD-specific tutorials and debated whether tutorials should be comprehensive, introductory, and they decided to go with Blackboard based information literacy modules. As Jenn Kelley explains it, “The content of the modules would introduce students to information literacy concepts, reinforce information literacy skills and stand as an orientation to basic competencies, creating a platform on which more advanced instruction could be built.” They used as a model the University of Washington’s Research 101 tutorial as a primary content source and outline for organizing the modules

Comprised of six units: Basics, Information Cycles, Topics, Searching, Finding and Evaluating Students move at their own pace through text, interactive elements, worksheets, and review quizzes and outcomes which correspond to the College’s Gen Ed outcomes and the library’s IL instruction standards assessment is gauged through brief multiple choice quizzes. They launched a pilot program the summer in 2011 and received excellent from faculty wanting to enter the information literacy modules into their Blackboard course pages.

Collegial Librarians: The Faculty-Librarian-Student Partnership in Distance Education – Kent Carrico, Benedictine University and Ariel Neff, University of Wisconsin-Madison Chemistry Library

Within the past six years the student population has more than doubled at Benedictine University and that includes a healthy growing graduate population of blended and online programs. As the graduate populations have grown so has the type and amount of specialized assistance much of it falling to the librarian as they reach individual graduate students by becoming instructional partners with the program directors and instructors.

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The process Neff and Carrico described begins with identifying opportunities to form relationships with program directors, curriculum creators, and faculty and through this association becoming involved with new, emerging and changing programs. The second step is orientation, involving social contact and personalizing the librarian-student relationship, allowing students to realize their librarians are part of the community of engaged experts that they can draw upon. Step three is to develop an individual counseling/coaching relationship with those students who need additional mentoring.

The personalization on distance education becomes a necessary component because of the very isolating nature of the distance graduate experience (especially through the thesis process) and because many graduate programs do not have service structures in place to help struggling member students as they hit walls and obstacles through the process. The fact is many students simply feel vulnerable speaking with professors and advisors during their dissertation/thesis process and librarians have adapted their service to become as counselors, collegial partners in listening and then getting them back on track to the research issues.

The presentation was augmented with video clips of program directors, professors, and graduate students speaking candidly about the Library service, expectations, the challenges inherent in graduate work, and how they see the librarian as being an essential spoke in the academic mission.

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