Collaborating for Student Success: A Model for Librarian Embedding in Faculty Blackboard Courses

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This paper presents a faculty-librarian collaborative course model for information literacy. Course-specific library resources and information literacy instruction are integrated seamlessly into the faculty Blackboard course. The librarian works with the faculty in the planning and design of the library component and shares with the faculty the responsibilities of teaching students effective research skills and the task of evaluating student progress. Technologies are also used to enhance teaching and learning, including tutorials, discussion boards and blogs, plagiarism detection tools Turnitin and SafeAssign. Results suggest that librarian-faculty collaboration in Blackboard online courses helps improve student learning and foster information literacy. The author describes this model in detail, discusses its benefits and challenges, and offers recommendations for successful librarian-faculty collaboration.

Introduction

Colleges and universities have seen phenomenal growth in online learning. According to a recent Pew Research Center study on higher education and the digital revolution (2011), 77% of college presidents report that their institutions now offer online courses, and college presidents predict substantial growth in online learning: 15% say most of the current undergraduate students have taken a class online, 50% predict that ten years from now most of their students will take classes online. While learning management systems (LMS) such as Blackboard were once primarily used for distance education, instructors nowadays use them more often for hybrid and traditional face-to-face courses. At the City University of New York (CUNY), Blackboard is the standard LMS for the University’s 23 campuses. Every CUNY course comes with a Blackboard course shell for the instructor to adopt.

The boom in digital information and information technology has brought us many challenges. Even though students today have anytime anywhere access to digital scholarly information, many lack the critical information skills to find, evaluate, synthesize and apply information in a meaningful way (Fitzgerald, 2004; Lampert, 2005). Student plagiarism has increased. A recent Pew Research Center study (2011) reports that most college presidents (55%) say that plagiarism in students’ papers has increased over the past 10 years, and that 89% say computers and the Internet have played a major role. Many students ignore the library’s high-quality scholarly sources, and choose to use essentially Internet sources for research assignments. The 2005 OCLC survey findings indicate that 84 percent of information searches by college students begin with a search engine, and Google was the overwhelming favorite (68 percent). Only Two percent of college students start their search at a library Web site. Violations of academic honesty on one hand, and the availability of high-quality scholarly resources from the library for doing great work on the other now require that librarians and faculty work together.

To have the most effective impact on student learning, librarians need to collaborate with faculty to integrate information literacy into the curriculum (Lampert, 2004; Xiao & Choy, 2006). The faculty-librarian collaborative course model for information literacy presented here can be an effective strategy for helping students meet the challenges of the digital age.

Literature Review

There is a recent surge in literature on “embedded librarians”. The phrase is said to come from embedded journalists, and “places a reference librarian right in the midst of where the user is to teach research skills whenever and wherever instruction is needed” (Shumaker, 2009). In colleges and universities, our users are in the classroom, especially the electronic classroom. This review focuses on librarians teaching research skills in faculty online courses using LMS such as Blackboard.

There are many published accounts in the literature on academic librarians’ use of Blackboard for library/information literacy instruction, and for supporting distance learning. As early as 2002, Christopher Cox wrote an article in which he encouraged librarians to “become a part of the course” by integrating library instruction into faculty Blackboard courses (Cox, 2002). Discussions on the strategic importance of a library presence in faculty online course websites also appeared in literature. “Libraries risk being bypassed by this technology and losing relevance to students and faculty if they do not establish their presence in courseware” cautioned Shank and Dewald (2003). Research study at the Cornell University Library confirmed the crucial importance of seamless linking of course websites and library resources “in an age where a growing number of students do not see a difference between what is offered by library resources and Web search engines”
(Rieger et al., 2004). Research study of courses on campus LMS also concluded that linking to library’s subscription databases and journal articles in courses on the LMS was difficult; that faculty’s inclusion of library resources such as databases in their online courses were not well presented; some faculty were not aware of how the library might further their teaching (Hatfield & Brahmi, 2004; Rieger et al., 2004).

In recent years, as more distance learning courses are offered at colleges and universities, librarians found ways to collaborate with faculty in courses on LMS to provide library services to the distance learning students. Library electronic resources, online research guides, ask a librarian virtual service, and discussion boards, are embedded into faculty online courses (Black, 2008; Daly, 2010; Herring et al., 2009; Li, 2011; Matthew & Schroeder, 2006; Stewart, 2007). To include more research instruction, librarians have also embedded online tutorials into LMS (Dawson et al.; Li, 2011; Stanton, 2011). However, research study indicates that librarians’ use of LMS “remains underdeveloped”, and “…the seamless integration of library resources, information literacy, and librarian/faculty collaboration in the online classroom is lacking, and needs to be developed” (Jackson, 2007).

The Faculty-Librarian Collaborative Course Model for Information Literacy

Key Strategies:

- The Faculty and the librarian meet to discuss details of their collaboration, and to develop strategies for integrating the library component into the course, including its design, implementation, and evaluation
- The faculty adds the librarian to his/her Blackboard course as TA or Instructor
- The librarian consults the faculty in developing course-related library resources, library instruction pre-test and post-test, and library instruction survey. Resources may include library databases related to the discipline, tutorials, and plagiarism prevention resources, and online style guides
- Teach students how to use these resources effectively in class and online
- Prevent plagiarism: use plagiarism detection services Turnitin or SafeAssign as teaching tool to help students learn how to work with sources ethically and creatively
- Help students at their point of need via discussion boards, blogs email, phone, and in-person consultation.
- Share the task of evaluating student progress with the faculty
- Faculty and librarian meet to evaluate their collaboration, and plan for next semester

Examples from the CSI Library

Collaboration with Faculty in Nursing:

The Nursing Department at CSI offers associate, bachelor’s, and master’s degree programs in nursing. Faculty members use Blackboard for online courses, as well as for hybrid, and traditional face-to-face courses. Promoting information literacy among nursing students is critical in helping them succeed not only in their courses, but also in their careers as healthcare professionals. Our collaboration with nursing faculty started in 2004 when we worked with the coordinator of an associate degree nursing program to redesign a library orientation program for students. At that time the library was offering two 45-minute library orientation sessions to 2 groups of students, about 45 students in one session. The purpose of the orientation program was to introduce students to essential nursing resources and help them complete a 10-13 page cultural research paper. Due to large class size, the varying levels of computer/library skills among students, many students needed a lot more help than our one-shot instruction session could provide.

The redesigned library orientation program has two main components: one-hour library instruction to help students gain knowledge and skills necessary for cultural and transcultural nursing research, and a library course website using Blackboard to extend library instruction to support student Cultural Discovery activities. Multiple library instruction sessions were available to allow for small group work and hands-on experience with database searching. The use of a library course website using Blackboard helped support students’ cultural discovery and research beyond the limited one-shot library instruction. The course website, Resources in Transcultural Nursing provided students with a variety of course specific resources, including a tutorial for the research paper, links to nursing databases, websites in transcultural nursing, a bibliography of scholarly journal articles on various ethnic groups, as well as online writing and citation guides. These resources, accessible anytime, helped reinforce what was taught in the one-shot session, and allowed students, especially those who needed extra help, to learn at their own pace. The library orientation evaluation at the end of their eight-week research project, participated by 80 students (a 92 percent response rate) indicated that the library orientation program made students more aware of the resources available for nursing, especially transcultural nursing research, that Blackboard was a useful tool for library instruction, and our strategies helped improve student ability to search nursing databases for scholarly articles to be included in their research paper (Xiao, 2005).

Encouraged by the positive feedback, the library proposed to the nursing faculty that for future classes, the core components of the Resources in Transcultural Nursing library course website be integrated into the NRS 110
course website. By doing so, students would have access to all the course-related library resources right in their nursing course, eliminating the need to click on a separate library course. We also suggested using discussion boards to allow students to ask questions and get help. At the time of the library’s proposal, professors teaching NRS 110 merged all ten course sections into one Blackboard course, and use it to enhance their face-to-face classroom instruction. After consultation among themselves, and with students who had attended the library orientation, the professors agreed to give the library’s proposal a try, and added the librarian as instructor to their NRS 110 course.

Spring 2005 marked the beginning of the integration of library resources into NRS110 faculty Blackboard course, and close collaboration between CSI librarians and NRS 110 faculty in utilizing Blackboard to deliver and extend not only the NRS 110 library orientation program, but also distance learning and hybrid courses. Over the years, we have continued to improve our strategies by incorporating library resources, information literacy, educational technology, and assessment into nursing courses. Library instruction, no longer limited to the one-shot session, continues with tutorials and other learning activities, with students posting their questions on the discussion boards and blogs, and seeking help for information sources for their research projects. The online discussion forum has become a learning community where the students, professors, and the librarian come together to help each other, and share their experiences. Faculty-librarian collaboration helped students become familiar with professional nursing literature, and gain information skills critical for their success as healthcare professionals.

Collaboration with Faculty in Education

CSI education professors have the responsibility of preparing students for a rewarding career as teachers/educators. Helping education students develop information literacy is critical not only for their own success as students, but as teachers. Librarians have been providing instruction sessions to help students develop those crucial information literacy/research skills. One semester, a librarian had the opportunity to collaborate semester-long with a professor who taught a graduate education seminar course. The objectives of the collaboration were to help students conduct effective educational research using scholarly journal articles and avoid plagiarism. Information literacy components and course-specific library resources were integrated seamlessly into the faculty’s Blackboard course. Resources for the students included library databases related to education, writing resources, APA style guides, plagiarism prevention resources, as well as tutorials to help students access library resources off campus, and register for Turnitin.com, a plagiarism detection service provided by the college. Information about Turnitin, what it does, and how it works was made available on Blackboard course and also discussed in class.

Each student in the course was required to write a literature review paper on a topic related to educational technology that the student could apply to his/her teaching. At the beginning of the semester, the students took a pre-test consisted of ten questions to assess their knowledge of plagiarism and APA citation. The test asked the student to read a passage and the information about its sources, and then decide whether each student’s sample is plagiarized or used the source properly. The results revealed that the students were not clear about what constituted plagiarism, and had difficulty paraphrasing. Another survey informed the librarian and the faculty that 16 out of 20 students had no prior training in conducting educational research utilizing library resources, especially the online databases. Two library instruction sessions were provided to the students, one focusing on education related databases, and the other on Turnitin.com and preventing plagiarism. To help the students distinguish between using Internet search engines and library databases, the students were asked to search for articles on their topics using the Internet before the first library session.

The class met only once a week, but using Blackboard and its communication features allowed the students, the faculty, and the librarian to stay in touch, and continue working on their research projects. By the end of the semester, a total of 187 messages were posted. After a semester-long faculty-librarian collaboration, the students showed significant gains in database searching skills and their ability to avoid plagiarism. No student committed plagiarism according to Turnitin originality reports. The students’ final research paper demonstrated a good selection of research-oriented journal articles in their references, and their ability to integrate sources into their paper and cite them correctly. The faculty found that the quality of papers submitted by this class was higher than those submitted by previous classes. As stated by many students in the class, “the course not only helped them improve research skills and avoid plagiarism, but also allowed them to use the knowledge and skills they gained to educate their students about plagiarism and how to avoid it” (Xiao & Choy, 2006).

Collaboration with faculty in M.A. in Liberal Studies

The M.A. in Liberal Studies (MALS) program at CSI normally takes two years to complete. The students are required to complete a 50-page master’s thesis to graduate. Entering students are often from various disciplines, with vastly different computer and research skills. And many of these students have difficulty finding time to study while holding a full-time job and raising a family. It has been a challenge for students to complete the thesis at the end of two years. For some semesters, professors were able to bring the students into the library for an instruction session,
but most of the time, they did not come. We were looking for alternatives to help these students.

In 2006, one of our librarians who is a graduate of the program, brought up the idea of a teaching collaboration with the program coordinator, who teaches the concluding master’s thesis seminar, LBS 770. The purpose of the course was to facilitate student writing of the master’s theses, and its architecture was designed around the interactions between faculty and students, oral and written critiques of thesis proposals, chapters, and the final versions of their theses. The librarian felt that the course’s architecture and content of interdisciplinary learning would create wonderful opportunities for faculty-librarian collaboration to integrate research help and information literacy into the course and help students complete their theses. The instructor was concerned about the increasing instances of plagiarism, and the use of mainly Internet sources in student papers, and well aware of the need for students to learn how to find, evaluate and use information effectively. He happily accepted the librarian’s offer to collaborate with him with the expectation that the librarian would be the resource person in teaching him and his students how to use Blackboard and Turnitin effectively. The librarian helped him design his first Blackboard course with course-specific library resources and information literacy seamlessly integrated into it. Throughout the semester, the librarian and the instructor worked together to teach students effective research skills while helping them make personal connections to their theses. The librarian also served as thesis advisor for one of the students. The learning experience was transformational.

That semester, fourteen out of twenty students completed their theses, and graduated at the end of their second academic year (the highest in terms of the number of students in the graduating class, and thesis completion rate). The remaining students were at different stages of completion. In evaluating the course, students commented about the effective use of Blackboard in the course, and how the integration of technology, library resources, and research assistance helped to enhance the learning process. They wrote about what they learned in the class. Each student’s story was precious and unique. Reflecting on the course, the professor credited the collaboration between him and the librarian as one of the vital features and reasons for its success. Integrating information literacy and plagiarism prevention instruction into the course helped improve the quality of student work, and prevented plagiarism. Through teaching collaboration, we have built and strengthened our relationships with the MALS faculty and the students, and expanded our collaboration to teach a credit research course for the students on summer.

**Benefits, Challenges & Recommendations**

Librarian-faculty collaboration in integrating course-specific library resources and information literacy instruction into faculty Blackboard courses benefits the students, the librarian, and the library. Our students will have the critical information literacy skills that can help them succeed not only in their courses, but also in developing lifelong learning skills for their professional as well as personal development. Our work with the students in the graduate education course has not only helped them improve research skills and avoid plagiarism, but also allowed them to use the knowledge and skills they gained to help their students do better in school, and educate their students about plagiarism and how to avoid it. Our work with the nursing students helped them develop research skills and cultural competency essential for providing quality health care in today’s increasingly multicultural and global society. The learning experience with the MALS students was transformational. As students engaged themselves with problems of the real world, made personal connections to their theses, and shared their learning, their voices articulated insights about themselves and the world (Xiao & Traboulay, 2007).

Literature on faculty-librarian teaching projects tends to focus on the benefits to students, not the librarian. In my experience, collaboration with teaching faculty benefited me enormously. Through collaboration, I have become a better teacher, a better researcher, and a tenured faculty member of my college. Academic librarians at many institutions, including CUNY have faculty status. Just like teaching faculty, library faculty on the tenure track are required to demonstrate excellence in the three-part mission of the academy: teaching, research, and service. As Tysick and Babb (2006) pointed out that unlike teaching faculty who “learn to assimilate into their departmental culture as doctoral students, the terminal degree in Library Science, the Master’s degree, however, provides training in the day-to-day operation of a library but not experience in scholarly publishing. As a result, library faculty on the tenure track live in a heightened state of anxiety when it comes to tenure and publishing” (p. 94). Collaborating with faculty offers librarians on-the-job training, and opportunities for becoming collaborators and research partners with faculty. Over the years, I have had the good fortune to collaborate with some of the best professors and researchers at the college, who supported, encouraged, and provided inspiration for my work. They have shown great respect for my work and given me more credit than I deserve. I will always remember how my first article got published in a nursing journal back in 2005. It was the nursing faculty who encouraged me to write about my work with the nursing students, took the time to read my manuscript, and gave recommendations for revision. I published 2 articles on my work with nursing students, and was also invited to join two nursing faculty in a book chapter. In subsequent years, I was able to expand my teaching collaboration beyond nursing into other disciplines, and had very rewarding experiences.
In a recent article titled “Partnering for success: Using mini grants to foster faculty/librarian collaborations”, Gordon (2010) pointed out that “one desire that instruction librarians share is the desire to move beyond the traditional one-shot bibliographic instruction session and toward a more collaborative and course integrated model of information literacy”. Several powerful reasons for librarians engaging in-depth collaboration with faculty were cited, including “enhance the image of the library, create enthusiastic library champions among the faculty, and further the success of an information literacy program” (p.152). However, our experience tells us that in-depth collaboration with faculty is not always easy to achieve, and here are some recommendations:

- Be proactive: talk about what the library and your have done, and provide faculty with examples of the many ways we can help the students
- Be willing to invest a great deal of time and effort into the project, and have the confidence that the outcome is worth the effort.
- Seek the support of the library manager.
- Be willing to learn, and experiment.
- Be strategic with course selection and time: embed in courses that have heavy research demands on students, and in which you have strong discipline knowledge.
- Be an active participant in the class, and be available.
- Develop close relationships with the faculty and the students

**Conclusion**

Information literacy is critical for student success. Faculty-librarian collaboration in integrating course-specific library resources and information literacy instruction into the curriculum and in faculty online courses helps ensure student success not only in their courses, but also in developing lifelong learning skills for their professional as well as personal development. By bringing the library and the librarian to where our students are and when they need us, by teaching our students what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it, by being their mentor and co-learner throughout their research process, we can deliver valuable services to our students and contribute to their success.

The digital age has presented us with unique opportunities and challenges. We have made great progress in teaching information literacy and helping our students succeed, but Shumaker (2011) challenged us to move beyond instruction to expand our roles, and to explore strategies for becoming “collaborators and research partners with our faculty (not just serve and support)”. These new roles, he said “can become important elements of the future of Academic librarianship” (p. 27). Librarians have deep knowledge and unique skills that can benefit our students, our faculty, and our institution. By collaborating with our colleagues across disciplines, building strong relationships with our students, and actively engaging in our own learning, we can become collaborators and research partners with our faculty.

**REFERENCES**


