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Online Learning in Post-COVID Library Instruction: Creating a Library Skills and Orientation Blackboard Course at the University of Mississippi

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development process of a library Blackboard course by a Research & Instruction Librarian at the University of Mississippi over the course of one summer. The Library Skills and Orientation course sought to address two issues: limited first-year instruction capabilities and underdeveloped skillsets in upper-level students. It was designed to replace first-year instruction where able and supplement subject-specific instruction where needed. Pursuing new online learning initiatives can be a tough sell, however, when many institutions are attempting to return to normal in-person routines after two years of forced virtual work due to the pandemic. This paper discusses not only the obstacles faced by the librarian who created the course – specifically related to time constraints, librarian inexperience, and buy-in – but also opportunities that other academic libraries can take advantage of to expand online learning initiatives post-Covid.

KEYWORDS

instruction, online learning, Blackboard, post-Covid

INTRODUCTION

This essay discusses the creation of a library Blackboard course at the University of Mississippi, which the author developed over the course of the summer in 2022. There are numerous situations which might dictate the need for more extensive online learning materials such as this, some of which are explained within the context of the University of Mississippi. Online course design comes with many challenges, depending on timing and execution, but there are many benefits to rolling out a new resource regardless of its overall success. This essay will touch on a few setbacks and opportunities encountered by the author throughout the project, framing some within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and remote work in general. The author describes this process from conceptualization to reality. They provide a collection of factors to be considered at the front end, complications to watch out for during development, and promotional tactics that may be beneficial moving forward. Many different libraries can apply these suggestions and strategies in their own online learning initiatives.

IN CONTEXT: UNDERGRADUATE INSTRUCTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI First-Year Instruction Initiatives

Most library instruction conducted at the University of Mississippi is for first-year programs. Courses included in those programs primarily come from two departments. Fundamentals of Higher Education (EDHE) courses, housed within the Student Success Center, focus on helping students achieve academic success. Some introduce first-year and transfer students to the university, while others work with students in danger of or returning from academic probation. Writing classes come from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric; they look to the library for basic research skills such as choosing a topic and formulating a research question. Other specialty courses include honors and speech classes; these students usually come into the library for research days based on specific topics. Library sessions for each group tend to cover similar material, either a broad library introduction or an overview of research skills. Until recently, certain EDHE courses have been the only exceptions. Library sessions for students on academic probation focus less on library-specific skills and more on career preparedness or critical thinking. How-

ever, the University of Mississippi's Quality Enhancement Plan, titled Thinkforward, aims to expand critical thinking instruction across campus (The University of Mississippi, 2019). Therefore, librarians have been working on critical thinking and information literacy concepts in more first-year library instruction sessions, increasing overlap between courses.

Liaison Librarian Instruction

While first-year courses are taught almost exclusively by the Research & Instruction Department at the University of Mississippi, library instruction for other undergraduate and graduate students is done by subject liaisons dispersed through multiple library departments. Individual librarians work with faculty in one or more subject areas to provide library sessions based on instructor requests. Standardized library resources such as research guides and tutorial videos are available for anyone to use, but many librarians choose to develop and edit their own materials for each session they teach.

Over the last two semesters, librarians have noticed that some lower-level undergraduate courses require the same type of library instruction regardless of their subject. The author taught multiple 200-level Political Science courses mainly interested in an overview of library services and resources, for example, not research specific to the discipline. They also substituted for another liaison's upper-level Gender Studies class, where the instructor had requested a sit-in research day with keyword search demonstrations across multiple types of resources, which the author was able to provide despite having no subject expertise related to the course. When conducting research consultations in their own liaison areas, the author found that explaining general search strategies – manipulating keywords with Boolean operators, using filters built into the library's search system, browsing journals and databases by subject, etc. – was enough for most students to get started on a research project. The author noticed that even upper-level undergraduate and graduate students were sometimes unaware of One Search, the University of Mississippi Libraries' primary discovery system, based on student behavior that they observed in multiple different research consultations. Research & Instruction librarians also observed other problematic information-seeking behaviors such as: typing an entire prompt or question into the search box, not knowing how to access articles through the library website, and being unable to successfully save or share resources from search results. These skills apply to all disciplines and thus fall to all liaisons to address as necessary.

It became clear that many students at the University of Mississippi could benefit from an occasional refresher on library services and resources, basic research skills, or simply a reminder that librarians are available for help at any stage of their academic career. However, the way that the liaison program is structured leaves library instruction up to individual faculty members and librarians. Because liaison work includes many wide-ranging duties, from book ordering to research consultations as well as teaching, it can be difficult for liaisons to find time to incorporate library orientation content into subject-specific sections.

Department Changes

Having distinct first-year instruction courses that take priority in the Research & Instruction Department at the University of Mississippi ensures that almost all students coming into the university have some knowledge of the library. Once students move past that stage, it is up to their instructors and liaison librarians to schedule library sessions as needed, which does not always happen for various reasons.

Recent departmental shifts within the University of Mississippi Libraries have made balancing basic library instruction and orientation with discipline-specific needs even more difficult. Over the summer, administration created a new department to address growing data literacy, digital humanities, and scholarly communication needs on campus. Two new department members moved out of the Research & Instruction Department, limiting the number of librarians on the first-year instruction team and the amount of instruction they could reasonably provide. Because the Research & Instruction Department is smaller, its approach to first-year instruction had to change. The department needed a way to address the needs of their first-year courses, which usually meet for fifty or more in-person library sessions in the

fall semester. The author also wanted to find a way to more easily promote and teach basic library skills outside the first-year program for any students lacking basic research skills. Therefore, they decided to focus on online learning materials that any library department or faculty member could incorporate into their instruction.

CREATING THE LIBRARY BLACKBOARD COURSE

Initial Concepts

The University of Mississippi Libraries has several online research guides and tutorial videos to help students succeed. Some classes are taught directly from the guides, while others are used for reference or treated as a makeup option, depending on librarians' individual preferences. When administration formed the new library department, the Research & Instruction Department made a goal to review all old library tutorials and guides to update them so they could lean more heavily on online learning materials. In an effort to provide more effective self-serve resources for classes that would not be able to receive in-person library instruction as a result of reduced staffing, librarians updated and promoted many of their existing online learning materials, including library tutorials and research guides. These focus primarily on routine tasks such as submitting an InterLibrary Loan request or finding a physical book in the stacks, but the author speculated that first-year student needs may include more in-depth research assistance as well. They sought to create an all-inclusive way for students to access library content, materials, and activities related to their overall research goals across multiple levels and courses.

The author brainstormed various options for increased online learning with colleagues, researched basic instructional design principles, and ultimately decided to develop a Blackboard course centered around library and research skills. The goal of the course was to meet three campus needs. First, the author wanted to provide a safety net for students at all levels who needed a refresher on core information and library skills. Ideally, they wanted something that instructors could seamlessly incorporate into their classes as part of the curriculum, regardless of the discipline. Second, the Research & Instruction Department believed they could benefit from self-guided learning materials to either supplement or replace traditional first-year instruction sessions to serve the same number of students with fewer people while preventing librarian burnout. Third, librarians felt a need to focus on skills applicable both inside and outside the classroom based on conversations with various faculty about the importance of workforce readiness. The course needed to introduce students to key topics relevant for daily life, such as information and news literacy, in addition to research skills needed for school assignments. The author sought to expand, innovate, and reimagine a new approach to library instruction that would meet these goals but could be broken up into individual pieces as needed and completed independently.

Setbacks

The author faced three primary challenges while developing the Blackboard course: time, training, and buy-in. The Research & Instruction Department had numerous adjustments to make over the course of one summer in order to be properly prepared for the upcoming academic year. Not everyone was pleased with the hands-off approach suggested by the creation of the course, and some librarians made a push for more traditional in-person options, including workshops and tours. Therefore, the author created the Blackboard course single-handedly as an alternative learning option alongside their colleagues' in-person projects.

All discussion, planning, preparation, and construction for the Blackboard course were completed in about four months. Combined with other summer projects already in progress, the process was very time-consuming. All preliminary adjustments for the Research & Instruction Department had to be completed in time for the fall semester so incoming students would still have access to library instruction. That time constraint limited the level of detail and number of elements the author could incorporate into the course, with the final product being minimalist and dry by necessity. Alternative library orientation activities have taken multiple semesters to complete at other universities. Learning Services Program librarians at UC San Diego "planned the form of [a First Year Experience] library module throughout Spring and Summer... then had approximately six weeks in late summer to select a technolo-

gy option, and to design and beta test the scavenger hunt activity” using Edventure Builder (Goldman et al., 2016, p. 85). For the University of Mississippi’s smaller community and limited time, the author had to focus on core content and assessment methods for the library Blackboard course, with little attention to flashier elements that would require third-party products or assistance from additional librarians. Though the online library course did pull inspiration from other departments based on previous syllabi and librarians’ perceptions of student needs, there was no time for true collaboration.

The author’s lack of experience with instructional design and Blackboard software further stunted the conceptualization and building stages of the course. They spent most of the summer learning how to design an online course and use Blackboard. Other institutions, like Deakin University, have streamlined the development and training process by using commercial products such as Smart Searcher (Churkovich & Oughtred, 2002). Because students at the University of Mississippi already use Blackboard, the author decided that the initial iteration of the library course should use resources already available. The author completed an online course through the Association of College and Research Libraries, “13 Things in Instructional Design for Library Instructors,” and had multiple meetings with an instructional designer on campus to learn how to use Blackboard. They were heavily influenced by Purdue University’s “Principles for Online Teaching” and “Student-Centered Teaching” (2022), Kathryn Whinton’s article on cognitive load and usability (2013), Richard West’s article on incorporating asynchronous video in learning (2021), and Jon Yablonski’s Laws of UX website (2022). The final hurdle in the creation and implementation of the Blackboard course was getting buy-in from colleagues and other faculty. Since each librarian is over specific academic departments, it can be difficult to effectively engage with faculty who may be used to working with a different person. While the author could discuss the Blackboard course with their faculty directly, they had to rely on colleagues to spread the word in other disciplines. The Blackboard course was not completed until right before the start of the semester, which made it even harder to drum up excitement. This was especially true in the Research & Instruction Department, where librarians often begin scheduling fall library sessions for first-year classes as early as July. When the author reached out to their faculty to give them a sneak preview of the new library course and explain how it would be used to supplement or replace some undergraduate instruction, the feedback and cooperation received were wholly positive. Some subject liaisons alerted their faculty to the creation of a library Blackboard course and passed along the author’s contact information in case they had any questions, which helped establish the author’s expertise and created an open line of communication. However, others focused on maintaining the traditional face-to-face model as much as possible and did not provide much detail regarding the new online course or alternative learning options. Many faculty members across different disciplines did not receive specifics about the Blackboard course – what exactly it was or how exactly it would be used – which significantly decreased the level of buy-in and momentum the author could build over the summer.

Successes

Challenges aside, there were several triumphs throughout the creation of the library Blackboard course. The author was able to identify which types of instructors and students were most interested in the course, which made it easier to develop marketing plans. They also had the chance to more thoroughly explore what concepts were traditionally covered in library instruction, as well as what could be added or modified for today’s campus community. The author began to develop instructional design skills that can be applied in other areas of teaching and learning. Finally, the project resulted in a comprehensive resource that any department can use, which was one of the initial goals.

Though some promotional efforts for the course were more successful than others, the author did get a sense of which faculty and students may find it most useful. Undergraduate instructors outside the first-year program appear more likely to take advantage of course modules as independent assignments to embed in their curriculum without having to take time out of their class schedule to coordinate a traditional library session. Librarians outside the Research & Instruction Department have shown enthusiasm for the course as a replacement for some liaison instruction, using it as an opportunity to decrease their workload and promote lifelong information skills. If instructors request a library session for

general research or library orientation content, rather than subject-specific instruction, librarians can direct them to the online course as a suitable substitute. If a face-to-face session is needed in addition to the online course, librarians can take that time to focus on the students' unique research needs rather than reviewing library skills they should have already been familiar with. Knowing who is most interested in the Blackboard course will allow librarians to market it more efficiently in the future. The author can target specific instructors, disciplines, or course levels instead of relying on mass emails.

Developing the library Blackboard course also gave the Research & Instruction Department a chance to reassess some of the library's existing online resources. Librarians drafted a new critical thinking guide, updated library tutorials to reflect website changes, and developed workshops to provide new learning opportunities so that the Blackboard course could include up-to-date online resources and promote other library services. The author had a chance to review teaching materials from some of the first-year program courses, including syllabi from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, which helped ensure that the Blackboard course content appropriately addressed student needs. Revamping library services and resources was a collaborative effort over the summer, which was beneficial for team bonding within the reduced Research & Instruction Department. Additionally, librarians were able to structure new workshops and research guides around modern information skills, such as critical thinking and media literacy. The workshops, in particular, allowed students to gain in-person library experiences alongside the completion of the Blackboard course. They also allowed the library to expand instruction initiatives beyond academic success, emphasizing workforce readiness.

The most notable and exciting success of the library Blackboard course was effectively creating a plug-and-play resource that can be used in any class, with or without direct librarian assistance. The course is entirely self-serve; students self-register, and instructors can assign modules based on their class needs. Each module can be completed individually for a digital badge, or the entire course can be completed in any order for an online certificate. There are prerecorded lectures, supplementary materials, take-home worksheets, and quizzes throughout the course. Though there will be room for improvement based on feedback and use, the author considers the finished product to be a successful pilot project for implementation in the 2022-23 academic year.

BLACKBOARD COURSE SUMMARY

The Blackboard course, titled *Library Skills and Orientation*, includes seven modules. The first module focuses on using the library website and finding basic resources, such as the reference chat and librarian directory, with a broad overview of library services. Modules 2-3 discuss narrowing down potential topics and drafting research questions, emphasizing how to interpret assignment prompts and determine key topic elements. The fourth module discusses finding and using different types of materials – special collections and archival materials, government documents, data, and other subject-specific resources. Module 5 introduces critical thinking and information literacy, teaching students to evaluate sources for credibility and differentiate between misinformation and disinformation. Module 6 pivots to news literacy, media bias, fake news, and the social media filter bubble. The seventh module caters to students on their way out of school or needing information sources outside the university library; it provides information on publicly-available resources. Six of the seven modules include four brief recorded lectures each, one post-module knowledge test, and supplementary materials for additional practice. The first module, which teaches students how to use the library website, includes a link to a library tutorials research guide in place of recorded videos. Students can self-register for the course and track their progress through the post-module knowledge tests. The author provided instructors and librarians with a handout guiding them through the self-enrollment process. After completing the videos and quizzes, students can screenshot their digital badge to submit to their instructor for credit. Instructors may assign supplementary worksheets or activities if desired.

PROMOTING ONLINE LEARNING IN “BACK TO NORMAL” TIMES

As previously mentioned, initial attempts to generate interest surrounding the new library Blackboard course had mixed results. While some instructors showed appreciation for ready-made li-

library instruction options, others expressed wariness about online learning replacing traditional in-person library sessions. The author believes that resistance to online learning is due in part to a desire to return to normalcy following the COVID-19 pandemic, since the University of Mississippi began shifting back to regular operations in Fall 2021. Many courses that had been forced into a virtual environment resumed face-to-face instruction, and administration expected faculty to reduce remote work hours. Some services that had been heavily promoted during the pandemic, such as virtual research consultations and online reference chat, are still used regularly and perceived to be very valuable.

On the other hand, many faculty members at the University of Mississippi have been eagerly pushing for in-person meetings and traditional instruction sessions again. The author discussed the merits of online learning with colleagues throughout the creation of the Blackboard course, and most believed the issue to be best treated on a case-by-case basis depending on individual preferences. Many librarians at the University of Mississippi continue to offer virtual instruction materials but accept in-person requests unquestioningly. It is unlikely that online learning materials will be heavily relied upon and promoted in place of traditional library instruction on a larger scale.

With so many differing opinions on online learning and shifting approaches to library instruction, universal adoption of any new technology or resource will likely be out of the question for most colleges and universities. While that does not invalidate the need for such resources, it does necessitate different promotional practices. The author intends to take a more proactive approach moving forward, sending promotional materials and information about the library Blackboard course to instructors across campus. There will be demonstration opportunities at the beginning and end of each semester, explaining what each module covers and how students can navigate the course. Prior to the fall semester, the author attended some department meetings to answer questions as needed and received multiple requests for more information regarding the course as a result. They promoted the course to instructors in the first-year program as a supplementary resource to support or provide additional content related to traditional in-person library sessions, despite the fact that librarians had already scheduled many of those sessions for the fall semester. For other undergraduate and graduate instructors, however, the author promoted the course as a series of research refreshers to replace non-subject-specific library orientations. The author thinks marketing the course in different ways based on different academic environments, rather than restricting it to one type of teaching, will demonstrate the adaptability of the course and increase its use in future semesters.

CONCLUSION

Librarians interested in pursuing online learning initiatives in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic can expect various complications and possible setbacks. Some faculty and instructors may push back against virtual or online options in favor of traditional in-person sessions to return their students to complete normalcy. Developing effective online learning materials takes extensive time and training, which may not be doable for some libraries due to limited staffing or a rapidly-approaching school year. Librarians involved in the process must learn basic instructional design principles and be well-versed in the software they use in order to properly engage students and troubleshoot problems. If at least one person can put in the time and energy, however, there are several potential benefits to having something like an online library course. Whether online learning materials are used in the way developing librarians initially intended or not, the process of creating and promoting them can indicate where those types of resources are needed on campus. This can lead to more fruitful collaboration opportunities, more efficient marketing tactics, and a better sense of what library instruction methods are most effective across different academic departments.

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