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WHITE PAPER

A History of the Embedded Librarian Program at Odum Library

by Laura B. Wright and Ginger H. Williams

Introduction

Reference librarians at Valdosta State University's Odum Library serve as embedded librarians in many online classes. Librarians enroll in courses through the university's learning management system (LMS) to interact with students online. This small but growing service enhances the library instruction possibilities for online classes. Embedded librarian service is one way librarians and professors collaborate to provide timely and relevant research assistance to students.

Types of Embedding

Barbara Dewey first called the deeply integrated librarian an "embedded librarian" in 2004 when she compared such intense collaboration to journalists embedded in units in the Iraq War (Dewey, 2004, p. 5). Librarians have also written about many varieties of embedded librarianship, including some approaches that are more automated. Rather than collaborating with individual professors, some universities have had success with embedding a library component, including a subject guide, into each class (Daly, 2010, p. 210). This approach,

referred to by Shank and Dewald (2003) as "Macro-Level Library Courseware Involvement," allows the library to reach a significant portion of the student population (p. 38). Preexisting content from the library website, such as reference chat service, database links, and subject guides, is drawn into the course through automated processes (Shank & Dewald, 2003, p. 39). This requires intense collaboration between librarians and distance learning staff to establish. Once the process has been established, it requires little maintenance on the librarians' part.

The opposite model, Micro-Level Library Courseware Involvement, gives students the chance to interact with a particular librarian within their online course (Shank and Dewald, 2003, p. 38). Collaboration between the instructor and embedded librarian is vital to the success of this service. The librarian's involvement is tailored to the needs of the class and can range from providing links to relevant pages on the library website to participating in the creation and grading of assignments. The expandability of such an offering is limited as it

draws heavily upon librarians' time.

At Odum Library, we use a blend of the Micro- and Macro-level approaches that combine automatically embedded content with the personal touch of interacting with a librarian. All students benefit from the Macro-level content, including direct links to GALILEO resources, our library catalog, and live chat with a reference librarian. Students and faculty have responded favorably to this method.

The Beginning

The embedded librarianship program at Odum Library began in 2006 as collaboration between Shilo Smith, the Distance Services Librarian at that time, and Dr. J. Patrick Biddix, a professor in the College of Education (S. Smith, personal communication, March 10, 2011). Smith had taught face-to-face library instruction sessions for Biddix. When Biddix began working with Georgia On My Line (GOML) to provide online education research classes, he realized that although distance education students would need and benefit from library instruction, actually providing the instruction would be a challenge.

After mentioning this to Smith, she suggested the idea of embedding a librarian into the online class. Smith and Biddix discussed how she could help students with their literature review assignment in particular, as this was where students tended to struggle the most (J. Biddix, personal communication, March 21, 2011).

Another reason we started offering embedded librarian services, beyond geographic challenge, was the belief by some of our librarians that learning happens best in context (C. Landis, personal communication, March 17, 2011). The reference librarians agreed that one-shot library instruction sessions were not always the most effective form of instruction and in some cases could not cover the depth and breadth of material needed for a research assignment or project. Being embedded provided the opportunity to parse the instruction into more manageable chunks that could be delivered in a timely way. Embedded librarians could reach a broader audience, including distance and online students, and provide research assistance when and where students needed help (S. Smith, personal communication, March 10, 2011).

Marketing

During the embedded librarian program's first few semesters it was marketed exclusively by word-of-mouth. Professors learned of the program from other professors or from working with a librarian who was involved in the embedded librarian program (S. Smith, personal communication, March 10, 2011). During the summer of 2009, an email was sent to the faculty listserv inviting all faculty to utilize an embedded librarian in their online courses with the goal of increasing participation. Librarians who met with their liaison departments at the beginning of the fall semester also promoted the embedded librarian service. As a result of the increased promotion, more faculty from a variety of departments did request an embedded librarian for their online courses in summer semester, 10 classes, and fall semester, seven classes, of 2009.

One thing we learned from embedding in a variety of classes was that our embedded librarian program was not an appropriate fit for all online classes. The presence of librarians added little value to classes that lacked a research component. After fall 2009 we decided to only embed librarians in online classes that had a required research paper, such as an extensive literature review or annotated bibliography.

Our current marketing efforts include reaching out to professors in subject areas we have worked with in the past, as well as emailing the faculty listserv an invitation.
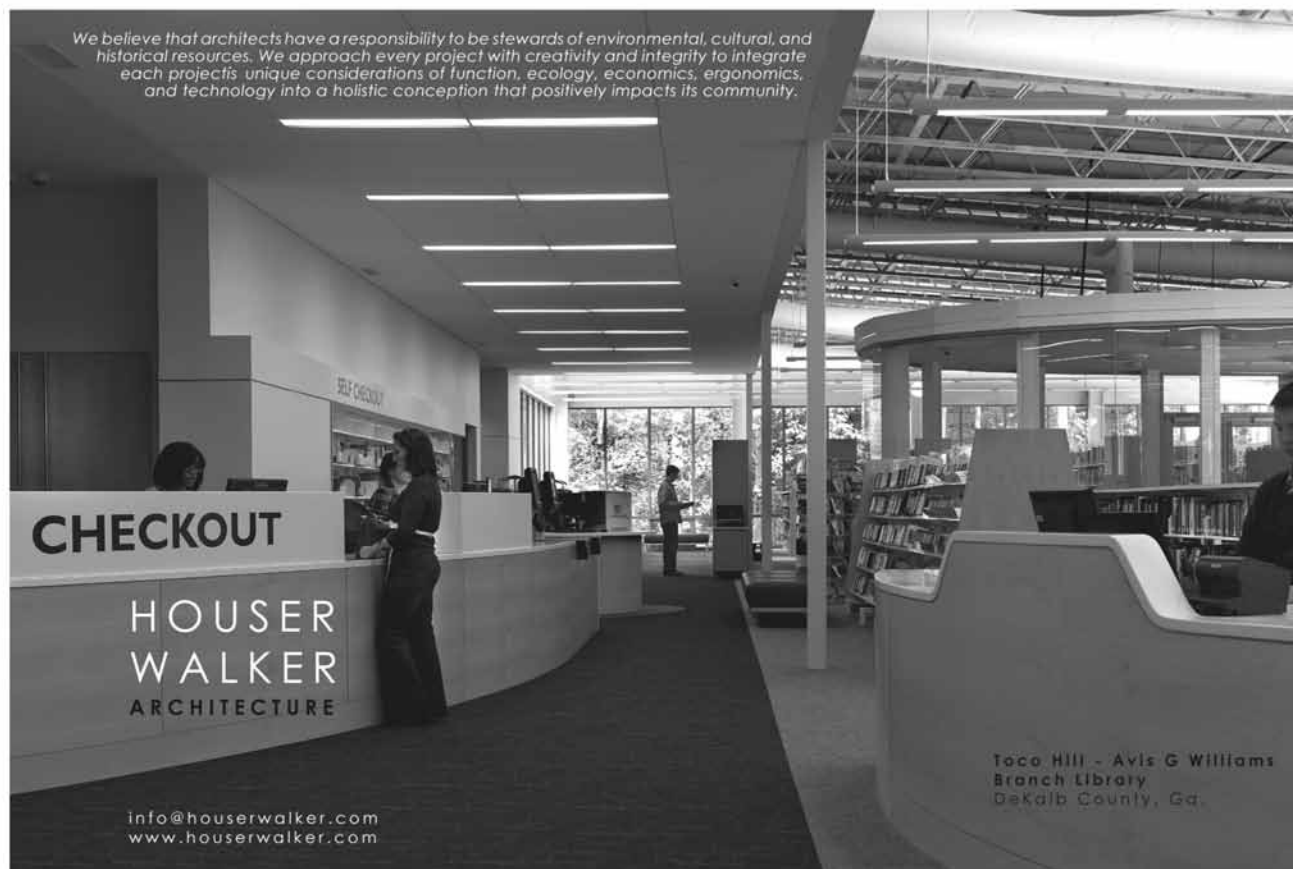
We have primarily been embedded in Education and Library Science courses, and we make sure to ask those departments if they would like to use embedded librarians again each semester. The listserv invitation includes an explanation of what an embedded librarian is, what he/she does, how his/her involvement in a class benefits students, and what types of courses are appropriate for an embedded librarian. Faculty often reply to this message to ask if their course is eligible and whether or not it would be a good fit.

Best Practices

As a starting point for our librarians, we have established a set of best practices based on a 2009 presentation at the "Online Lifeline Conference" by Mary Prentice, Patrick Milas, Robyn Hurst, and Elaine Yontz. While most of the practices are intuitive, having them compiled in one place is a helpful reminder to librarians of the kind of service they ought to provide. The best practices are goals to which we aspire, but in practice we can't always attain what is "best." Having materials prepared before the class begins, for example, can be difficult. Collaborating with the course instructor is vital, but some are more responsive than others. Optimally, librarians should discuss goals and expectations with the instructor and maintain a dialog throughout the semester to make sure they are on the right track.

Specific learning outcomes tied to the course and research assignment present an ongoing challenge. Based on the course assignment(s), librarians have a general idea of the kind of information literacy or research topics they need to cover with the students. Ideally, the librarian and course instructor should work together to determine the learning objectives the embedded librarian should address.

The degree of collaboration varies for every librarian and instructor. Learning outcomes or goals are often left to the librarian's discretion.

One of the most important jobs of an embedded librarian is making students feel comfortable asking for help. Along these lines, one of our best practices involves maintaining a friendly tone. This is something we would naturally do at the reference desk, but when interacting online one must be conscious of how his or her words might be interpreted. If students form a good impression of librarians from working with an embedded librarian, they will be less hesitant to ask for our help again in the future. We always try to end the course by inviting students to contact the reference librarians for help with their future reference needs.

Library Participation

During the first few years of the embedded librarian program only a few librarians participated. The Outreach Services Librarian coordinated the program, collecting requests from faculty for embedded librarians and asking librarians to take part. Each librarian worked independently, constructing his or her own posts and content for the online classes. Some librarians preferred to maintain an active presence in the online course while others posted contact information and encouraged students to contact them outside the course platform via chat or email. (S. Smith, personal communication, March 10, 2011; C. Landis, personal communication, March 17, 2011).

In the last year, the program has become more cohesive and more librarians are now participating. The structure has evolved to include more collaboration and to provide the embedded librarians with needed support. During summer semester of 2010, we

used a "buddy system" with the embedded librarian program for the first time. Experienced embedded librarians were paired with librarians who were new to the embedded librarian program. One of the librarians was the primary embedded librarian and the other served as a backup when the primary librarian was unavailable. The experienced partner could also provide technical support, answer questions and share his or her experience with the new embedded librarian. This eased the transition for new embedded librarians so well that we did it again during the fall semester.

Our current Outreach Services Librarian, Ginger Williams, is creating, collecting, and sharing a library of ready-to-use content for embedded librarians. The goal is to create as much relevant, rich content as possible on a variety of topics and in a variety of formats. In the past, we have relied on text-based discussion board posts with an occasional video. We are enhancing our instructional materials by offering a mix of short video tutorials and printable guides that include screen captures in addition to the more traditional text-based discussion posts. Each librarian has different technological and instructional strengths and styles. One librarian may create a short video tutorial with ease, while another prefers to create very detailed handouts. We want to avoid time consuming duplication of effort with librarians creating very similar content. Sharing instructional materials will enable librarians to embed into more classes and reach more students.

Assessment

We are now formally assessing the program. Faculty and students are asked to complete a questionnaire through SurveyMonkeyTM. Incorporating both qualitative and

quantitative questions, the survey has given us insight on how faculty and students view the embedded librarian program. We are using the data collected to improve the quality of the service by creating richer content for students and reaching out to faculty to foster a more collaborative experience. One challenge we have faced in collecting this data is the low response rate to the student survey. Although we encourage students to respond, we have not been able to provide an incentive to do so. We have improved the response rate by inviting students to participate in the surveys through discussion board announcements in the learning management system and direct email messages. For example, during the fall 2009 semester, only three students responded to an online minute-paper assessment. In fall 2010, promotion of the survey in discussion board posts and email messages helped increase that number to 13. This sample is still smaller than we are happy with, and we are exploring ways to collaborate with faculty to encourage student response. Currently we ask faculty to encourage their students to complete the assessment survey. A separate survey is sent to faculty in the program so that we can learn what faculty think of the program, what worked, and how we can improve.

Technology

During the fall 2011 semester, the eight Reference Librarians are embedded in a total 30 courses. While more librarians are participating than ever before, the need to reach a larger portion of our ever-increasing online courses is pressing. One way we hope to accomplish this is through greater technological efficiency. We have been fortunate to have the cooperation and assistance of a wonderful eLearning department

here at VSU. They have worked with librarians one-on-one to provide training, in addition to manually enrolling them in courses each semester.

The University System of Georgia is investigating a change of learning management system (LMS) from Blackboard Vista 8 that would take effect in January 2013. Some of the specific products being considered would make the librarian's role within a class easier for him or her to manage. For example, in the current LMS librarians often correspond with students through the course discussion board. Because there are many active discussion boards in a given online class, there is no way for the librarian to know when a new question or comment has been posted to his or her particular discussion board as opposed to the instructor's. Newer LMS offerings provide RSS and other features that will make it easier to monitor discussion boards and will save the librarians time.

VSU librarians embed into many Georgia On My Line (GOML) classes as well. This is a great opportunity to help students from across the state with their research questions. The situation does, however, present unique technological challenges. First, our eLearning department creates a GOML account for any librarians embedding in GOML classes. Then the librarian must remember to login to GOML instead of BlazeVIEW, our own LMS. Within GOML, students have different pathways for library access than they do with our own LMS. Because GOML students register through several different universities, the embedded librarian has to tailor his or her advice to each student's situation. This can be challenging with topics such as Interlibrary Loan, where the librarian here at VSU will not know

how to log into another university's ILL system.

We have also had communication problems as a result of our LMS. Many professors choose to "roll over" the content from their online classes from one semester to another. When they do so, our "Ask Your Embedded Librarian" discussion board, for example, rolls over, too. If the professor has not requested an embedded librarian for that semester, students are under the mistaken impression that they do in fact have a librarian with whom they can communicate in the online class. This has happened a couple of times, much to the dismay of students and librarians alike.

Expansion

We are implementing some additional services that will benefit lower-level undergraduate classes. Currently, many of these classes are ineligible for an embedded librarian because they do not involve enough research. They have traditionally taken advantage of face-to-face library instruction, but as many of them move to online or hybrid models, their schedules will not allow a visit to the library. In lieu of our typical one-shot library instruction session, we will begin offering another model for online and hybrid classes.

The process will start by gaining access to the online course as we would with the traditional embedded librarian service. Working with the instructor, we will add relevant instruction materials, in the form of tutorials, videos, and discussion posts, at the beginning of the semester. We can use instructional materials we have already created and made available to our librarians and create custom materials as needed. Additionally, a librarian will embed in the online class for a defined timeframe, based on when the course instructor

thinks a librarian presence would be most helpful for the students. This will allow students to access online instructional materials within the LMS on their own time and to interact with a librarian if they have any questions.

This project will be piloted during the summer semesters of 2011. To advertise the service, we are holding a drop-in information session for faculty at the end of the spring term. We will present these two models of embedded librarianship as well as information about traditional library instruction. All faculty have been invited to take part in this event. We are committed to providing service to distance and online students that meets or exceeds the service we provide on campus. Our hope is that through continual assessment and revision we can meet the instructional needs of all courses taught at VSU.

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Have you checked out the Georgia Library Association's home page lately? Take a look at http://gla.georgialibraries.org/ for the latest library profile feature, "Georgia Library Spotlight." Every six weeks, a new library will share information about its history, facilities, programs and specialties. If you're interested in seeing your library profiled, please email Tessa Minchew at tessa.minchew@gpc.edu

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