

Instruction on the go: Reaching out to students from the academic library

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to describe how a series of one-shot or single class library instruction webinars were created for on-campus and distance education students at Virginia Tech, a land grant institution in rural southwestern Virginia. Virginia Tech's distance learning department on campus trained in Centra 7.6 software and the lead librarian collaborated with peer librarians to offer a wide range of instructional sessions. In this study, interviews were conducted one-on-one with five webinar participants at Virginia Tech. Interviews were digitally audio-taped and transcribed. These interviews were used to gain feedback and information regarding the library-based webinars. Results were organized into thematic codes using NVivo 10 software. Results showed strong interest in the library webinars, especially in the playback or archiving features and interactivity.

Keywords: distance education | academic libraries | higher education | online instruction | webinars | information literacy

Article:

BACKGROUND

Virginia Tech is located in the southwestern portion of the commonwealth, approximately three and a half hours from Richmond. The university library serves over 31,000 full time and nearly 3,000 part time students in 65 bachelor programs and 150 masters and doctoral degree programs. Virginia Tech's School of Education is a graduate-based program offering teaching certifications, master's and doctoral degrees to over 900 students at five off-campus locations across the state of Virginia. The School of Education focuses in the programs of Curriculum and Instruction, Counselor Education, Career and Technical Education, Educational Leadership, and Education Research and Evaluation. Librarian liaisons, or department-designated librarians, deliver library and research instruction in a multitude of formats. The most common of these is face-to-face

instruction in the classroom, but teaching has also been delivered through a televised system to students in various distance education locations across the state. Liaisons also meet with students and faculty individually or in small groups in a face-to-face environment and talk with them via e-mail, Skype, or over the phone.

Because many students—especially in the area of Education Leadership—are in satellite campuses across the state, it is common to travel at least once a year to each distance education location to visit patrons. It was during one of these visits in 2010 that students introduced the idea of webinars for library instruction. This particular campus was located in northern Virginia, near Washington, DC, where traffic is very heavy and getting to class is always a struggle. The students in the graduate cohort wondered if library instruction could be delivered in a webinar format. That way, instruction could be delivered to where they resided and no one would need to travel to the distance campus for a library session. It was admitted at the time that it was an intriguing idea, and the students were told that the possibility would be investigated once back at the main Virginia Tech campus.

Upon returning to campus and speaking with members of Virginia Tech's Department of Distance Education it was determined that the university's online course software Centra 7.6 would be an appropriate tool for library webinar delivery. Centra is an online instruction management tool where instructors can teach sessions live (synchronously) or recorded (delivered asynchronously). Centra 7.6 includes teaching tools such as live chat, screensharing, polling, video conferencing and more. After looking at other online tools such as Wimba, Dim Dim, Join Me and many others, it was decided that Centra offered the most capabilities to share library instruction sessions in a live setting. Once the technology was secured, scheduling and advertising could be set up through the library and Distance Education Department and webinar opportunities could be offered.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The starting point for providing services to distance education students is to know the learners and to be aware of ideas and strategies to successfully deliver instruction (Newton, 2007). The purpose of this study is to provide a description of how a series of *one-shot* or single class library instruction webinars were created for both on-campus and distance learning students at Virginia Tech. The rationale for this study was that by obtaining a better understanding of the webinars already provided, as well as the expectations and perceptions of the students, librarians from Virginia Tech Libraries would be able to offer better webinars in the future.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How can one-shot or single class library sessions best be delivered online to students and faculty in higher education?
2. How do students and faculty perceive online education or webinars delivered from the library?
3. When online or distance library sessions are not attached to a credit bearing class, how can they best meet the needs of students and faculty in higher education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on webinars and similar efforts to aid distance education or off-campus students in reference and research instruction is limited and varied. Off-campus students are defined as those who do not live on college campuses, who study at a distance from the main branch of an institution, and who receive most of their research material through electronic means (Newton, 2007). The topic of webinars used for one-shot library instruction, and librarian collaboration to create online instruction through webinars, is not well covered. This paper will add to the growing body of research in the areas of distance education, instructional technologies, and librarian collaboration.

Barnhart and Stanfield (2011) discuss how the University of West Georgia created a pilot program for online instruction using the Wimba Web conferencing software. The article takes readers from the beginning of the pilot program in 2009 with training of the librarians to their first instruction sessions with students, along with the successes and challenges therein. One of their first issues occurred when the librarian's first class resulted in being shown on a full classroom screen instead of on students' individual computers. They found some technical issues as well with time lag between instructor and patron computers. When the librarian was speaking and teaching during a webinar session there could be a time delay to the receiving computers. Those who are using webinars to instruct have to take that time impediment into account and slow down when teaching. Discussion is still ongoing between librarians at the University of West Georgia as they reflect upon their pilot project, how the initial Web conferencing instruction went, and where they should go for the future. Barnhart and Stanfield offer advice to other librarians wishing to try Web conferencing software, even giving a comparison chart of free Web 2.0 tools, since software costs can get high (2011).

Nicholson and Eva (2011) write about using Skype to teach distance education students in their pilot study at the University of Lethbridge. The Web 2.0 video conferencing tool was used in collaboration with five Writing 1000 classes as well as with a management course. The authors express the need for librarians to refocus the way they serve patrons so that they are better able to provide instruction and reference for all students no matter their location, whether on- or off-campus. The librarians in this study used Skype to teach entire class sessions and also used screensharing software to deliver further aid to students. Nicholson and Eva (2011) discuss the successes and challenges of their project. This study opened opportunities for new instruction as well as introduced new avenues to offer individual research consultations to their students.

In other literature, Tang (2009) discusses the work being done at Jacksonville State University in distance education and e-learning. The needs of off-campus students are identified and met through virtual library tours, screencasts, pathfinders, handouts and other tools. Video conferencing is mentioned, but this is different from the web conferencing being discussed in previous articles and in this current project. Bower and Mee (2010) created *Meet the Librarian* Web pages to connect students and faculty to their subject librarians at the Rochester Institute of Technology. They used Adobe Connect to offer research tours and demonstrations from librarians' desktop computers. They also worked with virtual Web 2.0 tools to create a library presence in their university's Second Life space titled RIT Island. Lietzau and Mann (2009) used the Wimba Web and Adobe Connect conferencing tools to deliver live online

instruction and one-on-one sessions to their students in Taiwan from the University of Maryland University College.

Most of these studies involve librarians delivering instruction to one credit-bearing class or tying online instruction with one professor. These projects show strong elements of embedded librarians who are partnering with their faculty and delivering instruction through distance and digital formats. What happens when library instruction sessions are not tied specifically to a class? At Virginia Tech, offered online library sessions included topics such as: methods for dissertation submission; Endnote, Zotero, and other citation tools; Web sites and applications for teaching and learning; basics in database use; and many more, none of which were specifically tied to a particular class. There is an increase in online and distance learning and this is altering how librarians offer their instruction in information literacy (Rand, 2013). When library sessions are tied to a class or course there tends to be more buy-in, but can there be buy-in when the sessions are for personal use or the intellectual gain of information? This was one of the questions of great interest for those librarians offering these services at Virginia Tech.

METHODS

This exploratory study used an individual interview approach to move toward a thematic analysis of the data, exploring such areas as perceptions, instructional techniques, and motivation in and toward the library webinars. Ethics approval was gained from Virginia Tech's Research Ethics Board.

Sample

Purposeful sampling was used in this study, as only students and faculty who had participated in the library webinars over the past three years could take part; students and their professors who had never taken a library webinar from the Virginia Tech Libraries were excluded. Email invitations were sent to students and faculty who had taken at least one library webinar in the stated time period. Our hope was to have ten interviewees, but we were fortunate enough to have five willing to interview. Saturation of themes was well-reached amongst our five interviewees.

Data Collection

Two separate interviewers conducted the five one-on-one interviews, each taking turns to collect the interview data. Participants signed consent forms, which included permission to share findings in presentations and publications. They then completed interviews lasting 15–20 minutes. The interviews were digitally audio-taped—with participants' consent—and then transcribed. Three of the interviews took place face-to-face, one via the Skype online communication system, and the last via speaker phone. Interview transcripts were analyzed throughout the data collection process and it was decided that saturation was reached with the participating five interviewees.

Interview Questions

The interviewers did not ask for demographic information but did ensure that interview participants had taken part in the library webinar series at some point in the last three years. Participants were then asked the following questions.

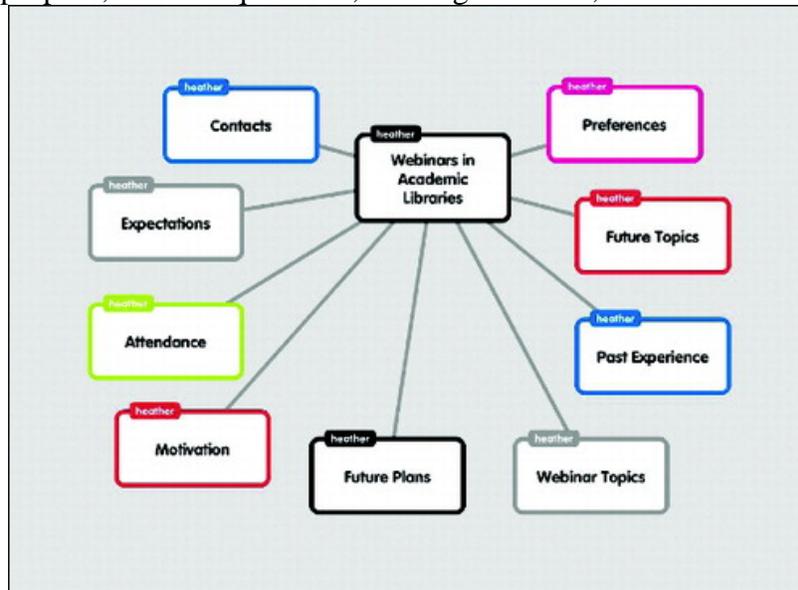
1. How many webinars have you taken outside of the library Webinar series? Can you provide some titles or topics?
2. Can you provide a description of the experience, teaching techniques, overall educational value?
3. Which of the library webinars have you attended?
4. Did you attend them live or did you watch the archived recordings?
5. What were your expectations of the webinars? And were they met?
6. What did you like about the webinars? What didn't you like?
7. Why did you take the library Webinar?
8. How did you find about the library Webinar?
9. Are there topics that you would like to see covered in the future?
10. If more webinars are offered in the future would you take them?

Follow-up questions were asked as needed throughout the interview process. The questions included thoughts on future webinar topics, theories or perspectives in online teaching techniques, and personal use of library webinar information gained from the series.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 10. The participants' narratives were imported into the software and common themes were explored throughout the five interviews. Common themes are included in [Figure 1](#).

FIGURE 1. Popplet Concept Map of Themed Codes from Study. Codes in this study emerged from the study's purpose, research questions, existing literature, and interview responses.



RESULTS

Interview respondents were graduate students who had participated in the library webinars over the past three years. Four of the interviewees had participated in the webinars live—synchronously—while one participant had observed an archived webinar after its recording and had taken part asynchronously. Participating respondents took part in webinars that included instruction in Endnote and other citation tools, the dissertation submission process, technology tools for teaching and learning, and library database training. Participants had been informed about the webinars via email, library Web page announcements, or directly from librarians during consultations or face-to-face instruction sessions.

Past Webinar Experience

Study participants had a wide variety of experiences with webinars. Before taking part in the library webinars, interviewees had participated in anywhere between two to sixty webinars depending on the respondent. Previous webinar topics were across the spectrum, as well; some examples that were included in the discussions were personal finance, how to teach webinars, academic affairs in higher education, NVivo Qualitative and data collection software, and online options integrated with credit-bearing graduate courses. One interviewee stated:

A lot of them have been through student affairs, they do those through the university here, that's been around 20 (webinars) in my mind, I have gone to maybe a dozen or two dozen webinars that are associated with conference calls so you will be in a meeting and someone will have to show a slide or give a certain presentation and then the meeting resumes after that, several of those have been for the multicultural advisory board talking about diversity and inclusion and things like that, then otherwise more like “academicy” [sic] ones that I have done have been through my online classes. So you know sitting down watching a lecture watching the slides with said lecture usually academic success or based on whatever topic that subject or lecture is, and then following up with notes or a paper or something like that.

Techniques from Past Webinars

When creating webinars and other online tutorials and screencasts, students and faculty need an environment that is user-friendly and intuitive. Live or synchronous webinars need to be a setting where assistance is available and questions are fostered (Kontos and Henkel, 2008). Participants from this research study had multiple techniques of which they were fond from previous webinar or online instruction experience. Quizzes, polling, screenshots, demonstrations, tutorials, live chatting sessions, and archiving for easy future review were some of the preferred teaching or delivery online techniques of participating respondents. One participant had the following to contribute:

So for me the teaching method that kind of works and I don't even know if really you want to call this a teaching method but the one that I kind of connect with the most is the one when there is something that is demonstrated on a slide but the entire webinar is not just on slides and then the individual is executing or showing by example of what it is

that they are talking about. That method works a lot better for me. I have been to many webinars I have taken probably at least ten where it's just the slides and it's like there is no reason for me to be on the webinar. I could just listen to a recording of this, print out the slides and boom boom and you know, that is usually a lot easier to access and a little less firm of a location that I have to be in.

Library Webinar Preferences

Study participants took part in webinars that included instruction in Endnote and other citation tools, the dissertation submission process, technology tools for teaching and learning, and library database training. There have been a number of webinars offered in the past three years. The first webinar offered in 2010 was focused on the basics of databases. This particular webinar was advertised solely to the School of Education's faculty and students. Twenty students and faculty signed up to attend this webinar. After the initial session more followed, and topics included information on databases, citation tools, dissertations, research aid, great Web sites and applications for teaching and learning, and basics in library research and organization. Webinars were not only taught by the Education Librarian, but also via collaborations including other librarians at Virginia Tech whose expertise better served to cover the topic of each webinar as it was being offered.

Participating respondents had many preferences both negative and positive toward the webinars. Overall the convenience of the webinars was an important factor of the online library sessions. The fact that students could take part in these sessions from the comfort of their homes or the destination of their choosing was incredibly useful. A distance education student had this to add about the convenience of the library webinar series:

What I like about the webinars in general is that they give me the opportunity to participate where I might not have the opportunity, particularly the ones that you did. I am a part time student who lives in Roanoke and I don't really feel part of the community or have opportunities to use some of those resources and participating in the webinar gave me the opportunity to do that.

The same student did have perspective to include about the webinars and online instruction in general:

I still think as good people think they (webinars) are, they have limitations. You are still kind of sitting there, and you don't always get, some of the time that you spend you don't always get that much back. So I still think they feel a little bit alienated, they're better than not having anything at all, but I am still not sure they're as good as live interaction.

The archiving capabilities of Centra 7.6 were a key preference to students as well. Even if the participant had attended the session live, being able to review the session at a later date was incredibly important to them. As one student stated when asked what they liked about the webinars, "Archiving and you could always go back to the recordings, you could use the material and you could always go back if you lost track or if you don't remember certain things."

Expectations

Interviewees came to the library webinars with some expectations and overwhelmingly they were all met. When asked if they would take a library webinar in the future all five participants responded positively. Expectations included webinar content and what would be gained, as well as technology and general connectivity issues. There were also high expectations for how the webinar content could help them with future classes and graduate-level assignments. One participant responded with this comment:

My expectations were, and this was last year, probably around this same time last year when we were working on our literature review for our big first year class last year and I really wanted to make sure that I had a firm grasp on APA formats and citations and things like that. And so my expectations of the webinar were that it would help with that, help me achieve that goal. Not necessarily learning how to cite but manage and make it less cumbersome. You know versus having this really messy word document full of citations. I was not really familiar with the library webinar format or the program itself but going to the webinar helped me to become more familiar with that. And I still use it, I just did a point of law paper for one of my second year classes and I had fourteen sources and my professor told me my sources were a little light so my next paper will probably have even more than that and it's very nice to know that I have this firm system that I can put all of my citations into. And know that they are there

DISCUSSION

The participants in this study shared many perspectives and insights into their past webinar experiences, effective teaching techniques, as well as ideas for future planning for the library webinar series at Virginia Tech. Whether study participants were taking webinars with the library or other providers, instruction techniques like demonstrations, live chat, polling, screensharing, blogging, video blogging (vlogging) and other interactive practices were the most popular. Other ideas that could be incorporated might be audio podcasts or video vodcasts for asynchronous classes, a menu of courses for library users to choose from like YouTube, Vevo, or Hulu, a librarian embedded into full credit-bearing online courses to aid students with classwork, and library orientation via webinars (Kvenild and Bowles-Terry, 2011). There are many online tools that can enhance an instructor's online courses and new ones are being created and released every month.

Respondents chose to take part in the library webinars for various reasons: curiosity, to gain a better handle on Endnote, dissertations, other subject material, interesting topics, convenience, or the simple fact that they didn't want to sit in a classroom. The themes identified in this study suggest that while the webinars are convenient and students' expectations were met with content, there is still much to learn and avenues to explore as library webinars are offered. It is difficult to engage students who are learning at a distance, and it will always be a challenge. Offering online library instruction at the appropriate levels from a distance is a task that takes continuous reflection, training, and effort (Rand, 2013). It is very easy for students sitting at home listening or watching an online session to feel isolated. Online instruction is not the same as being in a classroom face-to-face, but strong distance education instructors and librarians can challenge

themselves to make the experience as close to classroom experience as possible. By providing students with interaction, demonstrations, chatting functions and more, library webinars and online instruction in general can be less isolating.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Providing support and instruction to students both in person and online is the ultimate teaching situation (Nicholson and Eva, 2011). For Virginia Tech's Newman Library, being able to offer one-shot library instruction in a webinar format was a very logical step in instructional methodologies. One of our brand slogans at Virginia Tech is *Invent the Future*. By providing reference and research instruction to students at their residences and offices, we are, in essence, bringing the future to them. Collaborating with peer librarians was also appealing; not only does it provide a wide selection of informational sessions for the patrons, but it also reduces workload on any one person to provide all the sessions.

One area of future concern is enrollment. Participants in this study were interested in seeing future webinars offered on: APA format; library introductions for international students; NVivo Qualitative Software; comparisons of multiple citation tools; and more dissertation, great Web site and application sessions. When webinars are publicized students and faculty are very excited to sign up. However, when it is time for the actual sessions to air online, the percentage of participants who follow through to attend the session is low. This is definitely an area of consideration with the webinars. When one-shot library classes are not connected with a scheduled or required course the drive or necessity to show up might not be there. For this series of webinars, in future practice, we are still thinking on how to solve this issue. Good communication, strong advertising, and offering interesting sessions are all key components but this situation will continue to warrant further study.

The Centra conferencing program is a good software series that allows instructors to show live screen features as well as pre-recorded presentations. But as with many programs in technology, using it comes with some training and practice. Presenters have to take their time, be aware of who they are teaching, and stay on a steady pace to not get ahead of participants. This is really no different than a live class. In any course session, in person or online, continuous assessment is needed for successful instruction. In the future, Virginia Tech also has plans to change the webinar software for the campus. This will alter technology, connectivity, and training, but will hopefully not hinder library webinar selection.

Moving into the spring 2014 semester, Virginia Tech's libraries will be offering more webinars. New sessions on best Web sites, best apps, and digital curation will be offered. We will also be presenting another citation management webinar and dissertation session. Webinars will be announced to the entire university and will also be posted on the library Web page. Each session does have a capacity limit which depends on the class being offered. They are growing in popularity, students are requesting them throughout the semester when they are not being taught, and an opportunity to deliver instruction in an alternative medium is always worth exploring. As instructional librarians it is our role to aid our students and faculty in their library research, as well as any other areas of technology where we might be of aid. There are constantly new

emerging technologies to explore, and it is very exciting to see how we can use them in instruction.

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