

## Can You Hear Me? Teaching Music Librarianship Online

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### **Abstract:**

This article will examine online music librarianship instruction and its potential. Drawing on surveys of students, questionnaires and syllabi from professors, and personal experience teaching music librarianship online for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I will examine the pros and cons of teaching music librarianship online and provide strategies for designing and teaching a successful course that can, perhaps, be as good as or better than one taught in a traditional classroom.

**Keywords:** Music librarianship | library education | music librarianship education | online education

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

"Good evening, everyone. Can you hear me?" This is how I began each class during three semesters teaching music librarianship online. In a traditional classroom setting, one might begin with a question for discussion or casual conversation before class starts. In the online classroom, the instructor does not have this luxury. Class must begin with a sound check, with responses typed in a chat box, and with time to adjust volume settings. This is followed by long silences when the instructor (and students) may wonder if anyone is actually out there listening. The online environment can feel lonely and surreal.

Many master's in library and information studies (MLIS)<sup>1</sup> programs are offering online courses, and even online degree programs, so it makes sense that some would begin to offer a music librarianship course online, too. However, teaching online presents a number of unique challenges, and some of these are amplified in a complex subject like music librarianship.

Music librarianship courses can be an important part of the educational experience of MLIS students, whether they hope to be music librarians or not. John Wagstaff describes the “gold standard” of music librarianship education as consisting of a “tripartite education of (1) a library school course, (2) a practicum/internship, and (3) professional mentoring.”<sup>2</sup> On-the-job training, practicums, internships, and mentoring can often be easier for a student interested in music librarianship to come by than a one-semester survey of the subject. Students can often find a nearby music library or collection at which they can work or volunteer. However, relatively few MLIS programs offer music librarianship courses, and there is no guarantee that one of these programs will be geographically near the student. One of the greatest advantages of online instruction is that students are not as limited by geographic or time constraints, which can create opportunities for study for many more people.

Online courses can reach more students, in more places, with more variety of experience than can traditional on-campus courses. Students in different time zones can log on for synchronous class meetings or choose to have a completely asynchronous experience by listening to recordings of lectures and interacting with the professor and other students solely through discussion boards, wikis, and e-mail. Offering a course online can also make it “more viable in terms of numbers.”<sup>3</sup> Many music librarianship courses draw what some universities would consider a small, financially unsustainable class size.

To bring the benefits of music librarianship instruction to online students, we must overcome some challenges along the way. In his questionnaire for this study, Wagstaff wrote, “Making sure that every class member is keeping up and staying “tuned in” [is difficult online]. In a face-to-face classroom there is a group dynamic that you can pick up more easily [than] in an online environment.”<sup>4</sup> Helping students to feel connected to the professor and classmates in the online classroom can be facilitated by scheduling regular synchronous class meetings; utilizing the interactive capabilities of your course delivery software, like polling and chat; and planning regular class interactions through online platforms like discussion boards and wikis. Using these technological tools can have drawbacks, though, as many students’ complaints about online classes revolve around problems with the course technology.

The complexity of the music librarianship subject can lead to another difficulty. Some topics are well-suited to the online environment, but others, like music reference, can lack vital information and nuance when presented only online. For example, teaching students how to conduct reference interviews or introducing them to print resources can prove especially challenging in the online environment. Again, by taking advantage of the technological tools available, professors can come up with creative ways to encourage student engagement and communicate complex information.

Overall, student satisfaction with the online music librarianship courses I taught was quite high. One student wrote in his/her survey that the course was “one of the most informative and enjoyable classes in the program.” Another student wrote, “I think the online Music Librarianship course is definitely close to being as good as an in-person experience.” Although this statement is positive, it also makes it obvious that there is still room for improvement. Is there a way to make the online course as good as one taught in-person, rather than “close” to as good? This article examines online music librarianship instruction and its potential. Drawing on

surveys of students, questionnaires and syllabi from professors, and personal experience teaching music librarianship online for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I will examine the pros and cons of teaching music librarianship online and provide strategies for designing and teaching a successful course.

## **Literature review**

There is little written about music librarianship courses offered online. A notable exception is John Wagstaff's 2011 article, "Spreading the Message: Teaching Music Librarianship by Distance-Learning."<sup>5</sup> The article describes the Music Librarianship and Bibliography course at UIUC. It focuses on the technology used for online courses at UIUC (Moodle and Elluminate) and examines some of the pros and cons of online teaching. Although the article is about a Music Librarianship course, much of the content focuses on online teaching in general.

A 2000 article by Jean Morrow provides a survey of music librarianship education at the turn of the millennium.<sup>6</sup> She briefly addresses "long-distance learning" in the article, writing that "long-distance learning programs have the capacity to provide instruction on all aspects of music librarianship to a wide-ranging audience."<sup>7</sup> Morrow goes on to write that, although in-person instruction gives students the chance to interact with teachers and fellow students, distance learning "will open up opportunities for M.L.S. degrees to people of diverse age groups and backgrounds who have previously lacked access to them."<sup>8</sup>

A large number of articles have been published on online librarianship education. Many of these focus on universities that offer entire MLIS degrees online. Articles profiling programs like those at Florida State University, East Carolina University, the University of Pittsburgh, and Edith Cowan University offer snapshots of some of the trends during the 2000s.<sup>9</sup> The advantages and challenges faced by educators involved with these programs are quite similar. On the one hand, more students have access to more courses via the online environment. On the other hand, online instruction can feel isolating, and technical issues in the online classroom can be far more problematic than in an in-person setting. Frey, Alman, Barron, and Steffens point out that "most student feedback in focus groups did not relate to the discipline of library and information science. The majority of their comments related to the online delivery format."<sup>10</sup>

More recently, Oguz, Chu, and Chow published a 2015 study of who is enrolled in online library and information studies programs and what those students like and dislike about online education. Though this article was published several years after those mentioned in the previous paragraph, many of the students' opinions of online education are the same. Students cited the ability to get a high-quality education without relocating or giving up current employment as advantages of online education. However, they still felt isolated in the online environment. They also cited a lack of professional development and networking opportunities as drawbacks of online degree programs.

In "Moving a General Reference Course Online: Issues and Considerations," Sarah Robbins describes the experience of changing the delivery of a library reference course from in-person to online.<sup>11</sup> She points out that communication and boundary-setting take on new importance in an

online environment. Online students often need more guidance than their peers in traditional classrooms. In my experience, many students lack confidence in the online environment, especially when it comes to performing complex tasks. Add to this the fact that many students do not thoroughly read instructions, and an instructor can quickly find him- or herself assailed by confused e-mails or poorly completed assignments. Robbins suggests that professors take steps like providing sample assignments to combat confusion. Robbins also recommends that instructors budget additional time for class prep before the semester, as planning for online classes requires much more work before the class begins than do many traditional courses.

Although there is little literature about teaching music librarianship online, there are a number of sources on music librarianship education as a whole. "Music Librarianship Education," by Jennifer Oates, outlines why music librarianship courses are important in MLIS programs.<sup>12</sup> Oates describes important resources and recommends ways in which students can fill educational gaps when courses are not available, such as independent studies and internships.

Keith Cochran wrote in 2004 about the music librarianship courses and degree options offered at Indiana University.<sup>13</sup> This short article is a snapshot of what could be considered "typical" or "ideal" music librarianship education, where students have the option to pursue a dual degree in music and librarianship or a library degree with a music specialization. In either case, students have access to a music librarianship course and a music reference course, both offered in-person.

Wagstaff's chapter in *Careers in Music Librarianship III* gives a summary of where music librarianship education stood in 2014.<sup>14</sup> Wagstaff addresses changes in music librarianship instruction, especially since the publication of *Careers in Music Librarianship II* in 2004. He also provides examples of topics covered and assignments developed by instructors. Wagstaff addresses the importance of experience via internships and practicums and also makes suggestions for the continuing development and improvement of music librarianship education.

### **Unique challenges of teaching music librarianship**

As Oates, Cochran, Wagstaff, and many other authors point out, teaching music librarianship can be demanding, even without the added complications introduced by the online environment. Oates explains it thus: "The ephemeral nature of music creates a number of problems not found in other types of libraries, and the field of music is specialized, requiring the music librarian to have knowledge of and familiarity with references and resources of music libraries ... music librarians must be musicians, librarians, and music librarians."<sup>15</sup> Oates goes on to mention some of the specific aspects of music libraries that set them apart from other libraries. These include a wide variety of patrons, multiple resource formats and types, preservation of these formats, and numerous musical sub-disciplines. To handle these demands, music librarians should have trained in librarianship and music and should also build an understanding of the unique aspects of music libraries. An added challenge for music librarianship instructors, though, comes from the fact that not all of our students can or do take core library courses before taking music librarianship. This leaves the instructor with the tasks of providing basic instructions and filling in gaps in knowledge in addition to teaching about music libraries and librarianship.

Finding time to cover the many subjects a student needs to learn in a one-semester music librarianship course is one of the greatest obstacles many instructors must overcome. Professors can get an idea of which topics are most important by checking the Music Library Association's "Core Competencies."<sup>16</sup> Consulting other professors' syllabi can also provide guidance. In the end, though, each professor will have to make his or her own judgments about the relative importance of certain topics and about how each should be presented.

The majority of the students in the music librarianship classes I taught were MLIS students, though each offering of the course at UNCG also included one graduate music major with little or no library science education. Most students had at least some education in music. In informal conversations with students, I learned that most did not expect to get jobs as music librarians, but they took the class because they were extremely interested in the topic.

This variety among students does not seem unusual. John Wagstaff observed that his students "tend to fall into one of two types, which we might call the 'dedicated' and the 'curious.'"<sup>17</sup> Wagstaff defines dedicated students as those who are actively pursuing a career in music librarianship, whereas curious students simply want to know more about the subject. The needs and capabilities of this variety of students—dedicated and curious, musicians and non-musicians, library majors and non-majors—create challenges for the professor. Those students with extensive knowledge in music and libraries may miss the opportunity to dig deeply into a complex topic that means a great deal to them. Students with little or no experience or education in music or librarianship may feel left behind by the specialized languages of these two worlds and by the complexity that results from combining them.

Music librarianship instructors have an advantage over many other library studies professors, though, in that most of our students are genuinely excited about the course(s) they take with us. In surveys, some of my former students observed that, "the students as a whole are more engaged with the material, giving substantive comments on discussion boards, and generally making the class a more enjoyable experience than other classes where the subject matter might not be [considered] as interesting," and "most of my classmates were eager to discuss material without being prompted." This enthusiasm gives professors a bit of leeway because students are more likely to do extra readings, ask questions, and take on challenging topics in music librarianship. Additionally, providing recommended additional readings, flexible assignments, and suggestions for future professional growth (e.g., practicums/internships in music libraries) can give more advanced students a way to pursue the subject further on their own.

## **Methodology**

A combination of student surveys, professor questionnaires and syllabi, and personal experience informed this study. I taught music librarianship courses at UNCG in 2012 and 2016 and at UIUC in 2013. After the completion of each course, I asked students to fill out an anonymous online survey via Qualtrics.<sup>18</sup> Questions were divided into two groups. The first group of six statements asked students to rate their experiences of certain components of the class. They also had the option to make comments on these statements if they wished. The next eight questions asked students to comment on aspects of the course from how it related to in-person courses to things that they thought worked especially well or poorly online.

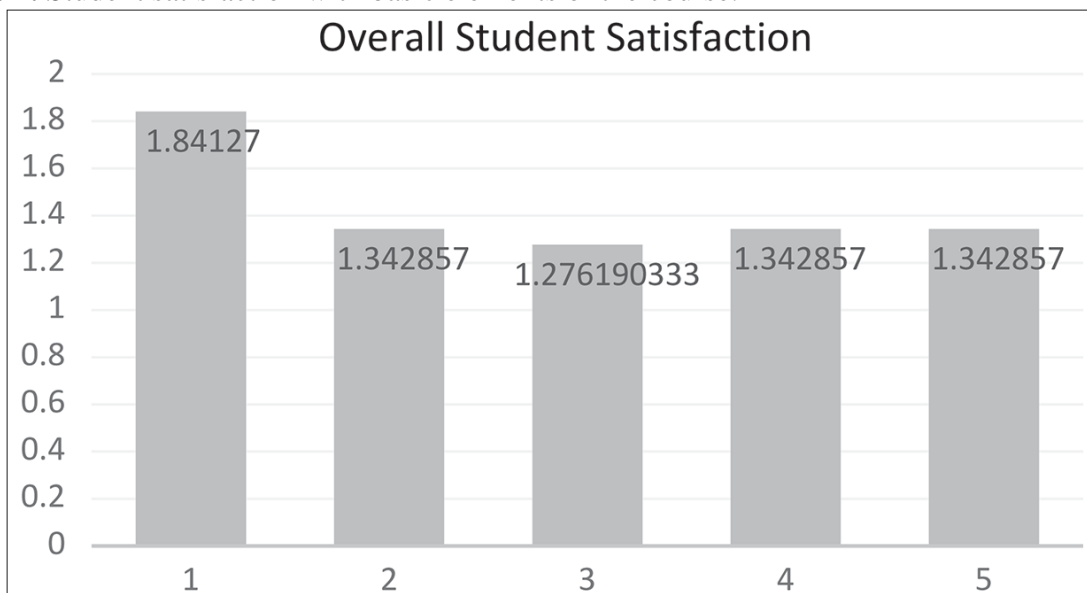
The course offered at UNCG in 2012 had an enrollment of ten students. Of those, five completed the survey. Sixteen students enrolled in the UIUC course in 2013, and seven filled out a survey. Of the nine students enrolled in the course at UNCG in 2016, three completed the survey. It is unclear why around 50% of students participated in the first two surveys, yet only a one third did in 2016. Overall, 43% of students in all three courses completed a survey.

The professor questionnaire consisted of five questions.<sup>19</sup> The questions focused on the teaching experience online and what professors saw as the pros and cons of teaching music librarianship online. I asked professors via e-mail if they would fill out the questionnaire and share a recent syllabus. I only approached those professors who had taught music librarianship online. I contacted four professors: Timothy Dickey of Kent State University and San Jose State University, Kirstin Dougan of UIUC, Ana Dubnjakovic of the University of South Carolina, and John Wagstaff of UIUC.<sup>20</sup> All four of the professors consented to fill out the questionnaire, which I e-mailed as a .docx file. Three of the four shared syllabi.

## Results

Students indicated in surveys that they were pleased with most aspects of the online music librarianship courses at UNCG and UIUC. The chart below shows the average ratings of student satisfaction with 1) technology, 2) course topics, 3) assignments, 4) readings, and 5) course expectations. Students rated each of these aspects of the class from one to four, one meaning that they were highly satisfied and four meaning that they were highly dissatisfied. Students rated all aspects of the course at around one except technology, which was closer to a rating of two. In short, students were pleased overall with the basic elements of the course but had some concerns about technology (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Student satisfaction with basic elements of the course.



Students' main concerns with technology revolved around difficulties with course software. Online synchronous class sessions for all courses were conducted and recorded on Elluminate (UIUC) or Blackboard Collaborate (UNCG). The courses offered at UNCG in 2012 and at UIUC in 2013 were made available via Blackboard, while the UNCG course in 2016 used Canvas. Students in the UIUC course experienced additional technical difficulties due to Java security threats and constant updates at the time, which made Elluminate difficult to use, including one class during which I spent 30 minutes trying to fix my own technical issues brought on by a poorly timed automatic update. Fortunately, UIUC provides a teaching assistant for each class who handles technology problems throughout the semester, and he was able to help when things went wrong. Students at UNCG had no such support system, and, especially in 2016, many cited difficulties with Collaborate as a primary technical concern, specifically complaining of inconsistent connectivity. It is unclear whether this complaint was due more to students' computers, internet connection speeds, or Collaborate itself.

### **Student involvement in the online environment**

The usual challenges a professor faces with getting and keeping students involved in class are amplified online. Croft, Dalton, and Grant argue that online students may need to be more self-motivated than their peers in traditional classrooms.<sup>21</sup> Although regular synchronous class meetings can help with this, some students may still struggle without personal interaction. Further, because more students from more places can take online courses, a wider variety of education levels and learning styles may be represented in an online classroom, demanding that the professor teach music librarianship concepts in varied and creative ways.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most difficult hurdle for students and instructors to clear, though, is the sense of isolation one has when interacting exclusively online. There are a number of ways to address this problem, and a few seem to work especially well for a music librarianship class. These include regular class meetings, guest speakers, creative uses of course software, and discussion boards.

Regular class meetings provide a way to check in with students every week or two. Meeting regularly can help ensure that students keep up with readings and assignments. In class meetings, the instructor has the opportunity to share examples and explain difficult concepts. In their surveys, several of my former students stated that regular class sessions were important because "online classes are isolating" and "regular interaction with the teacher" was valuable. In their 2007 article, Burnett, Bonnici, Miksa, and Kim found much the same thing, writing that, "most students reported preferring synchronous (interactive chat) to asynchronous (discussion boards) communication."<sup>23</sup>

Regular class meetings provide a valuable opportunity for the online music librarianship class: the chance to bring in guest lecturers. The online environment lends itself quite well to this because speakers can log in and talk to students from anywhere in the world in real time. Leaders in the field from different states, time zones, and even countries can talk to students about their experiences and offer suggestions for student development. Students are exposed to a variety of viewpoints and experiences, hear about different music libraries and career opportunities, and have a chance to interact with mentors who they would otherwise be unlikely to meet. Guest lectures were a favorite among my students in all three offerings of the course. As one student

put it in his/her survey, "I always liked the guest lecturers. Having someone talk about how they do their job is always helpful I think. It gives the student perspective on what potential jobs will be like." Further, it provides students with a rare networking opportunity, beginning early to build relationships that can enrich their educational and career experiences for years to come.

Online classrooms are less conducive to classroom interaction than their traditional counterparts. The Blackboard Collaborate and Elluminate platforms offered students a way to chat with the entire class, the professor, or select classmates by typing their comments and questions in real time. This was a good way to ask the occasional question, but it was not ideal for actual discussion. It takes time to type comments or questions, and it is hard to keep track of multiple posts showing up at almost the same time. Students could also use microphones to speak in class, but my students rarely took advantage of this opportunity. Many of my students asked for more discussion during class, but when they received that opportunity, they tended to sit silently. In a classroom, I can usually get them to start opening up in a few minutes, but online, students are much more hesitant to speak up, perhaps worrying that a microphone will not work or that no one will listen. In her online music librarianship classes, Kirstin Dougan uses chat, microphones, polling, and hand-raising functions to get feedback from students during class.<sup>24</sup> This provides the students with a variety of ways to interact and can get around some of the challenges of purely microphone- or chat box-based discussions.

Online discussion boards can give students an effective way to discuss class topics and dig more deeply into certain subjects. Robbins writes that "class discussion boards provide a space for much-needed public instructor-to-student and student-to-student interactions."<sup>25</sup> Ana Dubnjakovic observed that "students seem to enjoy the discussions much more than anything else. I think it's because in most of my classes I've had at least two or three students with years of library work under their belt and the other students enjoyed learning from their experience."<sup>26</sup> Students in my classes agreed that regular discussions were an essential part of feeling connected with their classmates, with me, and with the course material.

There are a number of challenges with discussion boards, though. First, if they are purely optional, many students will not take the time to participate, negating the positive effects of the medium. If discussion participation is part of each student's grade, clear guidelines need to be outlined in advance. Students need to know what is expected and when. Second, choosing topics for discussion can be challenging. I tend to assign additional readings, which cover in added depth some topic we covered in class. However, discussion boards can go beyond this. For example, Dickey uses discussion boards "to work through virtual reference transactions over the course of the week, and with time for meta-commentary and reflection on the process."<sup>27</sup> The opportunity to explore topics in more detail, whether through readings, discussions of assignments, or other methods, is a valuable way to go beyond the cursory survey that we usually must deliver in music librarianship courses.

After three semesters of experimentation, I came up with the following discussion model: First, discussions are scheduled at regular intervals throughout the semester. They do not occur every week. Students often have a week for discussion of a complex topic and then a few weeks off to complete other assignments and catch up on reading before diving into the next discussion. Second, students are required to participate in each discussion for a grade. I usually require that



students make at least two “substantive” contributions. What “substantive” is is quite subjective, so I define that in the syllabus, emphasizing quality over quantity. Third, students sign up to lead a discussion during the semester. This is for a separate grade from general participation and involves coming up with a discussion question/topic based on an assigned reading and keeping the discussion going with responses to classmates’ posts.

Keeping students actively involved in class through guest lectures, in-class interactions, and discussion boards helps them to feel more connected to their classmates and professor. It also helps them to engage with the course materials on a deeper level and thus learn more. When teaching a complex subject like music librarianship in the online environment, these techniques can help students keep up, stay engaged, and dig more deeply into topics that simply cannot be covered completely in lectures.

### **Assignments**

As with discussions, requirements for assignments should be clearly explained in online courses.<sup>28</sup> Everything from due date to format should be made clear. Samples of completed assignments can be very helpful. Equally important is the regularity of assignments. In an online class, it is too easy for students to lose track of time if they must only complete one or two big assignments during the semester. I prefer small assignments due every two or 3 weeks to keep students on track. This is also a great way, as with discussions, to dig more deeply into specific topics than is possible through readings and a lecture.

The online environment presents a set of specific challenges for music librarianship class assignments. For example, a perennial favorite of many instructors is the music library visit and evaluation. Quite simply, students visit a local music library or collection and write about what they experience. This presents a number of problems in a class where students are scattered around the country or even the globe. Are all students near enough to a music library to complete the assignment? Must each student go to a music library, or will any music collection in any library suffice? Finally, can students get as much from these solo visits as they might get from a class visit with the professor? In her questionnaire, Dougan wrote, “Not being able to share the physical library and research environment with students in a meaningful way [and] not being assured students all have the same access to non-electronic resources to consult [was a challenge].”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Dickey wrote that, “I miss the ability to take students in person to view and touch a local music library collection, for those who may not have a physical concept of what 40,000 CDs look like, for instance, and the particular challenges of storage, access, and preservation.”<sup>30</sup>

I address these problems in several ways. To complete the music library evaluation assignment, I encourage students to visit any music collection, even if it is only a shelf of CDs in a public library. I also open up the assignment to include online music libraries and collections. Those students who cannot go to a brick-and-mortar music library can still complete the assignment with relative ease. There is still much students can observe and evaluate in online music libraries/collections, and what they learn may, in fact, have more bearing on their future careers than a visit to a “traditional” music library. Additionally, scanning portions of important materials, doing video tours of libraries or individual resources, and helping students to find local

libraries that offer at least some of these experiences can help fill gaps in student knowledge or experience.

Another significant challenge is designing a successful music reference assignment. Many useful music resources are only available in print. Dougan points out that incorporating the “use of print tools [into reference assignments] to encourage broader thinking in students’ approach to reference (i.e., it’s frequently a combination of print and electronic sources needed)” would make music reference assignments stronger.<sup>31</sup> However, access to these resources is not a guarantee for online students. Dougan addresses this problem by providing the option to do one of two reference assignments: one that uses print and online resources, and one that uses only online resources.<sup>32</sup> Dickey has students complete a thorough review of a reference source (print or online), which will help them develop the skills necessary to use a wider variety of reference resources later in their careers.<sup>33</sup>

Another strategy is the reference question sampler. Dougan uses actual reference questions submitted to music librarians.<sup>34</sup> I created reference questions, which could be answered using the online catalogs and databases available to students. In addition to using the catalog at the university, students were also required to answer some questions using the online catalogs at other institutions, which helped them look at searching for information in different ways.

Although this type of assignment introduces students to the types of questions they might have to answer in the future, it does not address how to conduct a reference interview. Conducting reference interviews can be especially important in the music library where patrons wish to access a wide variety of materials on a number of different subjects and of differing levels of complexity. How can one teach the art of ferreting out the patron’s true question without the luxury of time to practice asking and answering questions in person? There are solutions to this in the online environment, from discussion boards to in-class chat boxes, and we must remember that many of our reference questions these days may actually come to the librarian electronically via e-mail or chat. Therefore, it is not impossible to prepare students for this aspect of reference work in an online class, but it does take some creative thinking about delivery of information and student-professor and student-student interactions, as discussed throughout this article.

I required students in my UNCG courses to contribute to an annotated bibliography of music library sources. They could access and make changes and additions to the bibliography via a wiki page I set up through our course website. I got the wiki started by posting citations for the readings assigned in class and a sample annotation for one of those readings. From there, students added annotations of class readings and citations and annotations for other interesting and relevant resources they encountered on their own throughout the semester. This assignment worked best when students were required to make a certain number of contributions at regular intervals throughout the semester. This helped to prevent last-minute scrambling, and, more importantly, it provided me with an opportunity to provide feedback on a regular basis, thus strengthening the final annotated bibliography as a whole. After the semester ended, I copied the bibliography, formatted it, and e-mailed a .docx file to students to keep as a resource for future work and research.

The annotated bibliography wiki is an example of an assignment that works better in an online class than in an in-person setting. Students have continuous, easy access to the wiki throughout the semester and can contribute in real time. This occasionally led to technical problems, especially within the few hours right before a set of contributions was due, when several students tried to make changes at the same time. However, for the most part, the process was smooth.

Collection development can be a complex subject to teach, and designing assignments that stay manageable while still providing students with a valuable learning experience is difficult in person or online. Dickey uses two assignments that I think can work especially well for this topic in the online environment. In one, students evaluate a music library's collection development policy.<sup>35</sup> This is a great way for students to become familiar with how these policies are constructed, what works, and what does not work, without requiring them to write a policy of their own, which can be overwhelming even for the seasoned librarian. In the other assignment, Dickey asks students to review two or more recording labels or publishers of scores. This is an essential part of collection development, as different labels and publishers focus on different musics, performers, and performance levels. Some offer consistently strong resources, yet others are more unpredictable. And, of course, they often charge different amounts. Being able to think critically about what each offers is essential when developing one's collection within a budget.

When I taught the music librarianship course at UIUC, I developed an assignment in which students came up with a plan to manage the donation of a collection to their library. This combined elements of publicity, fundraising, and collection development. Students chose a library (real or imagined) and a collection (usually imagined). Starting with the knowledge that donations are not actually free, students described what resources the library would need to determine that the collection was a good fit for the library and process the collection. Then they addressed how the library could pay for processing, publicize the collection, and how these two areas could overlap. Putting together promotional materials for a specific library collection or writing a sample grant proposal are also great ways to get students thinking about fundraising and publicity, and work well online.<sup>36</sup>

Other assignments work less well online, though. For example, I have found that effective music cataloging assignments are difficult to create. A few students will embrace the challenge, but most are simply confused and/or bored. In the classroom, students can practice reading or creating catalog records together and ask questions of one another and of the professor. Online, without that human interaction, music cataloging seems too overwhelming for many students. Even though I certainly teach music cataloging as a module in the music librarianship course, I do not give students an assignment beyond a possible discussion. Those who wish to dig more deeply into the subject may do so on their own or as their final project for the class.

The final project in my music librarianship courses offers students the opportunity to choose an area of music librarianship on which each would like to focus and to explore that area in more depth over the course of the semester. Some students choose to complete a traditional term paper for this assignment, but many think outside the box. For example, 1 year two students (one pursuing a Doctorate of Musical Arts, the other pursuing an MLIS after completing a Bachelor's in Music) teamed up to create a LibGuide for ethnomusicology, combining one's highly specialized musical knowledge and the other's growing library skills. Another student wrote

about her experience working with the Digital Projects, Special Collections, and Cataloging Departments at her institution to digitize a music collection and crosswalk metadata for that collection from the library's online public access catalog (OPAC). Still another student with a strong interest in preservation of audio recordings evaluated a collection of reel-to-reel recordings in his university's special collections and, based on research, listed problems with the individual recordings and how they might be solved.

To complete many of these projects, students did not depend solely on themselves or me. I often paired them with mentors in the field who helped guide them through the processes necessary for completing these projects, from organizing information on a LibGuide, to cataloging music, to teaching an information literacy class. I identified mentors by simply asking a few music librarians if they needed help with specific projects in their libraries or would be willing to guide a student or two through a specific type of project. Especially when students decided to complete tasks that directly helped a music library, librarians were willing, and even eager, to help. The combination of intensive, focused work on a subject students are passionate about with the opportunity to work with mentors in the field makes the final project a useful and enjoyable experience. The work these students did went beyond a class assignment, and many of their projects became useful tools for a local library or the basis for continuing research. One student wrote that, "The final project was extremely helpful for me. Given freedom to pursue an aspect of music librarianship I was extremely interested [in], I was able to develop a project that increased my knowledge exponentially in that area, which I believe helped me land an internship and then my current fulltime job in this area of music librarianship."

Providing students with a way to customize the final project has an added benefit for online classes. Students can use the resources they have nearby, certainly, but they can also take advantage of the online environment of the course. Guest lecturers from any part of the world can potentially become mentors for a project. Students can look beyond the area in which they live to the online platforms of larger libraries and collections that relate more closely to their area of interest. Although these capabilities exist in the traditional classroom, they are not always so obvious or so intrinsically linked with the daily course delivery.

By creating differing assignments, I try to cater to diverse learning styles, provide a variety of experiences, and find a way to utilize the benefits of online learning. Different assignments offer different benefits. The final project is semester-long, customizable, and helps students explore a topic of interest in depth. Shorter, more frequent assignments keep students on track throughout the semester and give them multiple opportunities to learn through experience, research, and/or critical thinking. Furthermore, combining a variety of assignments with multiple opportunities for interaction, like discussion boards, allows students to learn in a number of different ways.

## **Conclusion**

As with any educational experience, the success or failure of an online music librarianship class is based primarily on what each student makes of the course. A dedicated student with a strong work ethic is likely to learn a great deal from the class, no matter if it is offered in-person or online. However, we as teachers can provide students with tools and opportunities that they can use to get the most out of their online music librarianship education.

Giving students frequent opportunities to interact with the professor and one another can combat feelings of isolation common in online classes. These can include regular synchronous class meetings, creative uses of interactive features in online sessions, and regular discussions. Providing students with a way to hear and interact with leaders in the field through guest lectures is perhaps one of the greatest benefits of the online music librarianship course. Guest lecturers can speak with students from thousands of miles away, interacting in real time. Even though this is something that one can do in a traditional class, it seems to work better online, where students are already accustomed to hearing and speaking to a disembodied voice.

Assignments for an online music librarianship class should be carefully crafted to take advantage of the benefits of the online environment while keeping in mind that students may not all have access to the same physical materials. This can be especially challenging for reference assignments, which are generally considered to work best if they incorporate the large number of important print sources that can be essential for music research. However, there are ways to work around the unpredictable availability of print materials, whether it is by providing scanned examples of portions of important resources or assignments that can be accomplished entirely online. Other areas, like information literacy and fundraising, can work equally well in the traditional or online classroom for instruction and assignments.

In this article, I have primarily addressed strategies for teaching music librarianship online that I or other professors have used. I wish to take a moment here to address a few possibilities for the future of music librarianship instruction as more courses are provided online.

First, offering music librarianship courses online has the potential to provide students choices that they have not enjoyed in the past. If more courses are taught online, collaborations between universities, such as the Web-based Information Science Education (WISE)<sup>37</sup> program, of which UIUC is a member, could allow students to choose which professor they wish to study with and at which university. For example, a student who wishes to focus on public library music collections might choose to take the course with a professor who specializes in this topic, or a student looking to pursue ensemble librarianship might seek out a program where that is an emphasis.

This could open the door to greater diversity in music librarianship education, providing students with creative ways to customize their educational experiences. On the other hand, Wagstaff worries that the availability of online courses could actually lead some universities to discontinue music librarianship courses with low registrations.<sup>38</sup> This could lead to a narrowing of student experience, with only a few professors holding a “near-monopoly on teaching.” This could have the opposite effect to that mentioned above, limiting the educational experiences available to students. Thus, as the number of music librarianship courses offered online grows, it is incumbent upon professors, students, and music librarians to demand more variety in education.

Second, the possibilities for collaboration in the online environment can go far beyond those students enrolled in a specific course, the professor, and guest lecturers. One UNCG student suggested the following in his/her survey:

Would it be possible to collaborate with other music librarianship courses at other institutions? Maybe provide an option to work on a project with a participant at another institution to gain additional insight into what others are learning and contributing to the field. After all, these are the same people who may become future colleagues.

I find this idea intriguing, though I have yet to incorporate it into my class because of time and logistical challenges. The online environment is a perfect place for students from various institutions to meet, discuss the courses they are taking, and collaborate on projects. The final project would be the obvious place to do this, as students can customize it to fit not only their individual interests but also the resources they have available, whether those resources include a specific library, a mentor, or a partner at another university. Providing students with yet another networking opportunity could also help them feel less isolated online and more connected with the subject matter and the profession.

Teaching music librarianship online is an opportunity and a challenge. More students can take an online class, but they may feel more isolated in an online environment. Students will have to be more organized and self-motivated online, but they will also have more opportunities to interact with mentors and peers from different locations and with different experiences and skill sets. Although planning and teaching a music librarianship course for online delivery is time-consuming and requires much advance preparation, it is also a rewarding experience. By utilizing the growing number of technological tools available, from chat to discussion boards to wikis, we can engage students, provide them with a rewarding learning experience, and prepare the next generation of music librarians for success.

Table 1. Student satisfaction with basic elements of the course.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Notes**

1. Hereafter, I will refer to these degrees as MLIS, though they are given different titles and acronyms at different universities.
2. John Wagstaff, "Training and Education in Music Librarianship," in *Careers in Music Librarianship III: Reality and Reinvention*, edited by Susannah Cleveland and Joe C. Clark. (Middleton, WI: Music Library Association and A-R Editions, 2014), 24. Hereafter, Wagstaff 2014.
3. John Wagstaff, Questionnaire, 2015. Hereafter Wagstaff 2015.
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6. Jean Morrow, "Education for Music Librarianship," *Notes* 56, no. 3 (March 2000): 655–61. Hereafter, Morrow.
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12. Jennifer Oates, "Music Librarianship Education," *Music Reference Services Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2004): 1–24. Hereafter, Oates.
13. Keith Cochran, "The Music Librarianship Programs at Indiana University," *Fontes Artis Musicae* 60, no. 3 (2014): 217–21.
14. Wagstaff 2014.
15. Oates, 6.
16. Library School Liaison Subcommittee, Music Library Association, "Core Competencies and Music Librarians," 2002.  
[https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/resource/resmgr/docs/core\\_competencies.pdf](https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/resource/resmgr/docs/core_competencies.pdf).
17. Wagstaff 2014, 23.
18. A copy of the survey statements and questions can be found in Appendix A.
19. See Appendix B for the full list of questions.
20. Institutions listed are those at which the professor taught music librarianship online and for which they completed their questionnaires.
21. Nicholas Croft, Alice Dalton, and Marcus Grant. "Overcoming Isolation in Distance Learning: Building a Learning Community through Time and Space," *Journal for Education in the Built Environment* 5, no. 1 (2010): 32. Hereafter, Croft, Dalton, and Grant.
22. Ibid, 31.
23. Burnett, Bonnici, Miksa, and Kim, 31.
24. Kirstin Dougan, Questionnaire, 2015. Hereafter, Dougan 2015.
25. Robbins, 13.
26. Ana Dubnjakovic, Questionnaire, 2015. Hereafter, Dubnjakovic 2015.
27. Timothy Dickey, Questionnaire, 2015. Hereafter, Dickey 2015.
28. Croft, Dalton, and Grant, 35.
29. Dougan 2015.
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33. Timothy Dickey, Syllabus, 2013. Hereafter, Dickey Syllabus.
34. Dougan Syllabus.
35. Dickey Syllabus.

36. Wagstaff 2014, 34.  
37. More information can be found at <http://wiseeducation.org/>  
38. Wagstaff 2015.

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### **Appendix A: student survey**

Please rate your satisfaction with the following elements of the course:

The use of technology in the course (Blackboard Collaborate, Blackboard (UNCG)/Moodle (UIUC), wikis, etc.) was satisfactory.

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Comments:

The course topics were interesting and appropriate. (Topics included: education for music librarianship, acquisitions, preservation, cataloging, reference, technology, library instruction, copyright, management, special collections, fundraising)

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Comments:

The assignments were appropriate to an online master's-level course. (Assignments included: music library profile...)

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Comments:

The readings were appropriate to the subject matter being taught.

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Comments:

The course expectations were appropriate to an online master's level course.

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Comments:

How did this course compare with similar in-person courses you have taken?

How did this course compare with other online courses you have taken?

How did this course compare with your expectations?

What aspects of the course do you think worked best online?

What aspects of the course do you think did not work well online?

Do you have advice for the professor about how to improve the course?

Do you have advice for students who might take a music librarianship course online in the future?

### **Appendix B: professor questionnaire**

How long/how many times have you taught Music Librarianship? Of those times, how many have been online classes.

What are some teaching techniques, assignments, etc. that you think have worked especially well in your online classes?

What are some teaching techniques, assignments, etc. that you think have not worked especially well in your online classes?

What do you see as the greatest advantages of teaching music librarianship online?

What do you see as the greatest challenges of teaching music librarianship online?