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# LIBRARIANS IN YOUR MIDST: THE EMBEDDED LIBRARIAN PROGRAM AT PVCC

BY LAURA C. SKINNER

## How It All Began

In 2003, the American forces that invaded Iraq carried with them professional war correspondents attached to military units; the military and the media called

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them “embedded journalists.” A year later, librarian Barbara Dewey, “inspired by the ... phenomenon” (5), argued that academic librarians should become embedded in the academic process, in order to participate and contribute to that process in meaningful ways (Dewey 6). The idea began to spread among academic librarians around the country who saw the changes taking place in their libraries, and in the place those libraries occupied in their institutions. Lewis, in his vision for libraries in the early 21st century, suggested embedding library resources, including

librarians, into an institution’s academic systems (420). The concept of embedded librarianship demolishes the walls of a library and expands its reach outwards, takes the library’s resources and the expertise of its librarians to the virtual world where many courses take place, and attaches a librarian to courses, so the librarian can share those resources and her expertise with the students, the moment the need arises.

At Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC), the embedded librarian program began in 2005 as an initiative of the Reference and Instruction Librarian at that time, who first suggested it and developed it for the Betty Sue Jessup Library. With the help of other faculty members, this librarian presented her ideas at Peer Group, where her presentation was received with interest.

Her job as an embedded librarian involved being enrolled in Blackboard classes, where she monitored the students’ work and suggested materials for their research projects. She also shared information literacy tips and created tutorials. The subsequent librarian continued the program, and in 2010, it became part of my duties. I have been working to develop and expand this program since then.

This is not the first time librarians have responded to a trend or an idea and adapted it to library instruction. Tucker writes that Ralph Waldo Emerson inspired the birth

of library instruction by suggesting that colleges appoint a “professor of books” to instruct students in the classics. Librarians in the nineteenth century then took the suggestion as a rationale to develop and offer instruction in the use of reference works (10). But the Internet revolution and the increased availability of information have led many to question the future of libraries. According to Tiefel, “...the unthinkable has become a reality. Libraries are being challenged as not relevant or necessary to the future of information” (319).

But librarians, being experts in all aspects of information science, reject that notion. Libraries and librarians are more needed than ever in our Internet-soaked times. The Internet is a powerful tool, full of miracles, wonders, and yes, information, but experienced information professionals are not bedazzled by the glitter. They see that the Internet is an ocean that is infinitely wide, but only a few feet deep. The quality of information required by serious scholarship is rarely found in the open Internet; it is locked away in the databases that libraries subscribe to, and in the print materials that libraries keep on their shelves. Additionally, students (especially those born in the Internet era) have an inflated idea of their own information literacy skills, but the reality is very different: a 2010 study by Project Information Literacy found that, of 8,353 students surveyed, 66% could not define a topic, 62% could not narrow down topics, and 61% could not filter out irrelevant results (Head and Eisenberg 3). Librarians, then, are not only needed, but their skills as navigators through the information oceans are an essential component of student success. And embedded librarians are even more useful, as they can monitor students and lend a hand just when their guidance is most necessary: at the point of need.

### **Instruction at the Point of Need**

Instruction librarians at PVCC frequently offer “one-shot” (that is, standalone) library sessions in which they introduce and demonstrate library resources, or talk to students about concepts of information literacy or research mechanics. These sessions are useful, but they tend to be too short (often an hour or less) to cover topics in depth, or they may not take place at the point of need. The point of need is a moment in the learning continuum when an impending deadline exerts pressure on students and raises their anxiety levels; it is at this time that they are most receptive to instruction. Outside the point of need, students tend to place little value on information literacy instruction (Malenfant and Emers 272); they tend to tune out information, and so this information doesn’t stick. And even if they are interested in the information as it is given, chances are that a few weeks later, when they could use the information, they have forgotten it or only kept a fragmentary memory of it. Librarians at the Jessup Library see this often when students who attended library sessions come to the Reference desk, and ask questions that show that the information they were exposed to never made it to long-term memory. This is why librarians suggest that instructors bring their students to library sessions only a few days before a major assignment is due.

The embedded librarian program offers a solution to the problem of students’ short attention spans, as the librarian is present in the online class and can intervene precisely at the point of need, when learners are the most open to information literacy instruction. The embedded librarian can help students polish their work,

and submit a higher quality product for grading. Many times instructors ask their students to submit annotated Works Cited or References lists prior to submitting essays. These lists are usually rife with errors, both of quality and of formatting. The embedded librarian can go through these lists and suggest better sources, and can help students format their citations by providing citation style materials or answering questions. The librarian can also prevent plagiarism by helping students understand how attribution works. I have worked with students who, for example, cite from article abstracts. An embedded librarian can point out the error to the student, explain why abstracts are not used as sources, and help him or her find a full text article to cite from. Many students have problems understanding the difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources, and believe they all have equal weight. The embedded librarian can help students understand the difference, can create tutorials or provide tip sheets for the whole class, or can instruct individual students via email or a discussion board.

### **How the Program Works**

Adding an embedded librarian to an online course at PVCC is very simple: faculty members contact the librarian to let her know they are interested in the program, and then enroll her in the Blackboard course as a teaching assistant. As soon as the librarian has access to the class, she will create a tab in Blackboard, titled “Library Corner.. This tab includes links to library resources, both general (such as subject guides) and specific (such as books or articles that address assignment-related topics). As the course progresses, the librarian will add more materials to the tab, in response to student needs.

The embedded librarian’s participation in the class varies depending on the instructor. Some instructors prefer a limited role, and so the librarian maintains the library tab and does nothing else. Other instructors give the librarian more latitude, and the librarian can participate in class discussions, suggest resources, approve or reject sources, help prevent plagiarism, and help students with evaluating sources or with formatting their bibliographies.

Courses in which the embedded librarian has an active, participatory role yield the best results, because the librarian is able to guide the students in the improvement of their research products, so their submitted assignments are of higher quality. At the Jessup Library, my most active embedded work takes place in an online Survey of American Literature I. In this course, the semester project involves each student picking an author from among those not covered in the course, and arguing for her or his inclusion in future semesters. The professor divides the project into sections: students must first propose an author and have this author approved by her, then they must submit a search strategy and an annotated Works Cited page - both of which must be approved by me – and finally, they must incorporate everything into a PowerPoint presentation that other students critique.

As soon as the chosen authors are approved, I reply to each student, suggesting appropriate library and/or Web resources. When they submit their search strategy, I check each source to make sure it is a scholarly one. Despite my suggestions, many times the students choose shallow Web sources. I then reject the source, explain

why it is not acceptable for college-level work, and suggest scholarly alternatives. When the students post their annotated Works Cited lists, I check the citations and then help the students format them correctly, by encouraging them to use the library's citation guides, and by answering any questions they may have.

My experience as an embedded librarian in American Literature I classes has been very positive. I have seen firsthand how the students' research work improves when they have a librarian mentoring them through the process. Most students tend to struggle with source evaluation and with citation styles, but as the course progresses, they get better and better. Because they obtain higher quality and more scholarly sources, the quality of their own products improves, and this leads to higher grades.

### **Promotion and Reception**

At PVCC, promotion of the embedded librarian program is three-pronged. Twice a year, during Convocation Week (the week prior to the start of spring or fall classes, where college-wide planning meetings take place), I give a brief presentation at the new adjuncts' meeting. I explain the library services to them, and promote the embedded librarian program.

I have also created a brochure with information about the program and how to embed a librarian in a course. I distribute this brochure during my talk to the new adjuncts, and I also place brochures in different places throughout the college, such as the faculty lounge.

Finally, I send an email to the faculty at the beginning of each semester, promoting the program and describing how it can improve student success. The program fits well in any course that requires scholarly writing, the use of academic sources, evaluation of sources, and citing. It works very well in distance education, for students who cannot come to the library or who take all of their courses online.

All three methods yield new opportunities every semester, and the program continues to grow, albeit slowly. The Jessup Library research librarians have been embedded in a variety of online courses: English Composition, Literature, Journalism, Student Development, Microbiology, Biology, Nursing, Geography, Business, and Chemistry.

The program has been well received by the faculty who use it. I asked some of the faculty who had embedded librarians into their online courses to provide their impressions of the program. The Dean of Business, Mathematics, and Technologies wrote:

I was absolutely thrilled with the embedded librarian program and I saw a vast improvement of the student research papers with the added resources of the embedded librarian. The quality of the papers was very high and made the grading process a pleasure rather than a chore. I can honestly say that the program is something that I would recommend to any instructor in any field who really wants to see an improvement in the quality of student research and writing.

The Dean's students had to write a term paper that required a large number of business resources. I created a list of books, articles, and Web sites, arranged by the list of topics the students had to choose from, thus creating a shortcut for them so they could spend more time on the actual writing portion of the assignment.

A Professor of English wrote, "I believe the program is a brilliant decision and bright light in the community's collective efforts at teaching and learning." This professor has embedded librarians in his English Composition, Journalism, and World Literature online course, and he gives the embedded librarian enormous latitude within the online environment. The embedded librarian helps his students focus their thesis statements, guides students in tightening up their citations, suggests materials for research, and participates in online discussions.

An adjunct instructor, who teaches Student Development (SDV), has embedded librarians in all of her online SDV courses. SDV courses help students learn to navigate the college's environment, teach them strategies for success, and are especially useful to recent high school graduates, or to adult students returning to school. This instructor writes that the embedded librarian program:

[...] is an excellent resource for students. Rather than navigating the entire library site - students have access to the needed resources for conducting research all wrapped up in a nice package. This is especially helpful for students participating in online courses. They may not have the same access to the "on campus" library and it opens up an avenue to guided resources directly from a librarian.

An Assistant Professor of English has been involved with the embedded librarian program since its inception, and she is one of its most ardent supporters. She is always willing to try new approaches, and frequently consults with the embedded librarian about ways to increase her students' participation in information literacy instruction. She writes:

I think the embedded librarian program efficiently provides my online American literature students with quality resources. As a result, their presentations and essays, for which research composes a key ingredient, benefit. While I focus on content and asking students questions to consider about their topics, the librarian connects students with sources that may answer those questions.

Having an embedded librarian in a course is an open door for any student to ask for help. A student hits a wall in the research process and an embedded librarian--real person who is participating on a discussion board thread--is right there. In fact, the embedded librarian in my American literature course often directs each student to appropriate databases and even to specific books and articles. The immediacy and the ease for students are real strengths of the embedded librarian program.

Embedded librarians also guide my students in responsibly citing their sources. In particular, I appreciate the way [the embedded librarian critiques] their Works Cited. Many students are rusty.

This Assistant Professor's students are very enthusiastic about their chosen authors, and quickly put together a list of sources, many of which are sources found through Google, Wikipedia, or obscure, unsigned, and undated random Web sites. While these students start out on a weak note, they grow stronger once they are guided to better resources, and their presentations improve quickly. Their finalized products show the polish that comes from using academic sources.

### **The Future**

Having a librarian embedded in an online course, or in the online portion of a hybrid course frees the instructor to focus on teaching the syllabus, while the librarian takes care of the research mechanics. The librarian can steer students away from inappropriate Web resources, encourage critical thinking and analysis, help students become acquainted with library databases, teach citation styles, and help students avoid plagiarism. This increases the quality of the students' output, and trains the students in scholarly research. In fact, having an embedded librarian at hand to guide students means the students spend "less time struggling to locate [sources] and more time doing actual research [and] utilizing critical thinking skills" (Lenholt, Costello, and Striker 217).

This is a winning approach, and one that, if allowed to take root, expand, and become part of the college's culture, would surely contribute to student success and retention. Lewis writes that "libraries serve as a mechanism for making knowledge available in communities and organizations," and that they should be a means, not an end (419). I envision the embedded librarian program as a means, and as a meaningful part of the college community's efforts at teaching and learning. There is a synergy that comes from the collaboration between teaching faculty and teaching librarians in the online environment, and the students benefit from this synergy in the form of guidance, support, and the opportunity to succeed and shine.

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