Embedded Librarians: 
MLS Students as Apprentice Librarians in Online Courses

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Abstract
Library Science MLS students at one university are serving as apprentice “embedded” librarians in nursing courses at another university. Results of surveys of nursing students at the end of the class and reflections of the MLS students after this experience will be shared from the first semester iteration of this project. A comparison of this project with past iterations of the project will be made in the hope that the information gleaned from these interactions will help in the design of library services. Furthermore, this premise of the development of relationships in the provision of library services for distance learners will be further examined.

Library Patrons are Customers

Library patrons are customers, whether we call them users, clients, or by any other name. Even though Hoadley (1995) disputes this point of view by consulting a dictionary and stating that library patrons are not our customers because they do not meet the definition of a customer as “someone who purchases a commodity or service” (p. 175). She questions how we can possibly call patrons our customers if they are not purchasing something. Focusing on service, Hoadley (1995) goes on to say, is a good move and long overdue (p. 175). So why not consider what good customer service techniques can do for the people who avail themselves of our library services? Patrons could be much better served if in our role we considered them as customers.

Customers want relationships according to the findings of marketing researchers Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991). In addition, many of the customers interviewed in their research indicated that they wanted to be known and cared about, preferring “ongoing personalized relationships with the same representatives” of the firms they deal with who could be considered as partners
There is much we can learn from the field of marketing when considering how best to serve our library patrons. The concept of relationship marketing, defined as mutual interest between companies and customers that emphasizes customer retention and long term relationships, is one such idea that can serve as a theoretical framework worth exploring when designing services for distance learners, in fact, for all learners. Furthermore, in 2000, Besant and Sharp made the statement “libraries need relationship marketing” “[c]an there be a more straightforward way to create a vigorous library of value to users than by understanding and cultivating relationships with users?” (p. 22).

Soules (2001) discusses how libraries can and should move towards marketing and relationship management as a marketing strategy, and quotes Neil Goldman (1999) who works in the credit union industry and contends that every transaction, interaction, and connection is marketing. Soules asserts that every reference transaction is a one-on-one relationship that “stretches far beyond the reference transaction and it starts with the impression customers have when they walk in the door” (p. 344), whether it is a physical door or a Web door. Soules points out that the electronic world has complicated things considerably and that the “very concept of a physical library may or may not hold, but the mission is still the same—connecting content and customers through access and services” (p. 345).

Gutek (1995) who discusses customer service in several books on the topic defines two types of service transactions: relationships and encounters. She defines encounters as fleeting, single interactions with any one of a group of interchangeable providers. This is the type of service transaction that commonly takes place at the reference desk. Expectations for future interactions in which a shared history will contribute to more meaningful transactions are the basis for relationship style of transactions that “occur when a customer has repeated contact with a particular provider” and “they get to know each other both as individuals and role occupants” (p. 7). Gutek cannot imagine any circumstances in which encounters would be preferred over relationships.

**Relationship Management Techniques to Develop Personalized Services**

Working with colleagues for almost ten years to design more personalized library services for distance learners has made it apparent that the boundaries between distance learners and on-campus learners have definitely blurred. Regardless of location, however, on-campus learners seem to expect the same type of services that the online learners receive, and why shouldn’t they? Since the ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (2004) demands that “Library resources and services in institutions of higher education must meet the needs of all their faculty, students, and academic support personnel, regardless of where they are located” (¶1) and that “equitable distance learning library services are more personalized than might be expected on-campus (¶12), then why not provide the same services to students on-campus
as those students at a distance receive?

With many years of focusing on drawing students into the library, even to the point of adding coffee shops and cafes for enticement, should librarians give up the expectation that students living on-campus who take an online class must come to the library to receive their services while their distance counterparts receive a different type of service because they cannot come to campus? Technology has changed the way we do many things. Even people who live in bustling cities full of a myriad of retail choices shop online. And society does not force the people who live near a shopping mall to make all of their purchases there while only the people who live in remote communities are allowed to shop online.

Since technology has radically changed the way we do things on a daily basis, librarians can seize the opportunities that the technology presents to provide equal services to all library users. The ability of a librarian to be present in an online classroom on a 24/7 basis is an opportunity that the physical library environment has never enabled. So, why not make use of the technology to insert ourselves into the educational lives of our customers so that we are there when they need us? This perpetual “presence” allows librarians to provide point-of-need services. As Penson (1996) stated in an article about point-of-need learning, “hundreds of electronic resources are at your fingertips, but you don’t need them until you need them—and then you usually need them bad” (¶6). In this case, then, the student does not have to make a trek across campus to the library, or go online and try to wade through thousands of Websites on a topic—the student has rapid access to a librarian in the online class. The online class environment allows librarians the vehicle to attempt to provide personalized services and develop the type of customer service relationships that Gutek (1995) describes. In this environment, the librarian does not even have to wait for the student to ask because being in the class provides a day-to-day knowledge of what is going on allowing the librarian to determine what students might need at any given time and offer that assistance.

_librarian embedded in the online classroom_

In order to set the stage for the creation of librarian/student/faculty relationships, we have been exploring the concept of the presence of a librarian in the online classroom for eight years. The distance learning librarian and the subject specialist liaison at University of Central Missouri worked with nursing students and criminal justice students as librarians in online courses offered in these programs for several years. When the distance learning librarian became a library science (LIS) faculty member at University of Kentucky, she required the students in her online classes to consult with the distance learning librarian, and surprisingly many LIS students balked at this requirement (Lillard, Wilson, & Baird, 2004). The major finding from the various iterations of this project was that students never quite used the services of the librarian as we had hoped.
Another issue we saw emerging from this research was that if every online course instructor decided that he/she wanted a librarian presence in the online class, the manpower would not be available to provide this level of service, especially with such a personalized emphasis. The inclusion of library science students as apprentice librarians in the classes presented a new opportunity. After a three year hiatus from this project and this fresh approach, we are excited to share the results of the first iteration of this new approach. Library Science MLS students at Emporia State University are serving as apprentice “embedded” librarians in nursing courses at University of Central Missouri.

The Format of the Project

Eight MLS students from Emporia State University enrolled in a one-credit special topics class titled: The Embedded Librarian. The student librarians were divided into four teams of two students each and assigned to four different nursing classes at the University of Central Missouri. One MLS student who was serving in an internship position with the Newman Division of Nursing library at Emporia State University served as a student supervisor for this class. Student librarians were required to consult with the course instructor to negotiate their level of involvement in the course and this turned out differently for each team. Some teams were allowed to introduce themselves while other teams were introduced by the course instructor. Some teams were allowed free reign to make postings in the classes to initiate contact with students while other teams were required to pass all Blackboard postings through the course instructor for approval. A member of this team stated “another problem for me was that our instructor had asked that all of our postings on blackboard to the students go through her first and while I understand why she asked this of us, it did make me feel like my contribution was not that important.” However, even getting course instructors to allow the librarians into the online classroom is a major accomplishment and these liaisons must be cultivated if we are ever to be able to provide adequate library services in this digital age.

Data Collected in the Project

Due to time constraints and dealing with institutional review board approval, the student librarians did not get the opportunity to survey the nursing students and instructors this semester to determine the impact of their presence. One nursing faculty member, however, was prepared with a pre-approved set of questions that were placed in her technology related nursing course discussion board. Her message to the nursing students and the direct quote responses received from the nursing students can be found in Appendix A.

For the purposes of this project, two of the three questions the nursing instructor asked of her nursing students in the technology related class were
considered important.

**Questions for Nursing Students**

**Question 2:** What impact did having an embedded librarian have on the student's use and understanding of technology?

Nursing student responses indicated that the students in the technology related class did not use the assistance of the embedded librarian. Many of the nursing students thought that the embedded librarians was a good idea but that it would have been much more helpful to have this service available in classes they took at the very beginning of their nursing program. From their responses, found in Appendix A, it appears as though they thought that their research skills had already been perfected. If the nursing students had consulted with the embedded librarians, they may have discovered, as the Kentucky MLS students (Lillard, et al., 2004) also discovered, that bouncing search strategies and topic ideas off of a librarian can be helpful no matter how well one believes one’s research skills have been perfected.

**Question 3:** What impact does the inclusion of someone who can assist with learning about database searches have on one's learning and modeling of use in educational settings? I know that not everyone used the librarians, but knowing that they were there may have influenced you. Please take a few minutes and add information. This will help us look at how to use librarians in a course.

For the most part, the nursing students in this class did not use the assistance of the embedded student librarians. One student did think that somebody available to answer questions could add to the confidence level in the class, while another student thought that research skills should be taught in the process of obtaining the B.S. degree in nursing rather than at the master level (which this course was). Overall the nursing students seemed to think that the embedded librarian was a helpful option to have available. The exact responses of the nursing students can be found in Appendix A.

**Student Librarian Reflections**

The student supervisor for the Emporia project had some very interesting thoughts on the project that reflect things discovered in previous iterations of this project. These are also issues that can be found in the library literature.

A presupposition that I think all students in the class had (including myself) was that we expect patrons to be more forceful about asking for help. Yet in my own role as a patron, I am loathe to seek out help from a librarian at the library, so why should I expect students in online classes to be any different? This paradox calls for librarians to be much more present in these online classes than in a non-
online, traditional classroom setting.

The LIS students in the Kentucky version of the project were not happy about having to consult with the distance learning librarian (Lillard, et al., 2004). The Emporia State University MLS students were required to read the publications on all previous iterations of this project before they began the project. The student supervisor of the Emporia State project noted in her end of the semester reflections: “how can we expect our patrons to behave any differently if even LIS students do not want to ask a librarian for assistance.” But this is a good lesson in the obstacles librarians have in promoting themselves and their services to students and faculty. Furthermore, some of the students at Kentucky admitted that even though they thought they knew everything about online searching and narrowing topics (after all, they were library science students), they thought that bouncing topic ideas off the librarian was a beneficial experience in the research process.

The student supervisor of the Emporia project went on to say:

If anything, participation in an online class as a librarian, and watching my fellow students try to provide library service in these classes has led me to believe that we as librarians need to change our reference skills. As I stated above, this will mean being more “present” in classes, but this may also mean becoming more comfortable with new ways of communicating, such as instant messaging and chatting. Further, librarians who want to work in online learning situations must be expected to have excellent written communications skills, not only in terms of grammar, but also in terms of a professional working language.

Another embedded student librarian made the following observations:

My partner and I primarily provided the class with information by posting on the discussion board in Blackboard. We provided the class with our contact information and started separate threads to cover topics we thought would be useful to the class. The topics included: article search tips, APA style guides, and interlibrary loan. The discussion board threads were visited twenty times on average, and so it appears that the class utilized these resources.

She went on to say, however, “Overall the class did not ask as many questions as I was expecting. I thought we would receive a number of questions about APA style, but we didn’t have any.”

When the class began I was unsure of how to bridge the communication gap. The class did not contact my partner and I much, so the class either was very independent or our services weren’t promoted adequately. The interactions that I had with students were very pleasant. I tried to use positive language and emoticons to convey friendliness.
One team of embedded librarians did a lot of work on APA style with nursing students in their assigned class and was even asked to co-author a research paper with the instructor. Journal entries from this team had the following observations:

Teacher of class has asked me to co-author a paper on research for nursing students, specifically my part would be about the literature review.

My partner is talking to the professor about us going through the student papers and checking them for APA style, before the class moves on to the next paper. Other than that became an expert on health information literacy this past week in preparation for helping my professor publish a research paper on the health information literacy skills of college students.

And then of course, the age-old problem of when we find something for a student rather than teach them how to find it came up in these journal entries from another student librarian:

Had to bust some chops today, student was basically nickel and diming their way into having me do their reference list. I ended up just giving them the page numbers from the APA manual.

Had a student last night who was a little miffed that I wouldn’t find her articles. Apparently showing some people how to do a database search is not enough help. I would just think that if you are in graduate school, no matter the field, that you should have the desire to learn the skills necessary for knowledge acquisition. In other words, there is really no excuse for anyone who is getting a graduate level degree to be ignorant on the use of databases.

One of the embedded librarians who signed up for the embedded librarian project again in the following semester had these comments to make:

My experience as an embedded librarian in a nursing theory course differs from the experiences shared by my classmates only in my perception that I had some interaction with most of my ten assigned students and had ongoing discussions about multiple information needs with two of them. I collected over thirty e-mails from these students with reference questions about the class material. In looking back, most of the questions were about locating articles on a specific subject or APA format. But some of them dealt with plagiarism, or Wikipedia, and at least one student hoped I could help with some technology issues she was having in accessing her articles.

I was so fortunate to be assigned to a nursing professor who welcomed us, encouraged the students to contact us, and was enthusiastic about any of our ideas to promote the library and our availability within the online environment.
In speaking of what she learned from the experience she went on to say:

I learned that just putting your name into the online environment does not make anyone take notice. We competed for the attention of our students with group e-mails reminding them that we’d look over papers before they turned them in.

Students needed not only to be told we were available, but they also needed to know what we could do for them. And to be honest, sometimes I didn’t know what I could do until confronted with the situation. Competency becomes the criteria any student would use in deciding whether or not to consult with a librarian after the initial contact.

Conclusions

All in all we again find that students do not avail themselves of the librarian’s assistance as much as hoped. The technology class from which there were actual nursing students’ reactions literally did not use the embedded student librarians at all. They thought it was a good service to have available but did not use it. This mirrors what we discovered in previous iterations of this project (Dinwiddie, & Lillard, 2002; Lillard, et al., 2004).

The MLS student librarians’ comments showed that even though they were not asked for assistance as much as they hoped, it was still a valuable learning experience for them. One embedded student librarian mentioned the benefit of point-of-need service:

Though the class did not present my partner and I with many questions, I do believe that the embedded librarian program is a good service for librarians to offer. Communication and technical difficulties should be smoothed out to make the project run more smoothly in the future. The internet and electronic databases are the main source of information for many students. Librarians are serving the needs of students best by being present where information is being sought after.

Another embedded student librarian stated:

Even though my assigned nursing class did not provide online reference experience, reading other students’ experiences was helpful. Journaling and adding information on the wiki provided insight into how this tool could be used to communicate more effectively with an online group. I did develop some ideas on future participation as an online embedded librarian based on my experiences, the assigned readings, and the shared information.

At the present time we are preparing to begin the second semester of this project. Two of the embedded student librarians have enrolled in the class for another semester because they enjoyed this opportunity. One of these embedded
student librarians made the statement that she felt like a real librarian while taking part in this project. In fact, a comment she made in reflection really sums up the experience:

With students demanding online classes in ever-increasing numbers, librarians need to be concerned with providing competent, professional services in personal and unique ways. Becoming embedded in their class environment allows us to target our skills to the specific discipline and course content and challenges us to find new ways of truly helping our patrons.

References


Appendix A

Survey Questions and Responses of Nursing Students in Technology Related Class

Please complete this discussion board for those who also completed the survey. This is the follow-up of having librarians in the course.

1. What was the focus of the project completed by the student?

2. What impact did having an embedded librarian have on the student's use and understanding of technology?

3. What impact does the inclusion of someone who can assist with learning about database searches have on one's learning and modeling of use in educational settings?

For the purposes of this presentation, questions two and three were the most important. These are the questions and the responses received from the nursing students in the technology related class.

Question 2

What impact did having an embedded librarian have on the student's use and understanding of technology?

“I feel that I could have really used them earlier in my program, now that I am half way through, I feel fairly confident I can access/search the resources I need. Though it was nice to see them as an option.”

“I did not use the school's librarian resources for this class. In the past I have had trouble with on line connections and my inability to navigate the old computer system at UCM. I do however use my hospital's librarian staff and searches for my classroom work. This has proven very effective and a valuable asset in my schooling.”
“I did not utilize the embedded librarians. I was able to locate research reference material using the library resources.”

“I did not use the librarians to ask questions about technology. I am lucky because my neighbor is the technology person for the local school. I just asked him. If I would have not had a resource such as my neighbor, I probably would have used the librarians.”

“I did not use the librarian. I was able to find the articles and information I was searching for without the help of the librarian.”

“As far as the use of technology, I didn’t need the librarian.”

“I did not utilize the embedded librarian. However, it was nice to know there was someone there to help you find articles or other needs. My project consisted of utilizing online learning which with someone available to ask questions to benefits the students tremendously. There are many times the instructor may not know how to look something up but to have another individual able to answer questions is a great asset.”

“I did not use the librarian for this particular class.”

“I did not utilize the librarian services, although I think it is a good idea and I enjoyed knowing that the services were available if I did need them. Thanks.”

“I did not find this useful at this time in my learning. To me, searching a database and looking for current research to base my practice on is basic knowledge that any nurse functioning in a clinical environment should know. Gone are the days where we can practice in a vacuum and not know what is going on in the research community. I think at a master's level this should be a skill already perfected.”

“I personally did not use the embedded librarian. I had access to the hard copies of many nursing journals. I utilized the databases through JKL and did not have any problems obtaining information. I simply did not feel that I needed the embedded librarian's assistance.”

“I think it would be more useful to have someone dedicated to the course, instead of calling the library help desk.”

“I could have REALLY used the embedded librarian in my first class I took. I feel that it takes almost a whole class to feel comfortable with the school's database. I had no idea how to find everything or navigate around the site. I have learned different search techniques this semester from the librarians. I found that
calling the library, Scott answered the phone and my questions.”

Question 3

What impact does the inclusion of someone who can assist with learning about database searches have on one's learning and modeling of use in educational settings?

I know that not everyone used the librarians, but knowing that the were there may have influenced you. Please take a few minutes and add information. This will help us look at how to use librarians in a course.

Knowing that there is an embedded librarian, if needed for assistance, would be a helpful addition to an online course.

Since I have taken online classes before, I felt very comfortable with the online databases. When I was starting my online classes, I did use the online and onsite librarians frequently. I would get help with searches, interlibrary loans, etc... It is nice when you are learning how to research to have someone available to answer questions.

I think it is helpful to know that this person is available if we need assistance with finding articles for our projects.

I believe having an embedded librarian can be a useful asset in some online classes. I used the librarian several times in the Nursing Theory class for questions on papers and some for research as I had not previously used library resources online

I do think having a librarian in an undergraduate class would be helpful. I think these skills should be taught as a process of obtaining a BSN. Nurses in clinical settings now need to know what they are basing their practice on, not just the "how to do it". With the already computer smart next generation this is an easy skill to teach them.

I think that it is certainly beneficial for some students to have an embedded librarian. I never contacted the librarian because I did not feel that I actually needed his/her assistance. However, it was nice to know that someone was there to answer questions had I had any. Perhaps, it added to the confidence level in this course to know that someone was readily available if needed.