Going the Distance: creating an eLibrary for non-traditional students

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INTRODUCTION: The popularity of online learning continues to grow due to the flexibility offered to students. At the University of Toledo, online programming has increased from 371 courses and 8755 enrollments (seats) in Spring 2009 to 475 courses and 10609 Enrollments (seats) in Spring 2010.

In an effort to make library resources and services more equitable for students taking online courses, a task force of librarians from the University Libraries and Academic Support division and an instructional designer from Learning Ventures was assembled to create a virtual library (eLibrary) within Blackboard, the web-based course management system.

METHOD/STRATEGY: The task force decided to focus on the creation of a point-of-access portal within Blackboard, with the goal of eliminating the need for an online student to go searching for the library website. After establishing a timeline to complete a working model, the task force composed a statement of purpose, formed goals and objectives, and reviewed the literature for examples of similar projects.

Next, relevant content for the site was chosen, with emphasis on electronic resources. From this, information categories were developed, with objectives for each category, which was used to organize the site content.

The selected subject categories were submitted to the instructional designer and graphic artist to create page templates and icons for the main eLibrary page. A bookmark created for the library by the UT Marketing and Communications Department was chosen as a banner, and determined site’s color scheme (Fig. 1). Once the page templates were complete, librarians populated them with content. At this point the portal was ready for use.

An introductory page on the Distance Learning Web Site was created (Fig. 2) and a Link to the eLibrary was added to the Blackboard login page (Fig. 3). Links to librarian’s photos and bios were included for a personal connection (Fig. 4). A survey was placed within Blackboard to assess usability, gather demographic information, and provide an avenue for feedback. A usability study using students was conducted.

The following were utilized to market the eLibrary:
- Library Blogs
- UT News (including traditional print articles and e-mail formats)
- Emails to Faculty
- Distance Learning Newsletter
- Library Facebook Page
- Letter to faculty from library administration

RESULTS: The eLibrary was accessible in late May 2009. Students began to utilize the site despite there having been no promotion. Usage statistics from Fall 2009 show the majority of users as having access to campus resources (Fig. 5) and working on undergraduate degrees (Fig.6). Of the 67% who claim to be users of the eLibrary (Fig. 7), 31% use the eLibrary daily. The most visited page was “Find an Article” (Fig. 8), although finding a book was the main reason users gave for entering the eLibrary (Fig. 9). Also, 4% of survey respondents identified themselves as having a disability.

The usability study revealed no specific design or navigation problems with the eLibrary, but did demonstrate the need for point-of-access help guides. As expected, the users’ skill level and willingness to read closely influenced success at finding and using the library resources.

DISCUSSION: A summary of survey comments from Fall 2009 show overall satisfaction with the eLibrary. Most users found the site useful and easy to navigate, would use the site again, and would recommend the site to fellow students. Some important factors that may have contributed to maximal use and success of the site were: having the link to the site prominently displayed upon login to Blackboard, giving a “face” to UT librarians through biographical information, and having a representative on the administrative end of Blackboard to attend to technical details and reduce the time necessary to make changes or fix problems.

CONCLUSION: The eLibrary Services Center illustrates one way librarians can successfully reach online students by going beyond the brick and mortar library to where they are: in BlackBoard. Plans to improve the site suggested from the user survey include:
- Adding video tutorials
- Eliminating having to authenticate when leaving Blackboard to access a resource database with a product such as EZProxy
- Looking into better ways to serve users with disabilities
- Adding links to UT’s virtual lab, the UT Libraries’ blog, and the patron library record
- Revising the survey in Blackboard
- Adding Information about writing styles

Acknowledgements
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