

Connections on Demand

Linda C. Gordon, Librarian, University of La Verne

Darryl Swarm, Librarian, University of La Verne

Kitt Vincent, Regional Campus Admin. Director, San Luis Obispo and University of La Verne

Abstract

The University of La Verne hosts approximately 3,500 traditional undergraduate students on the main campus, 3,500 adult students throughout California at regional campuses, and several hundred online students. Colleges represented include Arts & Sciences, Business, Education, and Law. Challenged by lack of funding and staffing, the library struggled with ways to support over 8,000 students with only six instruction librarians. The library and Regional Campus Administration collaborated with senior management to pilot a technology platform using AdobeConnect (licensed) for content and video, and Business Skype (free) for voice, to deliver real time, interactive virtual information literacy to remote users. During the pilot program testing phase it was recognized that this medium could be expanded to create applications fostering emerging virtual social learning communities beyond a shared information literacy experience. The university President and Provost used the platform to introduce themselves, share news and introduce “Library Connect.”

Discussion

Introduction

The Wilson Library, both distance and resource challenged for the delivery of information literacy instruction, responded to the urgency for change to sustain its mission and goals for servicing both the main campus and the off-campus Regional Campus Administration (RCA) student populations equitably. Between 2008 and 2009 the percentage of information literacy instruction conducted declined from the prior year by 32% due to a 38% reduction in travel budget. In 2008 to 2009 alone the instruction librarians travelled a total of 5,717 miles between the main campus and the RCA off-campus locations. The trend of declining instruction, 55% overall for both main campus and RCA off-campus locations between 2008 to date (Wilson Library Fact Book, 2007-2011¹) at a time enrollments have risen by 22% (University of La Verne Fact Book, 2007-2011²) is of great concern to the Wilson Library instruction librarians in terms of sustainability.

Given this situation an approach to optimizing the delivery of information literacy at Wilson Library was to explore and pilot the use of existing technology at the university to reach the greatest number of students in the greatest need, synchronously and live, for basic

¹ University of La Verne, Wilson Library 2007 – 2011 Fact Book retrieved at <http://library.laverne.edu/reports/>

² University of La Verne 2007-2011 Fact Book retrieved at <http://sites.laverne.edu/institutional-research/files/2011/10/Fact-Book-2007-2011-with-IPEDS.pdf>

information literacy instruction. The two College of Business & Public Management librarians supporting the greatest number of students at the university (approximately 39% of the student population both on and off-campus, or approximately 3,000 students) took the lead on this project on behalf of the Wilson Library.

Working as an internal team among the librarians, as well as with a cross-functional team which includes the Dean of RCA, one of the key RCA Directors, residing at the most distant of the RCA campuses (San Luis Obispo, CA), and in collaboration with the Office of Information Technology, a multi-phased program called “Library Connect” was proposed to senior management. This platform uses live synchronous video-conferencing using AdobeConnect and Business Skype for delivery of information literacy to multiple classrooms at multiple off-campus locations, potentially over 500 students in an evening webcast.

The learning objectives and outcomes for Library Connect as originally developed were revised based on the change of content format to include the President and Provost’s welcoming remarks and introduction of “Library Connect.” The revised objectives and outcomes were:

1. Support multi-dimensional learning modalities preferences among students for the delivery of information literacy using AdobeAcrobat and Business Skype: auditory (the librarian host’s presentation will be heard in the classroom through the classroom podium speakers using Business Skype; students may interact with the librarian host using the classroom microphone), visual (a live demonstration of database searching using AdobeConnect for screen-sharing), and kinesthetic (RCA Directors will provide students with a physical handout with screen shots and space for note taking)
2. Students will participate in live interactive instruction with the host librarian for the delivery of information literacy/library research instruction.
3. Students will participate in a “virtual community” of students sharing questions and answers with the President, Provost and librarian.

The pilot program launched Monday, March 26 and continued through Thursday, March 29, 2012. An estimated total of 2,655 students participated over the four evening sessions (over 500 students an evening). In cooperation with the University President, Provost, RCA directors and staff, and Office of Information Technology, the University Library successfully piloted “Library Connect” (a live streaming video conferencing presentation platform with two-way audio) with students at nine off-campus RCA locations. All connections were stable and the presentations were successful.

Students were asked to complete a survey using SurveyMonkey following the Library Connect presentations. Despite only a three percent return, the following summary themes emerged:

President/Provost. Positive reception of the President/Provost's welcoming address and feeling more "connected." The majority (78%) enjoyed the opportunity for interaction but some would prefer in-person sessions.

Delivery Platform. The technology platform was viewed as better than average or excellent for audio, video, and microphone quality/ease of use (80%). Moderately positive reception for the use of this technology in a hybrid format (66%).

Library. A majority of students have a positive view of using online library resources (68%). A minority of students (15%) prefer pure online library instruction delivery as opposed to face-to-face or hybrid. A significant majority of students (97%) responding to the survey self-reported they were "moderately proficient" to "proficient" in the use of technology and had access to the Internet.

Description

The "Connections on Demand" session provided an overview of the challenges of outreach to remote user locations. "Library Connect" utilizes two mature technologies, AdobeConnect and Business Skype, together as a new and creative way to sustain and expand the delivery of information literacy to student and faculty researchers in emerging virtual social learning communities.

Laptops were configured at each table in the presentation room. An overhead projection of the presenters' screen was used for a live demonstration of "Library Connect." Although the technology, AdobeConnect and Business Skype, are both mature technologies, there are no reports of the two technologies being configured in this unique manner to deliver interactive programs to large scale populations of students at diverse locations, simultaneously. Presenters lead a lively discussion of the following questions:

1. Do you presently have online distance learning library research/information literacy instruction (or would you like to) at your institution? What platform is used? Strengths and weaknesses?

Participant responses to question #1 included approximately one-half of the thirty-eight attendees sharing they were familiar with using various platforms such as AdobeConnect, Moodle, Polycom, Eluminate, Horizon Wimba, and Muse with various degrees of success. Consensus seemed to be lack of training opportunities and greater success with smaller numbers of classrooms participating simultaneously.

2. What are your concerns about online distance learning library instruction/information literacy instruction at your institution?

Participant responses to question #2 included the expense for quality audio components of delivery systems(e.g., free systems lack integrity and drop connections while robust systems using telephone bridges, for example, are costly), lack of

training, and lack of both personnel and funding resources to support larger scale delivery of live synchronous online distance learning library instruction/information literacy instruction.

3. What are the advantages for the use of online distance learning library instruction/information literacy instruction at your institution? Whether you have implemented a program or are thinking of implementing a program?
Participant responses to question #3 included the ability to reach users at remote site locations without physically traveling to the locations, as well as the ability to present to two or more physical classroom locations remotely.
4. Do you have target audience(s) which benefits (could benefit) from online distance learning library instruction/information literacy instruction? How? Why?
Participant responses to question #4 identified online populations and remote location populations as primary targets, but also targets are users who try to perform research online from any location. A few institutions regularly participate in online distance and/or virtual learning library instruction. The benefit to online students is they are usually unable to access in-person services. Virtual online instruction can provide critical information to students about Library websites and databases; information that is not always intuitive. Many students accessing library resources online experience difficulties in finding what they are looking for but do not ask for help or don't know how to ask for help. Virtual online library instruction closes the gap between students at a distance and librarians located at main campus libraries.
5. What are challenges in the delivery of information literacy/library research instruction for in-person versus distance learning populations?
Participant responses to question #5 included students believing they are effective in their use of technology and of library resources but librarians realizing students are not; the lack of library staff to adequately support in-person and distance user needs; lack of resources (technology, staffing, training, budget) to serve online or distance populations effectively.
6. Do or would you view online distance learning library instruction/information literacy instruction at your institution as primary or supplemental in nature?
Participant responses to question #6 indicate that face-to-face instruction is the primary mode of delivery of information literacy library instruction. Almost all of the participants responded that their institutions offer some form of online distance learning library instruction (e.g., either through embedded links or modules in course management systems such as Blackboard or webcasts). Many fewer participant institutions offer virtual interactive webcasts for information literacy instruction.

None shared they are using virtual interactive webcasts for reaching students simultaneously in multiple classrooms at multiple geographic locations.

Key Points

While many participants were familiar with the use of AdobeConnect or similar technologies for hosting live interactive information literacy sessions with a single class, large scale synchronous delivery to multiple classrooms at multiple locations was novel. A common theme emerging from the discussion was the limitations for video technology coupled with a variety of audio models (e.g., telephonic bridges, VOIP, etc.). Frequently with moderate numbers of node computers (over 15 to 20) degradation in the form of dropped connections, delays in video and/or audio feeds, or prohibitively costly audio connectivity (pay per minute) deters use.

Another common theme emerging from the discussion was the importance of training and support (resources) for librarians. This was true both for librarians who are currently participating in virtual delivery of information literacy instruction or those wishing to learn more about the modality. The presenters offered to visit interested institutions and host a demonstration of the technologies used for “Library Connect” or to “test” with anyone interested in learning more about or piloting the technologies for live synchronous webcasts.

The University of La Verne’s model for using existing resources to equip RCA classroom podium computers as “host” computers projecting the AdobeConnect live video feed into classrooms using the overhead projector, feeding free Business Skype audio through the classroom podium speakers, and equipping classrooms with microphones for two-way voice/audio optimized the present system limitations of hosting approximately 24 simultaneous nodes (users). Given the 24 node limitation students at each campus were moved into two classrooms. This equated to 18 simultaneous user nodes for the technology platform. Each off-campus location has approximately five classrooms in use on any given evening with approximately 15 students in a classroom, totaling approximately 60 students. Sixty students times nine off-campus locations equates to approximately 540 students that can be reached in a synchronous live webcast, across programs and across geographical locations at a given time. The pilot launch was for the prime Monday through Thursday evening class population bringing estimated potential total to 2,160 students. A later tabulation of actual courses participating in the “Library Connect” presentation raised the estimated total students to 2,655 students. Limitations of the present system include limited bandwidth, number of licensed users for AdobeConnect, and number of authorized users for Business Skype. However, the significant windfall benefits of the technology platform were the creation of a learning community among the nine RCA campus locations and obtaining the President and Provost’s participation in launching the project.