Online Learning in K–12 and Higher Education and the Library Professional

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Every once in a while, my colleagues across the fields of library and information science and instructional technology debate the growth and application of online (or, as it is sometimes referred to, distance) education. For those of us who are passionate about high-quality online learning, it often comes as a surprise that anyone might still be hesitant or against the creation of a fully online course. Dr. Marshall Jones, director of Graduate Studies in the College of Education at Winthrop University, South Carolina, explained his perception of this continued hesitation:

> One of the reasons online learning has a bad reputation is that early iterations of it could be pretty crummy. And there are online classes today that are still pretty crummy. I like to point out that if you take an online class, and it is crummy, you don't have enough good online classes to balance out the bad one. So rather than just calling that one crummy online class a bad class, people tend to define the delivery mode as bad. We've all had bad face-to-face classes. But we've had enough good ones to help balance out our perceptions. We don't think of a bad face-to-face class as defining the whole delivery system. We just think of it as a bad class.[1]

Whether we laud its growth or fear its presence, online learning is here to stay. In its most recent report, the Babson Survey Research Group shared that enrollment for distance education students has steadily increased every year for the past fourteen: "The most recent year-to-year addition of 337,016 distance education students, a 5.6 percent increase, exceeds the gains seen over the past three years."[2] In its section describing on-campus students, the report emphasized the continued shift toward online learning: "The growth in the number of students taking only distance courses, coupled with the overall decline in the overall number of students enrolled, means that there are now over a million fewer students coming to campus in 2016 than there was [*sic*] in 2012. This decline has been present across all sectors of higher education."[3] Before you assume this growth is due to private, for-profit entities, I'd like to highlight one more data point collected by the Babson Survey Research Group: almost 69 percent of all distance education students are enrolled in public institutions.[4]

Distance or online education in K–12 settings is just as ubiquitous. Due to student needs for advanced placement courses, elective college courses, credit recovery, homebound placements, and homeschooling, online learning is now a part of K–12 school systems in all fifty states.[5] In addition, the growing popularity of technologies such as Schoology, Edmodo, and Google Classroom means that even in face-to-face K–12 classrooms, students must develop a comfort level with online coursework in order to fully participate and experience academic success.[6]

For the library professional, this translates into making sure we are present and involved in multiple learning settings—face-to-face, online, hybrid, blended, flipped, and any number of other setting combinations. Unfortunately, little evidence exists that coursework for library and information science prepares candidates to design and assess online learning.[7] Many library professionals either pursue training in instructional design in the form of additional degrees or certifications or amass professional development in these areas, trying to keep up with an ever-changing list of learning management system characteristics, web-based tools, adaptive and assistive technologies, and institutional regulations.

Library professionals and LIS researchers have also amassed a body of work that contextualizes librarianship in the world of online learning, with specific focus on the librarian's role as instructional designer and instructor. The *Journal of Library and Information Services in Distance Learning* claims that "the issues surrounding the delivery of library services to this population are sufficiently unique," requiring its focus on this area starting in 2005.[8] Interestingly, as one peruses the articles in the journal, beginning at 2005 and moving toward present day, it is easy to identify a shift in the librarian's attention, from a provider of resources to a collaborator and instructor:

> Librarians' roles have expanded from putting resources in students' hands to helping students engage, evaluate and apply information in a rich educational landscape, much of it not even library-curated. Librarians need to be out on the front lines with other faculty developing educational environments instead of merely reacting when assistance is requested. . . . Efforts to be visible and proactive will help faculty develop direct associations between information literacy/critical literacy pedagogy and collaboration with librarians.[9]

A parallel focus exists among school library researchers. In 2017, Lucy Santos Green, Stephanie Jones, and Panne Burke surveyed eighty-five school library preparation programs representing thirty-eight states, asking how these programs prepared candidates to deliver school library programs in fully online settings.[10] The national study concluded that while the preparation program coursework did not directly address fully online school librarians, graduate programs were aware of their importance and attempted to address the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed through an emphasis on technology-enabled learning, web design, the teaching of digital literacy, and the development of candidates who continually pursued professional development after graduation.

In preparing this issue of *Library Technology Reports* on librarianship and online learning, I wanted to honor and continue the shift in focus from librarians as providers and curators of resources for learning to librarians as active designers and teachers in online spaces. Each chapter tackles an aspect of online pedagogy from this perspective, avoiding specific discussions of technology tools that might go away with next year's budget, and instead prioritizing an examination of the affordances of those tools and learning needs librarians are tasked with addressing, regardless of our title and user population.

In chapter 2, Jennifer Banas and Russell Wartalski use radical change theory and its three principles—connectivity, interactivity, and access—as a guiding framework for librarians discussing how best to foster community in online learning spaces. Not content with merely addressing the design of online materials, Banas and Wartalski make a strong case for why intentional development of community is a goal that is just as, if not more, important for instructor librarians. Their section of this report introduces you to an ideal learning community and the course elements necessary to support its existence and growth.

Supporting our profession's ethical and foundational belief in access for all, Heather Moorefield-Lang addresses accessibility in online course design in chapter 3 of this report. In a detailed look at the materials one might develop for an online space, Moorefield-Lang provides clear guidelines and suggestions for making each aspect of your online course accessible to all learners. Based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning, chapter 3 explains why accessible design benefits not only the fifty million individuals with learning differences, but all students on their learning journey.

Chapter 4 was written by Jered Borup and Leanna Archambault, two internationally recognized scholars on K–12 online learning and K–12 online teacher educator preparation. In a practical and resource-filled section, these authors describe the importance of personalized learning when online settings of any type or combination are designed and delivered to younger learners. Although many of the situations and resources discussed cater to K–12 educational settings, librarians in public libraries who work with children and young adults, as well as academic librarians working with incoming freshmen or first-generation college student populations, may also want to carefully review chapter 4.

In chapter 5, Tonia A. Dousay takes a library organization step-by-step through the process of selecting online settings and resources outside of expensive and official learning management systems. Prioritizing open educational resources, her chapter describes how online learning design needs can be met by both open source all-in-one solutions and build-a-system approaches. Using accessible terminology, Dousay discusses the importance of not only assessing needs, establishing goals, and selecting systems, but also selecting content and making linking decisions. For individuals who would like to develop online instruction but are facing limited budgets and resources, chapter 5 is an excellent resource.

Social media, in all of its glory, can be a wonderful platform or a librarian's worst nightmare. Considering the pushback and ethical conundrums companies such as Facebook are facing, it is no surprise that one might hesitate to include social media tools when

designing and supporting online learning. However, in chapter 6, Lucas John Jensen makes a strong case for why these tools, when appropriately selected and integrated, can lead to powerful learning experiences and community building among learners. His storytelling approach delightfully describes the best, the worst, and in-between of social media use in online teaching.

This report concludes with Ross A. Perkins's treatise on assessment and evaluation of online learning in chapter 7. Differentiating between assessment and evaluation, and detailing how the application of each impacts every step a librarian might take in the online learning process, Perkins guides the reader through a logical and systematic approach for considering the quality of one's design and its impact on student learning from a program perspective. For those who value evidence-based practice and data that supports instructional, as well as funding, decisions, his primer on assessment and evaluation of online learning is a must-read.

Online learning, whether in higher education, K–12, community, or work-training settings, is a unique learning venue with its own pedagogical and technological needs. It is my hope that you find this report to be informative and well-structured, enabling you to provide your constituents with well-designed and well-supported online instruction, filled with "opportunities for personal growth and participation on a global scale; opportunities to become agile, lifelong learners."[11]

Notes

1. Marshall Jones, personal communication, February 7, 2019.
2. Julia E. Seaman, I. Elaine Allen, and Jeff Seaman, *Grade Increase: Tracking Distance Education in the United States* (Oakland, CA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2018), 3.
3. Seaman, Allen, and Seaman, *Grade Increase*, 26.
4. Seaman, Allen, and Seaman, *Grade Increase*, 13.
5. Leanna Archambault and Kathryn Kennedy, "Teacher Preparation for K–12 Online and Blended Learning," in *Handbook of Research on K–12 Online and Blended Learning*, ed. Richard E. Ferdig and Kathryn Kennedy (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2014), 225–44.
6. Lucy Santos Green, Stephanie A. Jones, and Panne Andrea Burke, "School Librarians Fully Online: Preparing the Twenty-First Century Professional," *School Library Research* 20 (2017).
7. Green, Jones, and Burke, "School Librarians Fully Online."
8. "Aims and Scope," *Journal of Library and Information Services in Distance Learning,* Taylor & Francis Online, accessed February 22, 2019, https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=wlis20.
9. Rebecca Bliquez and Lynn Deeken, "Hook, Line and Canvas: Launching a Professional Development Program to Help Librarians Navigate the Still and Stormy Waters of Online Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Library and Information Services in Distance Learning* 10, no. 3–4 (2016): 101.
10. Green, Jones, and Burke, "School Libraries Fully Online."
11. Brenda Boyer, "Designer Librarian: Embedded in K–12 Online Learning," *TechTrends* 59, no. 3 (2015): 76.