



Empathy and Opportunity: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Library Services for Distance Learning

Elizabeth Dobbins, *Campbell University*

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunities to create innovative, robust services as libraries worked to support residential-turned-online students. This paper situates the pandemic in the broader context of the challenges distance learners face, discusses the opportunity for innovation that came as a result of the pandemic at one university library, and considers the lasting impact these changes may have on the future of library services for distance learners.

KEYWORDS

Academic libraries, COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning, higher education, library services, online learning, quality education

SUGGESTED CITATION

Dobbins, E. (2022). Empathy and opportunity: The COVID-19 pandemic and library services for distance learning [Column]. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 7(1), 95–105.

<https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/11/11>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted inequities in American society that disproportionately impact vulnerable and marginalized populations. Disparities have taken shape along familiar fault lines of race, gender, and social class (Kantamneni, 2020). Amid this crisis, however, opportunities have emerged for one group within higher education: distance learners. The COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunities to create lasting, innovative, and robust library services for distance education students by centering their experience.

The Distancing of Distance Learners in Higher Education

Individuals working with distance and online education college students recognize the unique challenges these learners face. The appeal and promise of flexibility—learning “anytime, anyplace” (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019)—drives enrollment in online learning, especially for students balancing coursework with family and career obligations. While this flexibility provides a new method of accessing education, it comes with a unique set of challenges, “typically stemming from the need to vie for time and space to study in an already full schedule” (p. 1009). Thus, what attracts students to the online classroom—flexibility in completing coursework “anytime, anyplace”—becomes one of their most significant challenges as they juggle competing priorities.

Online and distance education students can truly become “distanced” if campus conversations about services and resources begin with assumptions of traditional, on-campus students, considering only how to *adapt* services for distance students as opposed to centering the design on these students. They can easily become invisible to those of us designing library services—out of sight, out of mind. Distance students, then, are expected to operate within structures that weren’t built for them.

What would happen if, when designing library instruction and services, we started by thinking about online and distance students? This way of thinking draws on the curb-cut effect, that “laws and programs designed to benefit vulnerable groups ... often end up benefiting all of society” (Blackwell, 2016, p. 28). Consider how curb cuts and ramps assist wheelchair users, as well as people pushing strollers, carrying heavy groceries, or riding a bike. Consider how closed captions assist deaf and hard of hearing people as well as English-language learners, diners in a noisy restaurant, or individuals who forgot their headphones. We can, and should, apply this principle to the way we design library services for distance learners.

In my own library, I have worked to shift the thinking around distance education by encouraging librarians to center design on distance students when implementing library instruction services, planning outreach events, and purchasing resources. Considering the special needs of distance learners allows us to create more robust services for everyone, as we find areas of overlapping needs between distance students and traditional learners. For example, social presence—one of the three pillars in the Community of Inquiry framework by Garrison et al. (2000)—is a well-studied component of online learning. Similarly, social

integration is a key concept in the literature on residential student persistence (Braxton et al., 2013). Considering this area of overlap, librarians can design outreach events to include a virtual component, fostering a sense of campus-wide community that benefits both distance learners and residential students.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I worked to develop more robust services for our extensive distance learning community. I encouraged librarians to take the time to intentionally design resources for distance students, arguing that creating online instructional materials will not take away from on-campus partnerships, but rather will enhance the in-person student experience, too. Creating asynchronous tutorials for online students, for example, can be utilized to replace or supplement main campus library instruction. While our library built a strong foundation of support for our online and extended campus students, the COVID-19 pandemic provided additional opportunities for innovation.

Before the Pandemic: Library Services for Distance Learners

Wiggins Memorial Library serves the majority of Campbell University's diverse campus population of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, in addition to Adult & Online Education (AOE) students enrolled in Campbell Online and at our Camp Lejeune, Fort Bragg, Raleigh, and Sampson Correctional Institution sites. In 2016, I became Wiggins Library's first dedicated Reference & Online Instruction Librarian and worked to develop systematic and scaffolded support for distance learners.

Library information is embedded into every distance learning course through the Blackboard learning management system (LMS), including a librarian profile with contact information, links to valuable online library resources, and a course- or discipline-specific Research Guide, as available. This provides point-of-need support within the Blackboard course—a distance learner's "home base." Formal library instruction was integrated into the curriculum in the first-year experience course, which includes heavy librarian support through office hours and other outreach. Subject-specific librarians were expected to partner with instructors in their discipline for upper-level courses, although instruction was limited due to the challenges in navigating the complex network of instructors on various campuses and AOE's shorter eight-week term structure.

Virtual services such as the library's 24/7 chat support benefitted both main campus and distance learners. Other library services included an underutilized ship-to-home service for library print materials. Librarians worked to foster a sense of community and belonging among distance students by developing a Virtual Symposium for distance learners: an offshoot of the library's annual in-person Academic Symposium, a highly anticipated campus tradition of student research presentations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, these practices helped the library establish a solid foundation of support for distance learners. However, there was room for growth in library instruction and ease of access to print materials for distance learners.

COVID-19 as an Opportunity for Empathy

As the campus shifted to online instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, librarians adapted to working remotely and were thrust unexpectedly into the space of a distance learner. Suddenly, librarians were discovering how to collaborate, learn, and teach online while negotiating collapsed boundaries of family life and professional identity—experiences that are all too familiar for many distance students.

Empathy is a critical skill in human-centered design practices and is the first stage of the human-centered design process (Kelley & Kelley, 2013). Empathizing with library users allows us to define the problems users experience and thoughtfully design services that meet their needs. Human-centered designers seek out immersive experiences as a way of building empathy with their users and understanding their points of view. By living their experience, librarians were able to better understand and articulate the unique needs of distance learners: convenience, ease of access, and timely point-of-need instruction in a variety of formats. Empathizing with distance students also centered them in the design process and kept their needs a priority as each librarian created services, instead of relegating them to the purview of the distance learning librarian.

Adaptations in Online Learning: Innovations at Wiggins Library

Librarians weren't the only ones thrust unexpectedly into distance education; hundreds of main campus students suddenly found themselves navigating academics and campus life remotely. During this transition, the library—alongside many academic units—needed to quickly mobilize services and resources to support residential-turned-online students. Our strong foundation of support for distance learners allowed us to market and promote existing online resources for these students. In addition, the library designed several new services for these residential-turned-online students.

Virtual Reference Room for Synchronous Research Assistance

Immediately following the campus transition to online-only courses, librarians began working remotely and fulfilled their Research Assistance Desk shifts from home, with patrons able to receive research support via email, 24/7 chat, phone, or scheduled research consultations via web conferencing software. This model served the campus while all courses were taught online. However, as the University prepared to transition back to modified in-person classes in Fall 2020, the library needed to adjust its reference model to serve in-person students accustomed to using the library's Research Assistance Desk while protecting them and librarians alike through social distancing.

Our solution was the creation of a Virtual Reference Room, staffed 80 hours a week, where main campus students could visit the physical Research Assistance Desk in the library in much the same way they might visit with a local bank teller via a banking kiosk with a camera and audio. A kiosk was set up with a computer monitor, keyboard, mouse, webcam, and

microphone facing the patron. A web browser remained open, connected to the virtual meeting room, with a slide displayed inviting students to ask a librarian for help. Librarians, working remotely, monitored this virtual meeting room during their reference shifts, ready to help students visiting the desk for assistance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Note. A librarian working remotely assists a student at the library's Research Assistance Desk; this image depicts the librarian (left) and student (right) experience of the same transaction.

The Virtual Reference Room was also widely promoted to our online and extended campus students, giving them more robust, direct access to librarians for research help. Librarians grew accustomed to monitoring the virtual meeting room during their on-call reference shifts and the service was well-received by AOE students. As a result, the library will continue to provide the Virtual Reference Room for online and extended campus students, even after social distancing limitations from the COVID-19 pandemic cease. Additionally, librarians will begin offering access to this desk at the University's newest campus site, Sampson Correctional Institution, a local prison facility where the inaugural cohort of students are receiving an Associate of Arts in Behavioral Sciences Summer 2021. The ability to provide synchronous virtual instruction to students, mediated by a Corrections Officer, revolutionizes information literacy instruction in prison education.

Asynchronous Online Instruction

Another significant response to the COVID-19 pandemic was the development of engaging, interactive tutorial modules through H5P, an online tool used to create interactive HTML5 browser content. The library already had been in conversation with Adult & Online Education (AOE) administration to work toward adding library instruction to the AOE English curriculum to mirror main campus programmatic library instruction in ENGL 100, 101, and 102 courses. The COVID-19 pandemic added new urgency to this project in order to support main campus English courses taught online. Librarians developed a series of H5P modules tailored to ENGL 100, 101, and 102 and piloted these modules in a main campus ENGL 102 course adapted to be taught online in Summer 2020. Piloting the module in a main campus course allowed librarians to compare pre-/post-test assessment data for the new module against past data from in-person ENGL 102 instruction. The assessment results showed a marked increase in student learning outcomes as compared with traditional instruction. Such promising results generated the buy-in from AOE administration and English instructors needed to conduct a similar pilot in ENGL 100, 101, and 102 AOE courses in Fall 2020. The initiative culminated in library instruction being incorporated into the English curriculum across extended campus sites and Campbell Online, effective Spring 2021. To support this initiative, the library purchased a subscription to H5P.com, which is a paid hosting solution as compared to the free, self-hosted version of H5P.¹

During this time, I also took advantage of the library-wide focus on serving online students to lead an online tutorial revision project. The project sought to analyze all of the library's general tutorials and rank each as high, medium, or low priority for revision based on a librarian peer-review process (see Appendix A), usage statistics, and other considerations such as timeliness for review or relevance to current instruction. Tutorials identified for revision were assigned to working groups of two to three librarians; new tutorials were developed using a collaborative scripting process. The revision project resulted in the creation of 10 interactive H5P tutorials and five video tutorials. Beyond the scope of the revision project, additional tutorials were created as needed, including adaptations of the library's in-person Library Tours and Escape Room—both new student orientation experiences—for the virtual format. In total, 61 new tutorials were created from March 2020, when main campus courses pivoted online, through the end of the 2021 academic year; this is a significant increase when compared with the five tutorials created during the academic year (AY) 2018–19, and two tutorials created during the bulk of the AY 2019–20 prior to March 2020.

In tandem with the revision project, the library developed a new [repository of online tutorials](#). The searchable repository includes tutorials organized into the following collections:

¹ See [Getting Started](#) to explore H5P's interactive content and [H5P.org vs H5P.com](#) for a comparison between H5P.org, a free tool to try out H5P, and H5P.com, a robust environment available with a paid subscription.

Using the Library, Research, Search Strategies, Evaluating Sources, and Citations. The renewed focus on online services during the COVID-19 pandemic led to the creation of new tutorials, a virtual escape room, and a repository that will continue to benefit both in-person and distance learners past the pandemic.

Ship-to-Home Options for Library Materials

During the pandemic, the Access Services department worked to serve students by creating curbside delivery services and revised document delivery options. The most significant adaptation was the creation of a streamlined “Request Options from Wiggins Library” link that was integrated into the library’s discovery service, OneSearch. While the library had previously offered ship-to-home services for distance learners, it was underutilized because the service ran through the Interlibrary Loan system, ILLiad, a system that was originally designed for main campus students requesting loans from other libraries, rather than distance students requesting print materials from our own collections. The process was cumbersome, a workflow obviously adapted for distance learners rather than designed for them. In contrast, the new “Request Options” link was designed for distance learners: located where they are (the discovery system), efficient, and easy to use. The link allows users to request print library material for curbside delivery, ship-to-home, scan-to-email, or pick up at the Circulation Desk. Because it was designed to be as simple as possible for the most challenging of circumstances—requesting library materials from a library that students may never have stepped foot in—the resulting service is stronger for everyone.

Increased Librarian Engagement in Distance Education

As instruction librarians became more comfortable teaching synchronous online, hybrid, and HyFlex sessions for main campus students during the COVID-19 pandemic, their outreach to and engagement with online and extended campus students significantly increased. In the AY 2020–21, 45 instruction sessions were taught for Adult & Online Education—an increase from 10 taught in AY 2019–20 and four taught in AY 2018–19. This increase is a result of greater librarian confidence in teaching online as well as, I believe, the focus on online and extended campus students resulting from the empathy garnered from personal experience.

Campbell Business Librarian Dan Maynard, deeply embedded in main campus business school programs, began significant outreach to AOE Business instructors. He reflects: “My experience working during COVID-19, and my work with AOE, has me thinking about the implications of proximity—both of materials and people—as a design consideration for instructional modality” (D. Maynard, personal communication, June 22, 2021). The unique needs of distance learners require librarians to design instruction and services differently. Dan’s personal experience as a “distance learner” during the COVID-19 pandemic cemented his understanding that instructional design is guided by student needs and experiences.

Library Outreach

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, several library outreach events were live-streamed and/or recorded for distance learners. Outreach events, however, were primarily designed for main campus students and adapted (recorded or live-streamed) for distance learners. In order to foster a sense of community for students suddenly learning remotely, Librarian and Chair of the Outreach Committee, Brooke Taxakis, worked during the pandemic to modify traditionally in-person outreach events to be natively virtual. Through her work as a student worker supervisor, first-year-experience instructor, and Outreach Committee chair, Brooke works closely with students and values community as an important factor in student achievement. “Seeing how main campus students struggled with a sense of community in the online environment made me understand more how our AOE students feel,” she reflects. “Moving forward, we will continue to do virtual events so that our AOE students feel included and more connected to their campus community” (B. Taxakis, personal communication, June 23, 2021). During the 2020–21 academic year, the Outreach Committee offered 12 library events virtually, such as informal “Dabble in a Discipline” presentations by Campbell professors that provided a glimpse into an academic department; “Knock Out Your Final Paper,” a partnership between the library, the Writing/Tutoring Center, and the Counseling Center; “Trivia Night”; “Crafts with Books”; “Puzzles and Prizes”; and “Faculty Lightning Talks.”

The Future of Distance Learning Services at Wiggins Library

Having spent five years as the library’s Reference & Online Instruction Librarian, I am currently transitioning into a new role of Head of Research & Instruction Services and Assistant Dean of the Library, leaving a vacancy in the Online Instruction position. The library, however, has made the decision to refocus that position away from online instruction, signifying that outreach and engagement with our online and extended campus learners is the responsibility of every librarian, not just one, within the department. The COVID-19 pandemic became a catalyst for librarian engagement with distance learning and spurred librarians to engage more deeply and meaningfully with online and extended campus programs.

Moving forward, the library will continue its new services for distance learners, most significantly its Virtual Reference Room. While students have had the ability to schedule online consultation services for years, the ease of being able to “drop in” to the Virtual Reference Room significantly improves distance learners’ ease of access to research assistance. Librarians will center design on distance learners when designing instruction, services, and outreach. Another opportunity for future directions is to capitalize on librarians’ increased understanding of distance learners’ needs through the creation of an empathetic marketing campaign. Girton (2018) makes a compelling case for using empathetic marketing to reach distance learners by signaling an understanding of their core emotional needs and explaining how the library can meet those needs.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to refocus library services on distance learners and underscored the importance of designing for these learners from the outset. The need to quickly create new services for residential-turned-online students centered the design process on the distance learner, while librarians' own personal experience working remotely engendered empathy for the unique experience of these students. Building on a strong foundation of support for Campbell's Adult & Online Education students, librarians leveraged a challenging situation to create lasting changes that will better meet the needs of distance learners.

References

- Blackwell, A. G. (2016). The curb-cut effect. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 15(1), 28–33. <https://doi.org/10.48558/YVMS-CC96>
- Braxton, J. M., Doyle, W. R., Hartley, H. V. III., Hirschy, A. S., Jones, W. A., & McLendon, M. K. (2013). *Rethinking college student retention*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)
- Girton, C. (2018). Showing students we care: Using empathetic marketing to ease library anxiety and reach distance students. *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning*, 12(3–4), 209–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533290X.2018.1498634>
- Houlden, S., & Veletsianos, G. (2019). A posthumanist critique of flexible online learning and its “anytime anyplace” claims. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50(3), 1005–1018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12779>
- Kantamneni, N. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized populations in the United States: A research agenda. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 119(2020), 103439. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103439>
- Kelley, T., & Kelley, D. (2013). *Creative confidence: Unleashing the creative potential within us all*. Crown Publishing.

Appendix A

Each tutorial was assigned to two librarians for peer-review. Librarians reviewed the tutorial by responding to the following questions through an online form:

1. Considering **content** (e.g. material covered, examples included), what does this tutorial do well?
2. Considering **pedagogy** (e.g. delivery/teaching method), what does this tutorial do well?
3. Considering **aesthetics** (e.g. opening slide, graphics, text), what does this tutorial do well?
4. Identify at least three ways to improve the tutorial. (Consider: Are there any gaps in content? More or less explanation needed? Could this content be delivered more effectively in a different way? Is it visually interesting?)
5. Is the current **format** the best choice for delivering this topic of instruction? Explain. (e.g., if it is an interactive tutorial, what purpose does the interaction serve? If it is a traditional video tutorial, is this the best way to teach the topic?)
6. Dream big. Do you have any ideas of how to remake this video to be more impactful?
7. Do we need to have a Wiggins Library-specific tutorial or is there an existing tutorial that teaches the topic better? (Take some time to browse the web! You may search the LibGuides Community, YouTube, product videos from a database vendor or service, etc.)

The two librarians leading the project independently each synthesized the peer-review feedback in a one- to three-sentence summary and scored each tutorial with a number indicating its priority for revision (1=high priority, 2=medium priority, 3=low priority). The two librarians then averaged their priority-for-revision scores for each tutorial and, along with the peer-review summary and statistical data, prioritized tutorials for revision and established a calendar for tutorial revisions. This data was compiled into a spreadsheet that organized basic information about the tutorial (peer-review assignments, tutorial name, link to tutorial, length of tutorial, librarian author of tutorial); statistical information (average user views over the last two years, along with annual usage data for each of the previous five years); and action item notes (priority for revision, revision focus, revision deadline, revision assignments).