A Library Can Be Anywhere

Allison Faix

Coastal Carolina University

In a small computer lab hidden at the end of a labyrinth of book stacks, I circle the room, checking to make sure all the workstations are connecting to the internet. Students wander in one by one: "Is this the right place?" I chat with them while we wait for their professor and the rest of the class: "How is your research going? What are you hoping to learn?" Sometimes they ask me what they can expect during the library session: "Is our teacher coming, or just you? Who are you exactly? Before the pandemic, this was the way my library instruction sessions always began.

As a librarian, I am almost always a guest teaching someone else's class. The pandemic didn't change that, it just changed where those classes took place. I do my best teaching when I find out the context of the class that is visiting the library—about the assignment and the instructor's expectations, but also what the students are worried or excited about, too. If the students seem confused about what they need to do, I'll ask the professor clarifying questions about that at the beginning of the library session. If students mention being frustrated with not finding things on Google, I'll explain why Google might not be their best choice before I start showing library databases instead.

I always try to limit demonstrations so I can devote time for students to start researching. I will go around and talk to each student individually and suggest strategies just for them. This is my favorite part. I like to help students exactly where they are at that moment in time—some struggling to find a way to narrow things down, others so far ahead they ask for help with Interlibrary Loan. There are skills and concepts related to library and online research that can be built on as students progress through college, but it's also true that each time you start a new research project, you might need different resources. Even experienced researchers can run into problems and learn new strategies along the way.

I had always assumed that bringing students to the library, and being able to talk with them informally before library sessions, was essential. Going to the library breaks routine and calls attention to research as something that's important. And if students learn nothing else, I want them to leave the session knowing that people who work in the library are patient, approachable, kind, and here to support them.

When everything went online during the pandemic, even I wasn't allowed in my library anymore. The doors shut to everyone except a few staff running curbside checkout. I could teach library sessions online from my house, but my first challenge was getting an invite to those online spaces. I can't blame faculty for that--we all had to regroup so quickly that making sure students

could still have library instruction couldn't be a priority. I started reaching out, but I couldn't even reach out to anyone in person anymore. It took a while to have much success.

I learned to start smaller and try to do more to meet faculty where they were, too. A library instruction session is not the only way that librarians can teach information literacy or help students. My library department brainstormed a list of other ways we could offer to help. None of these things were really new to us but they were mostly things we didn't do too often before the pandemic, or advertise as much. The list included:

- Visiting online classes for synchronous library sessions
- Creating custom videos for students to watch asynchronously
- Recommendations from the library's instructional videos that faculty could incorporate into lesson plans
- Creating online library research guides for classes
- Adding librarians to Moodle (LMS) classes to participate in discussion boards about research and answer questions for students
- Meeting with students via Zoom for individual or group library research appointments (these could be required--librarians reporting attendance--or optional, for students who want extra assistance)
- Reminding students about library chat, where they can get assistance with research whenever the library is open

With such a long list of options, it felt easier to reach out to faculty over email. I tried to craft my emails with empathy and understanding: this year is different; this semester is harder to navigate. What can I do to help you and your students where you are right now? Here are some ideas, but I am open to your ideas as well.

When I look at the numbers of library sessions we taught, it wasn't as many as usual, but I think we learned that what's even more important is the different ways we can still have a positive impact. I had many faculty agree to try something new and different that made sense for their newly online classes. The number of individual research appointments that our library did with students also doubled—sometimes because faculty wanted to require them, but many times just because faculty encouraged them. It wasn't the same as helping them in class, but it might have helped those students even more.

What I learned from this crazy year is that you don't need a pandemic to think outside the box like this. If there are faculty who aren't scheduling library instruction sessions (even though we know they are asking their students to do a lot of library research), we can reach out to find out if there is a different way to support their classes. And for faculty who didn't think they wanted library sessions, sometimes the feedback they got from their students about the alternative library help they used instead actually helped change their minds about this. Everything we do as teachers and researchers is always a bit experimental, so we shouldn't be afraid to try new things. The pandemic forced us all to try doing everything in a new way, and that is a mindset that I hope I can keep. You'll often hear librarians talk about the library as a

place, and of course it is an important place. But what I learned is that the library can also be anywhere that librarians can go, online or in person, to meet with others and help them with their research.

Going forward, I want to keep thinking outside of the box that is my library's building, even though I am so glad to be there again. I always knew that librarianship could be just as multi-modal as any kind of teaching, but I wasn't taking advantage of that. The best way to help students and faculty is still to meet them where they are, and to find out what they need. You can do that by walking around a classroom before a library session starts, but there are many ways to do it in online spaces, too. I plan to continue offering all the types of instruction I offered during the pandemic, and to remain open to new ideas from faculty about how to best reach their students. I will keep learning about best practices for online teaching, and keep working to apply them to online library instruction as well. The library is just as much online as it is a building, and librarians need to be wherever our students might need us, too.