

Neither Pandora nor Cassandra

Library services and distance education in the next decade

by Mark G. R. McManus

The title refers, of course, to two classical myths that warn of the possible negative, unintended consequences of the search for knowledge. In the first instance, curiosity unleashes a panoply of disasters that continue to plague the world. In the Cassandra myth, she is able to foretell the future, but people refuse to believe her predictions because they are all bad news.

As a library administrator bearing some responsibility for extended campus services that are both successful and well-regarded (*not* the same thing), I keep these myths in mind because it is easy to succumb to either or both of them. My own bad prediction follows: unless we are cautious in how we define and program such services, 20 years from now, distance students will sit at their home PCs and electronically debit \$20 per course to the university and \$400 to Time-Warner. That is, the library will not be a key player in distance education (or, ultimately, on campus).

A major mission for the Western Governors' [Virtual] University (WGU) is to broaden access to higher education by fostering the use of advanced technology for the delivery of educational services (<http://www.westgov.org/smart/vu/imp.htm>).

This institution is viewed as a prototypical utilization of technology as a future educational delivery mechanism. It represents the direction many institutions are beginning to take; a variety of legislators and administrators see it as the wave of the future.

It is the wave of the future, and for a very simple reason. In a white paper on the Army Medical Department Distance Learning Plan, Henry T. Lippert proposes that "the bottom line reason for considering the use of procedures and technologies under the rubric of 'distance learning' (DL) is *to save money*" (http://ae2178.med.osd.mil/scgi-bin/library_list.pl/lib). While it may not express the lofty mission of the WGU, I suggest that the Army is surprisingly realistic.

Technology-mediated distance education may be the answer at the bottom of Pandora's box; none of its attendant ills will obviate its truth. Librarians cannot simply disregard it as another bad scene predicted by some Cassandra, or gain any advantage by emphasizing negative consequences. William Miller, past-president of ACRL, had a standard stump speech about how difficult his job became when he had to overcome the view of state legislators that soon "everything will be free digitally on the Web" and that libraries will need no funding for acquisitions.¹ I'm fairly certain every librarian has a local version of the same story. As long as there are prospects, however imaginary, for saving money on the delivery of education, that is where the money will flow. There are, indeed, many good reasons for delivering education by distance technology: program demand may be isolated, potential learners may have environmental considerations that preclude on-campus attendance, the market for instructors or materials may

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be insurmountable locally; distance education *can* overcome geographical and temporal boundaries. As an administrator, I commonly see, read, or hear about excellent programs of library services to distance learners. Each involves a considerable investment on the parts of institutions, learners, and, particularly, librarians. Following are a number of points I believe must be kept at the forefront for libraries (and librarians) to play a key role in distance education in a technological environment.

Early and basic library involvement in distance education programs

For at least two reasons, librarians must be involved early in the development of distance education programs. The first can be illustrated by a problem that arises every day at any reference, circulation, or reserve desk: the instructor has assigned materials that "the library is bound to have." While this presents difficulties on campus, the simple inconvenience and frustration (and concomitant ill-will) are not easily resolved for distance students. Secondly, librarians remain the experts in information/knowledge packaging. It has been, and continues to be, our jobs to know what students need and can use and what is available. Examples of cases where librarians were *not* consulted may be quite extreme: in my state, an institution offers a master of science degree over the Internet. If you go to the program's homepage and click on the icon for library access, you get the following:

Library Research Facilities

While pursuing your . . . degree at xxxx you will find that many of your course assignments will require you to research a particular topic in more detail. If you live near a major library, then you may use the resources available at that library in your research efforts. If you do not have access to a research library where you live, then you can access information on the Internet using any of the following services: Excite / Infoseek / Lycos / WebCrawler / Yahoo!

The institution *does* have an on-campus library and is a participant in the University System of Georgia's GALILEO project that provides Web access to more than 110 data-

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bases online, including full-text of more than 2,000 periodicals. This is a program with many difficulties to overcome, I suspect, since preparation and availability of course materials for distance students is of utmost importance to the successful completion of either courses or programs. Yet, the second edition of the *Oryx Guide to Distance Learning: A Comprehensive Listing of Electronic and Other Media-Assisted Courses* (1997, William Burgess, ed.) is depressingly full of courses and programs where students are left on their own to find whatever library resources they can to complete the requirements for their distance courses.

The learning curve is higher than we think

Computers and information technology are generally pandemic within higher education in the United States, but the capacities of students are not yet generally high. Patently, no students will enroll in Internet classes if they don't have access to the Internet. But at my institution, we spend an inordinate amount of time explaining on the telephone how to download and configure plug-ins (e.g., telnet software or pdf readers), how to print, how to save or ftp files.

I view this as the logical result of librarians' frequent claims that "Our library is easy to use; if you have problems just check at the reference desk." We have often acted as if the library were a shopping mall. In fact, libraries are difficult places to navigate. They can be *fun*, but they are not fun because they are easy. They are fun in the same way that solving puzzles is fun. Both require work to solve, however.

Distance students don't usually have the luxury of recourse to a reference desk. This is primarily a rationale for the extension of library instruction to the electronic environment. If we fail to work with the distance instructors to provide the kind of naviga-

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tion tools and instruction necessary to allow distance learners to be successful “electronic library consumers,” my Time-Warner scenario will become reality. Someone else will package material in a readily consumable, mall-like retail package (even if it doesn’t include “learning”).

Library service must be more than pointing to resources

Librarians must begin to view the library as an intellectual, learning exercise, rather than as a warehouse.

Distance education can make good or bad use of information technology. What is distinctive about good education is the reflexive engagement of students into the whole process of learning. The University of Pennsylvania’s Project Vision appears to be a good example of library and curricular instruction that engages students and that continually challenges both instructor and student to determine that *education* rather than training is taking place.

Although the Internet is a marvelous mechanism for *presenting*, we don’t know how to make it a learning instrument. As in education TV, we must be cautious not to replicate the most unsatisfactory “talking heads” or “sages on stages” aspects of traditional education. Since, by common agreement, much of what is on the Internet is junk, librarians must be able to prove that they are successful in imparting critical thinking skills, in introducing notions of authority and judgment into use.

In traditional library services, the arcanities of library “theory” as rule-driven activities don’t much matter. If push comes to shove, we can get up from the reference desk and walk students to the materials they need. That has never been true in distance learning, and it will become increasingly untrue in an electronic environment.

My 15-year-old daughter, a straight-A student, can make her way to the ultimate world in a video game with no directions, but my library makes no sense to her at all. Until we can make the library (mostly) a self-teaching *experience* rather than a stack of bricks and books, game makers will get proportionately more developmental resources than we do. We need to review and use and probably conduct considerable research in areas of learning processes, construction of effective teaching materials, self-paced instruction, and a variety of other educational psychology issues. We need to be able to demonstrate the added value of the academic library to the educational process.

Library services for extended and local students interpenetrate

I suggested above that my institution has a successful and well-regarded off-campus library service. It received specific commendation during the last accreditation process. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools requires that planned adequate library services *must* be offered to students at distance sites, equal to the services on-campus students receive. (The “Principles of Good Practice,” <http://www.srec.sreb.org/student/srecdocs/principles/pogp.html>, adopted by the Southern Regional Education Board for its Southern Regional Electronic Campus—a southeastern coordination of existing programs and courses offered as a counterpart to the Western Governors’ Virtual University—are not nearly as stringent.) But what we’ve found, in addition to satisfying external mandates, is that programs designed for one group or another (on campus or off) invariably lead us to integrate those services into better library services to all students and faculty.

We developed WAN access to databases so that distance students could get the same service that on-campus students get. Yet, that meant that faculty can get access in their offices, and on-campus students can get it from campus labs or even from home. We reinvigorated a library instruction program with a credit course, and we are working to put it online so that we can offer it to off-campus students. More and more of our class handouts are made available on the Web so

that students can use them at their leisure; they automatically become available for *all* library users. We started dial access for our catalog for distance learners; that effectively opened the catalog 24 hours per day. When we added Web access to our catalog and other resources, it was an easy step to make it available on campus and off. We currently have Internet licenses for students and faculty that utilize IP domain authentication, but since many of our students (and faculty) use non-university Internet service providers, we have to develop authentication tables that allow password access to databases.

This means that on-campus students can use whatever ISP they prefer, and that faculty can have access when off campus. Since we offer ILL request generation through e-mail forms, it will be a relatively simple extension to make this service available to off-campus students through a Web-based form. Since we provided a document delivery service to off-campus students, we've developed a program for on-campus delivery of books and articles (prototyped for faculty users). We expect that electronic delivery will soon follow, as will service to all students, regardless of location. Our experience has been that, as we enhance the services for one group or the other, we enhance services for all. In the increasingly electronic environment I believe we will face, I also believe that the opportunities for providing equitable and better services will be greater.

When I first started working in libraries in the mid-1970s, library schools were abuzz

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with the news that a (probably apocryphal) Ivy League university library had publicly announced that it could no longer collect everything it deemed necessary to provide a quality education for its students. Today, even Harvard College Libraries recognize the necessity for the academic libraries to transform themselves into *Gateways of Knowledge* (MIT Press, 1997).

If librarians and libraries don't become pedagogical players in the information and education enterprise, then turning to the Internet as the first source for information will make sense to more and more students *and* university administrators. I think that distance learning, information technology, and libraries have too much to offer for that scenario to become true. Yet, libraries must be active, political, effective builders of learning *knowledge structures* if the money that legislators and administrators save is not at their expense.

Notes

1. Miller, William, "Point of View," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 7, 1997): A44. ■

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