

Learning and teaching through technology

If riding the winds of change to deliver information literacy in the online environment sounds exciting, then being the liaison librarian for the Centre for Learning and Teaching Through Technology (LT3) might be your job of a lifetime. Six months into her job as the Chemistry liaison at the University of Waterloo, Laura Briggs was tapped to take up the LT3 liaison responsibilities.

Making information literacy ubiquitous

When I asked Briggs what her job entailed, she replied, "I work at integrating information literacy into online courses at the University of Waterloo. I see myself as sort of an infiltrator, trying to get the library into as many online courses as possible. I'd love to reach every course.

"The longer I'm in the job, the more sample modules we have to show," she continued. "That really helps because the faculty member can see a model for what could be offered in their course. I talk at departmental meetings and at the LT3 Task Users Group. It meets every semester, so faculty members can show what they're doing in their courses. I'll show what the library can do for them. The response has been kind of surprising. Traditionally, when you talk about the library people's eyes tend to glaze over. But at the Task

Users Group, there's often a lot of excitement and faculty have a lot of questions."

Briggs explained that LT3 has developed an instructional design model, called the T5 model, which she follows in designing the information literacy modules. "It's a way of structuring your class so that you actively engage your students with the

subject matter in an online course environment. What that means is there's not just a topic. We always want students to have a task and feedback so that they have to engage with what they're learning."

Before and after

Briggs illustrated how this works with the following example. "For a religious studies course, part of the assignment was to include three Web sites in their essay. The faculty member found that they were using

'Suzy Satanic' sites, not appropriate scholarly Web sites. Christy Branston, the liaison librarian for Religious Studies, and I wrote a traditional guide on evaluating Web sites. The task for the students was to choose two sites and determine which was more authoritative and why. The students actually had to engage with the topic and we gave them feedback about what their choice was. When the students chose Web sites for their essays, they selected appropriate ones."



Laura Briggs, liaison librarian for the Centre for Learning and Teaching through Technology (LT3) and Chemistry liaison at the University of Waterloo.

Change and collaboration

Briggs explained that for this position, you have to be comfortable with change, something that has not been a problem for her. “I love change. If after 500 days I’m not doing something new, I’m looking for something different. I have degrees in chemistry, but what I’ve been working on have been mostly arts courses, German, Religious Studies, etc. You have to be willing to step outside what you’re comfortable with. This job has hugely broadened my horizons. From German thought and culture to Buddhism and Sikhism, I feel my education has just been phenomenal. Technology is always changing, too, there are upgrades every term, and this fall Waterloo is moving to CyberLearning Labs’ ANGEL course management system. I have whole new editing tools I need to learn for next term.”

She described that the move to the new course management system has involved close collaboration between LT3, IST (Information Systems and Technology), and the library. “A lot of what I do is collaboration. I know

the people from IST, I know the people from LT3, and when they’re talking about something, I always try to keep the library’s interests in mind. For example, IST was considering not requiring a password to get access to the course. Well, if you have a journal article posted there, you know our license agreements are only for our users, so it would be a violation for the general public to see. So I brought that to the attention of people from IST who weren’t aware of that.”

Making inroads through outreach

Briggs and an LT3 systems analyst colleague, Koorus Bookan, have begun a Technical Exposition series that highlights innovative and untested new learning and teaching technologies for students, staff, and faculty. “We talk about freaky flaky technology, hardware, and software that doesn’t really quite work, that’s not mainstream. The one we just did was on PDAs. We had a faculty member talk about how she is using PDAs in her classroom, Koorus gave an overview of

PDAs, and then I talked about how you could use your PDA in the library. I wasn’t a hardcore PDA user, but it’s something I should know about because our patrons are using them. If you don’t know anything about a new technology, then your patrons consider you to be irrelevant—they are just going to pass you by.”

Never enough time

Briggs was frank about the numerous demands on her time. “You never have enough hours in the day. You know you could make that module different, but it goes live at 7 p.m. that night. Part of the solution is that you get faster and you know the tools better. Once you develop modules, you have modules you can refer to and cut and paste pieces from.

“And you also learn how to say no, which

is not in a librarian’s vocabulary. You always want to say, ‘Sure, I’ll get this done. I know it’s due tomorrow and you’re just asking today, but I’ll get it done.’ Sometimes you have to learn to say, ‘I can’t get it for you this

week, but can we put this into your course later on?’ or ‘We can only do this for you this term, but what about the next time you offer your course?’”

When I asked what the response has been, she said, “Surprisingly positive.” Time constraints aside, Briggs is passionate about making a difference through information literacy. “We’re really committed to lifelong learning. The ability to locate and use information is a basic skill set that you need to be a successful information consumer. Every time we reach a class we’re helping those students with that goal.”

The next 500 days

When I asked Briggs what the future might hold for her, she reflected, “It’s almost been 500 days. I’d like to go back to school to do a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science to learn more about the best way to offer instruction through online courses.” Lifelong learning indeed. ■

Liaison librarian

What: The Centre for Learning and Teaching Through Technology

Where: University of Waterloo

For more information, visit:

lt3.uwaterloo.ca/ and www.lib.uwaterloo.ca