

President's Column:

Online Learning & Why I Want You To Eat Your Dog Food

Karen Niemla, University of Louisiana at Monroe

This summer, I became the new president of The Association of College and Research Libraries Louisiana Chapter, and I would like to thank all who voted in the election this past spring, whether they voted for me or not. If you do not know me, am a reference and instruction librarian at The University of Louisiana at Monroe, and starting in June 2012, I have been in Louisiana for five years. It does not feel like it has been that long, and the way I have been treated by my librarian and faculty peers in this state, it sometimes feels like I have always been here. Since I am (comparatively) an early career librarian, I am still grateful for the mentoring and good examples from other librarians in Louisiana, and I am honored to have this opportunity to serve you all and the state to the best of my ability.

I have been involved with ACRL-LA since early 2008, when ACRL-LA hosted a free panel discussion called *The Future of the University Library: Strategic Management for the 21st Century*, held in Lafayette. It was free to attend, and I decided to go when I realized that I could make it there by myself via Greyhound bus and public transit and that I could afford to go. I only knew a few people who were there from an earlier ACRL-LA meeting, and I was glad to find myself welcomed almost immediately. That is when my involvement with ACRL-LA really began, even though I had become a member in 2007. Workshop and conference events such as that are, as I see it, key to the success and longevity of a professional organization such as ours. However, budget problems among our members and the organization itself can limit how far attendees can travel, the

cost of registration, and how often we can host events. Online education might weaken or eliminate those limits. I am not at all suggesting that I will abandon plans for new in-person conferences or workshops; on the contrary, I would very much like for us host one soon. Yet I do think that exploring online learning as a means for creating more professional development opportunities may actually be necessary in itself, not only for what it does, but for what it is.

As a teenager I was reading a biography about Steve Jobs when I came across the business jargon phrase "eating your own dog food." I never forgot it (mostly because it is rather distinctive). Fortunately, it is not meant to be taken literally; what this means is that if your company makes dog food, visitors to your home shouldn't see you feeding your own dogs a different dog food. Or if your company makes computers, you shouldn't be using a different company's computers at your own, or perhaps even at home. After all, if it is good enough for your customers, it has to be good enough for your company too. If it is not good enough for you, then how can you make your customers believe it is good enough for them? By no means am I the sort of person who believes that academic institutions should be run like businesses in how they manage and market themselves, but "eating your own dog food" is an idea which comes from the simple, almost universal, wisdom within the golden rule: thou shalt make dog food for others as you would have them make dog food for you.

What does that have to do with academic libraries? Potentially it is relevant in many ways, from how we do customer service at reference to how often the restrooms are cleaned. We all know how it feels to go to the grocery store and find one or both of those lacking. However, what I mean to talk about is online degrees and education, which are

fairly new "products" being offered by our institutions, even if "distance education" is not new at all. Libraries do play a role in online education, and our institutions' commuter and residential students use off-campus access for library resources and course management software as much as their online counterparts do. Some of us earned our library degrees online or at least learned in-person with the support of online course management, or might even teach such courses. Even as early as the year 2000, there were nine Library and Information Science online programs, and that number more than doubled by 2006.¹ Some of us have not experienced it, though, and perhaps we do need more opportunities to learn in that environment. Additionally, it might improve our understanding of how faculty teach these classes, and provide insight to their needs for instruction.

As I am trying to earn a second master's degree in History, I have been taking classes recently; among these I have attended traditional in-person classes with supplementary internet materials, online classes, and online "hybrid" classes which meet sometimes in person but also have online class days. Some of these experiences have been good, and some others have not been so good. Taking classes as a student has been useful to me not only in developing my career, but also in giving me perspective on how our students are learning online, and how the library could make that experience better. Being a student has also given me access to students as peers, and I have asked some of them casually for their opinions on our library and how it is accessed. One of them, a graduate student around my own age who works at an elementary school, said that she tried to get into our online databases, but after her log-in failed to work, she just assumed that she was not allowed to use it. Alarmed, I apologized to her and explained how she

could get access to library materials; it is complicated by the fact that our log-in pages cannot be customized to offer users specific instructions or explain that the same log-in and "PIN" they use to enter other campus systems do not work at the library. As a result of this short but valuable conversation, when explaining our off-campus accessibility woes to our computing center, I can say with confidence that it is not as user-friendly as it should be because even a reasonably intelligent student cannot easily figure it out. In other words, because I know what the dog food tastes like, I know that the formula needs to be improved.

Even though some academic institutions appear not to be entirely sure about what they intend to do with online degrees in the future, one thing is very clear: this is not going away, and if anything, educating online is going to become even more popular in the future. The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2011 that the percentage of U.S. students taking a least one online course was 20%, up from 16% in the previous period, even while the percentage of online-only students fell from 5% to 4%.² I have noticed some resistance and derision towards online degree programs from faculty and administrators. Earlier this summer my faculty senate interviewed candidates from other states for the then-open Vice President of Academic Affairs position, and when we asked them for their thoughts on online degree programs, one said that it would never be a substitute for a real classroom, and another applicant went so far as make comments along the lines of "Do you want to become The University of Phoenix?" Perhaps I am too milquetoast, but although I would not say that The University of Phoenix is among the greatest of institutions, I would not make disparaging comments about another university based on its medium of choice alone. There are problems with online education, but

whether you like it or not, here it came, here it is, and here it will remain. Now the only thing we can adjust is our attitudes and responses.

As President of ACRL-LA, I would very much love to have more conference events, and having at least one such event in-person during my tenure is a goal of mine, especially because talk of such projects began during Past-President Melissa Goldsmith's tenure and I do intend to continue to give those ideas attention. However, as the budget cuts of the past few years continue on as they have, some of us have less departmental travel money from our institutions, or are only granted such money under specific circumstances, while some might not have any at all. This means that many librarians such as myself need to choose professional development events carefully. For instance, I did not go to the 2011 American Library Association Annual Conference even though it was in Louisiana that year because, as much as I would have loved to be there, I could not be reimbursed and did not think I could justify the time away from work and the personal expense. During a conference a couple years ago, I had a conversation with some other librarians about reimbursements which seemed to become a race to the bottom regarding who had received the least travel money. I was the lucky one. In this case, the dog food is really good, but not everyone can afford it.

Library budget issues are nothing new to us, regardless of what kind of library we work in; it is a problem which has many people in higher education biting their fingernails. In regards to professional development events like conferences and workshops, there is a silver lining (which is saying a lot because I am generally not an optimistic person): these constraints of distance, time, and money are very much the same as those which our own *students* experience. Imagine a middle-class teen who is able to

procure financial aid and a fair loan saying that online education is not worthwhile, compared to a to a working father in his late twenties who might want an online degree. This is also why one librarian saying, "Well, I go to ALA every year-- why don't you?" is not an adequate comparison to another librarian who either does not have the same salary, or institutional support, or time. To say that online education is the poor relation to in-person education is also to misunderstand the motivation behind it. In 2008 Arleen R. Bejerano of California State University, Long Beach, observed that online students "are generally older, employed, and have family responsibilities," and are "students who are unable or find it difficult to attend on-campus classrooms."³ I surmise that most working librarians match at least some of those characteristics.

One could argue, though, that familiarity with online education might cause someone to give the concept of learning via internet a higher appraisal than someone who is not. Yet eating the dog food does not mean the same as "drinking the Kool-Aid." According to a 2007 article by Maria Haigh of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Information Studies, that is true, but not necessarily in a way that indicates that online students are biased and overestimate the value of online degrees. She found that about 92% of MLIS students who went to class in person felt that their degree was superior to its online counterpart, while only 37% of the online students agreed. Haigh concluded not only that the online students had a different perspective, but that students who were not attracted to online education could probably learn to like it and improve their ability to participate.

The experience of online education has probably reinforced these skills and attitudes. While students without good typing skills or confidence in electronic communication might be less likely to seek out online classes in the first place, their confidence in their abilities here might well rise with

their exposure to the online educational environment. Likewise, although students who believe online instruction to be inferior to face-to-face instruction would be unlikely to take courses online, one might expect that their faith in this instructional medium would rise after taking successful online courses.⁴

It might not be much of a stretch to assume that if this is true of MLIS students, then it may also be true of established librarians. By now you may be wondering why, apart from its importance to our institutions and students, I am talking so much about online education. The truth is that I have been for a while considering the idea of ACRL-LA trying methods similar to online education to offer workshops and other programs to librarians in Louisiana (or, perhaps, beyond). At the University of Louisiana at Monroe, the course management system of choice is "Moodle," a free software which runs on a server with PHP and MySQL. The software itself is free, although hosting is not. ACRL-LA already has a website with the required server software, fortunately. So, as ACRL-LA's web administrator in 2009 I tried a test installation, www.acrlla.org/moodle (which is still there, although inactive). I was and still am impressed with how simple (for a task so complicated, anyway) it was to manage users and create test courses. Although it is not intuitive, it is not enormously difficult to work with. At ULM, faculty members are taught how to use Moodle, and as a faculty member, I also have access to an individual test area of my own to practice using it. Sometimes, I help other faculty members with questions about using it in my capacity as a reference librarian.

Moodle is, it bears repeating, a free software. This would, I imagine, significantly decrease the cost of admittance. I am not interested in that solely because of saving money for the chapter; I also happen to know that ACRL-LA's most successful events in recent years were the free ones! It should be fairly obvious why that is. My initial

attraction to Moodle and online learning was firstly because I understand the problems some of us have with getting to conference and workshop events, and because a change in format would allow us to conceive new and different types of professional development opportunities. After thinking about it some more, however, I began to realize that whether we like the concept or not, it is the dog food. At some point, we need to eat it. Many of our institutions are offering online degree programs, and if this type of environment is good enough for our students and faculty, then it has to be good enough for us as well.

Perhaps, though, I am wrong and no librarians are interested in such a scheme, either as a participant or a leader. I am a superstitious person and believe it can be bad luck to project success too soon ("Pride goeth before..." and so on). Or maybe that instead is what I am wrong about? If anyone has any ideas on workshops or classes you wish existed and would like to join or even establish and run, please contact me. Either way, the overhead cost of doing online education is low enough that even a small number of participants could be worth it. After all, if ACRL-LA had not hosted its panel discussion in 2008, I would not have attended it, and then I probably would not have become involved with ACRL-LA as much as I have, I would not have become president, I would not be writing this article, and you would not be reading it. If you did not like this article that might have been be a good thing, but now that you have reached the end there is nothing either of us can do about it now!

¹ Maria Haigh, "Divided by a Common Degree Program? Profiling Online and Face-to-Face Information Science Students." *Education For Information* 25, no. 2 (January 1, 2007): 93-110. *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 6, 2012). p. 94.

² Alexandria Walton Radford, "Learning at a Distance: Undergraduate Enrollment in Distance Education Courses and Degree Programs." *The National Center for Education Statistics*. Last modified October 5,

2011. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012154>.

³ Arleen R. Bejerano, "The Genesis and Evolution of Online Degree Programs: Who Are They for and What Have We Lost along the Way?." *Communication Education* 57, no. 3 (July 1, 2008): 408-414. *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 3, 2012), p.3.

⁴ Maria Haigh, "Divided by a Common Degree Program? Profiling Online and Face-to-Face Information Science Students," 45.