

Suggestions for success in an ACRL online seminar

Make the most of your e-learning experience

by Lori Buchanan, Barbara Burd, and Alison Armstrong

ACRL online seminars, which have been offered for a year-and-a-half, provide librarians with the means to continue their education without leaving the office. In order to take full advantage of this new learning opportunity, participants should consider practicing some of the techniques that the authors have observed in others who have successfully completed online seminars. These techniques fall into three broad categories:

- becoming familiar with the online environment,
- practicing independent learning, and
- collaborating with participants and instructors.

Becoming familiar with the online environment

When first considering participation in an online seminar, make sure that you have a proper Internet connection at home as well as at work. Connecting from home becomes beneficial in completing the work involved in an online seminar.

ACRL offers its online seminars via the WebCT platform. Participants whose campuses have access to WebCT should try to arrange for the WebCT administrator or someone who teaches via WebCT to introduce them to how WebCT works. It's useful to see how course

content appears, how discussion threads are posted, and how chatrooms work.

Participants should get to know the technical support people on their campuses or within their libraries and have them check out the computers to be used for accessing WebCT. Letting them know ahead of time about participation in an online seminar will alert them that they may be needed to troubleshoot connection problems. Technical support people may communicate with ACRL's helpful technical support staff to assist them in solving connection problems.

When beginning an online seminar, participants should keep an open mind and remain flexible as they experience the new ways of communicating and learning online. Online seminars provide learners with structure, including posted course content, a planned sequence of activities leading to a final project, and course instructors who serve as facilitators. Both asynchronous (discussion threads and e-mails) and synchronous (live chatrooms) communications are available, and they provide participants with important opportunities to interact with each other and the instructors.

Practicing independent learning

Because online seminars cover a large amount of information in a short period of

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time, usually three weeks, they may seem very intense. The time needed to complete an online seminar will vary by individual. If possible, learners should consider scheduling a time within the workday just for online learning. While completing the assigned activities and the final project may appear overwhelming, participants can take some steps to prepare for the intense pace of the seminar. They include:

- reading suggested background materials before the course start date,

- glancing through all content as soon as the course is available in order to become familiar with the layout,

- noting the scheduled chat times, and making the necessary arrangements to be present,

- going online at least once a day to see what other participants have posted,

- making every attempt to meet the due dates for each day's activities, which build upon each other and lead toward completion of the final project, and

- using the calendar within WebCT to keep abreast of important dates and events.

Once individuals take these steps, they are free to engage in the course as independent learners. Practicing independent learning ensures that participants receive the most for their investment of time and money.

Independent learners are self-directed. In the case of online seminars, independent learners read each week's course content and reflect upon it in light of their own experiences. They then complete the week's assigned activities and prepare to engage in discussion threads and chat sessions with other learners about the process they are learning. Since the final projects build upon prior activities, it is helpful to save activities in Word or whatever word processing program is being used. These activities can then be cut and pasted into the final document, which is typically due a week or two after the course ends.

Doing all of the assigned activities is good practice, even though it might not seem so at the time. The activities give learners a chance to apply the learned content. As progress is made toward completion of the final project, it is useful to review course content, discussion threads, and chat transcripts. Ultimately, individual frameworks evolve out of assessing local experiences in light of the new knowledge gained through participating in the online seminar. To fully develop a

framework, it is important to collaborate with others involved in the process.

Collaborating with participants and instructors

Everyone who is involved in an online seminar is a learner, including the instructors. Besides creating course content and providing feedback on final projects, instructors spend most of their time facilitating the process of learning. Instructors do comment here and there, but they never want to overwhelm participants with too much information in a short time. They depend upon participants to take initiative by asking questions when clarification is needed.

Participants are encouraged to share their knowledge and varied experience with others. Providing feedback on others' work maximizes the learning experience for everyone. No one should work in a vacuum; all possess insights that enhance the process.

From the initial personal introductions to discussion threads in which participants reflect upon posted questions, everyone benefits from collaboration with others. At every encounter, participants should notice who shares

Go the distance to support distance ed

All Users Are Local, an ACRL class on library support for distance education, is a good example of a course that emphasizes the techniques for a successful online seminar. In addition, students have a unique opportunity to put what they learn to good use. Students work on a planning document throughout the course in which they analyze their institution's distance education program and examine how their library's finances, personnel, resources, services, and Web site will meet the needs of faculty and students. Students have the opportunity to submit these documents to their instructors for comments and advice at the end of the course. Many course participants use these documents as the basis for planning for distance education at their library.

The course will be offered again February 7-26, 2005. *Ellen Elicieri, elicieri@webster.edu; Kathy Gaynor, kgaynor@webster.edu; and Laura Rein, lrein@webster.edu, Eden-Webster Library.*

a common interest. Follow-up e-mail, either inside or outside the course environment, can provide useful immediate information, as well as long-term connections with others.

Beyond e-mail, threaded discussions provide a forum in which learners respond to questions and provide feedback to other learners. Important, reflective group work occurs in these threaded discussions. Instructor facilitators are able to discern how well learners are grasping concepts by reading the discussion posts.

An important, but probably the most difficult learning format in online seminars, is the live chat session. This is due to various reasons, including the large number of learners present, intense pace which may be too fast for some, lag time which may be too slow for others, and the disjointed conversation that jumps from one idea to the next without completion.

The best way to prepare for a chat session is to read the materials, complete the assignments on time, review materials and reflect upon

them, and consider the posted questions and participate in discussion threads.

If new to chat, participants should read through the chat guidelines provided within WebCT. They should also probably observe a chat session for a while before participating.

During the chat, everyone should be positive and encourage others. They should keep comments concise and try to stay on the topic being discussed. Jotting down any questions that arise is a good idea. After the chat session, it is useful to review course materials and follow up through e-mail with any questions for the instructors.

Conclusion

Online seminars are a great way to learn new processes. Successful completion of an online seminar depends upon a participant's willingness to become familiar with the online environment, to practice independent learning, and to collaborate with others involved in the seminar. Best of luck to all who choose to broaden their horizons through ACRL's online seminars. ■

E-learning from ACRL

Don't miss these ACRL online seminars. All seminars are three weeks long. Complete information and links to registration are available at www.acrl.org/e-learning.

Assessing student learning outcomes

Instructors: Alison Armstrong, Lori Buchanan, and Barbara Burd

This seminar is designed to give librarians the skills to create assessment tools to measure student information literacy. After completing the course, academic librarians will be prepared to work with faculty to design, implement, and evaluate tools for assessing student learning outcomes. **Next offered July 26–August 15; registration opens June 28.** This course will be offered again November 1–20, 2004 and February 14 to March 5, 2005.

Electronic collection development for the academic library

Instructors: Diane Kovacs and Kara Robinson

Participants in this new ACRL online seminar will develop selection criteria; plan for

collection, evaluation, organization, and maintenance of an e-library collection; and begin the process of identifying, evaluating, selecting, and collecting appropriate free and fee-based Web-accessible resources. **Coming in August 2004; dates to be determined.**

All users are local: Bringing the library next door to the campus worldwide

Instructors: Ellen Elicieri, Kathy Gaynor, and Laura Rein

Participants will develop a comprehensive plan for library support of distance education at their institutions. See sidebar on previous page for more information. **Next offered, February 2–26, 2005.**

ACRL/TLT Information Library Series

ACRL is also collaborating with TLT Group on an online information literacy seminar series, featuring weekly live audio Webcasts.

Topics covered include best practices, assessment, and collaboration. Seminars will be offered July through September.