E-learning and the Library:
Learning How A Librarian Can Support e-Learners

By Amanda Bjorling

"Ms. Bjorling, I need my next test unlocked!" Sitting at the top of a Ferris wheel looking out over the skyline of Amsterdam, I opened up an email to reveal this message from one of my online students. As the ferris wheel started to descend towards the earth I brought up my Odysseyware portal. By the time the wheel had climbed back into the sky I had checked to see if she had passed the previous lessons with a high enough score to show mastery, unlocked her next test, and emailed her back so she could get started. Online education started as a mail delivery system, grew into a booming industry in higher education, and quickly spread to secondary education.

I became fascinated with online learning while completing my library masters at the University of Illinois. I loved how I was able to connect with my fellow students, complete group work, and get advice from the professor while still being able to work a full-time job. As I researched further, I began to look at how this learning platform could be applied to the secondary level. Most of the research I found was on colleges and universities, but there were a few articles about the lack of long-term studies and the fast growth of online learning despite this lack of research (Barbour, 2013; Barbour & Reeves, 2009; DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, & Preston, 2008; Ferding, Cavanaugh, Dipietro, Black, & Dawson, 2009; Thomson, 2010).

One of the largest areas of growth within the secondary education field has been in-house elearning programs or blended learning programs (Ash, 2011). Most current research shows that blended learning programs are the most promising of the online learning styles (Adkins, 2011). Blended learning is defined as "any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace" (Staker & Horn, 2012, p. 3).

Leysin American School has been using online learning to meet the needs of transfer students, summer credit recovery, and International Baccalaureate students who want to take classes not currently offered in our two-year program. In initial interviews with students who had taken online classes in the past, they found online courses to be frustrating due to school calendar conflicts and poor communication

with their online professors. The purpose of this study was to investigate how an in-house blended learning program might support future students' success while expanding my own understanding of blended learning as online learning coordinator.

When beginning to look at platforms to best meet the needs of our school, I looked at several organizations that LAS or I had used in the past i.e: Keystone, Ontario Virtual School, Blackboard Collaborate, and Odysseyware. We chose to go with Odysseyware because it was the only platform that would allow us to customize the course schedule to match our own while providing content that could be supervised by a faculty member on site. Odysseyware's website explains its program as follows:

> "Odysseyware's powerful assessment capabilities and prescriptive learning paths offer students with learning gaps, those needing remediation, or those desiring acceleration and enrichment opportunities, efficient and targeted resources to gain standards mastery and recover and acquire course credits." *Odysseyware.com*

Findings

Student engagement

"I've taken all of my requirements and I wanted to try something new…" Student, grade 12.

Fifty percent of the students interviewed were taking an online class because they had taken most of their required courses and wanted to take an elective course that they were interested in. Some of the most popular courses were Business Law and Small Business Entrepreneurship. The other 50% of the students were taking the course to replace missing credits or to meet requirements for universities in North America. Ninety percent of students loved the fact that these courses focused on topics that they were interested in studying at university, causing them to show a high level of self-motivation. One student said about Odysseyware: "…it was teaching me more, it would put you in the situation and asked what if this, this, this happened and what would you do…" The students taking the business courses were all positive about being given the chance to build real-life business plans while solving actual business problems and scenarios.

Motivation

"The homework was well written, but I definitely could have done more." Student, grade 12.

Eighty percent of the study participants stated that they appreciated having a schedule that didn't push them too hard or make them feel extremely stressed, but also stated that it was sometimes hard to keep themselves motivated when not having firm due dates. Further research will be conducted into project-based learning methods in order to create a sense of self-efficacy for the students to improve the long-term success of the LAS online learning program. We will be fostering healthy work ethic and real-life work skills by allowing the students to create their own learning contracts and choose their unit completion due dates. At the end of each unit students will be asked to reflect on their time management, learning process and focus level.

Language Skill Support

"With the online course if you didn't understand anything you can translate it and they also make sure that you understand everything with quizzes and questions after." Student, grade 12.

Odysseyware provides students who are struggling with language skills an opportunity have passages read aloud, provides vocabulary exercises, and allows students to work at their own pace to figure out meaning and context. LAS is a school where over 40 different languages are spoken it so it's important to have learning support in places that will provide opportunities for our students to improve their reading comprehension and fluency skills, especially in the area of non-fiction.

Conclusion

Students have to be invested in the process. They want to know that the materials that they are learning today will help them in the future. What purpose is this course? Why should I try? Real-life based learning is especially important for online classes. Elearning provides great opportunities for students who are motivated and self-disciplined, but can be often difficult for students with poor learning habits. Blended learning environments have shown the most success out of any online learning at the secondary level by providing the support struggling students need through the employment of a consistent mentor who serves as advisor and learning support (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Further study will need to be completed over the next year into the creation of effective online learning assessments that empowers students to invest in their own learning process.

Currently research on the use of online learning in boarding schools is very limited (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). However, the evolution of flexible learning platforms like Odysseyware is changing the landscape of online learning.

"By 2016 a projected 5 million students will be enrolled in online courses. Many schools have a difficult time finding a standards-based, effective online solution that is easily customizable and adaptable to learning models such as blended learning," said Beth Te Grotenhuis, Odysseware President (Devaney, 2015, p. 1).

Through continued growth and research, Odysseyware and blended learning can be used to support the future success of the LAS students. By further developing a program of consistent self-assessment and reflection we can not only help students build effective learning habits, but provide them the time, support, and space necessary to be successful at any academic level.

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