

The changing landscape

Distance education : a student perspective

Meredith Williams

Who am I as a D.E. student?

Am I typical? Is there such a creature? I don't know - the point is, I did this alone. But my impression from brief contacts with others is that:

- We are all dealing with obstacles, trying to overcome barriers of some sort.
- Some of us are completely isolated from information, facilities, personal contact with educational institutions, teachers and fellow students. Most of us haven't met the people we're dealing with, including the "phantom examiner". Perhaps we've spoken briefly on the phone with a lecturer.
- Mostly we're self-motivated people. Even so, some stick with it, some don't. It's my experience that to do Theology by Distance Education successfully, you need to be well-organized and highly self-disciplined and directed. The initial stages of this sort of work involve a lot of "hit and miss". It takes energy, determination and mental gymnastics to keep going.

As a library user I know how to ask for what I want. I appreciate the importance of the reference interview and I try to be as clear and specific as I can about my request, including supplying alternative keywords and synonyms. When the reference interview is conducted over the phone, which is usually the case with D.E. students, the procedure is even more important. The feedback and checking process is made difficult by the absence of visual clues and aids.

I worked as a D.E. student from my home in Laurieton on the mid-north coast of New South Wales. I started out with a Lay Preachers' Course. Resources were not difficult to obtain - usually relatively cheap, standard texts that could readily be bought, or even borrowed from local ministers.

I moved from this into a Bachelor of Divinity Degree from Melbourne College of Divinity, concurrently with a Bachelor of Theology Degree from United Theological College in Sydney. For my B.D. work I attended some tutorial and information days for external students at a small college on the NSW coast. In my first year I did Preliminary and Intermediate Greek and exegesis of the Synoptic Gospels and Corinthians in English - nothing especially difficult about that. In 1994 I undertook Old Testament Survey and studied Romans and John in Greek. At this stage the materials I needed started to become increasingly more specialized, harder to obtain and more expensive. So my library needs increased significantly. In 1995 I did exegesis of Revelation, Hebrews and Philippians in Greek. In 1996 I studied Advanced Greek texts, including translation and detailed analysis of the Didache, as well as Christian Social Ethics and Early Church History. This is where things got interesting!

My main use of the library by this time was for Greek New Testament studies. As my work became progressively more complex, my needs became more specialized and the library more important.

In all this work, as an external student, I was supplied with very little material by the educational institutions I was studying with. I worked from a brief synopsis and bibliography, or a course outline, statement of assessment requirements and bibliography. The few tutorial days that were organized for external students were invaluable. Students could meet together, discuss issues, receive some input and guidance from tutors, and of course use the college library.

Some experiences

The College I was working with for my B.D. has a reasonable-sized library collection, housed in one room. When I started, there was no librarian, and the policy was that external students could not borrow. Later in that year, borrowing facilities were extended to external students, but the loan period was for only 3 weeks. This was unsatisfactory since external weekends only happened about once every 3 months, and I lived 3 hours drive away. Some students lived close enough to be able to return books when due, but I would have to post them to get them back on time and this was an unwelcome burden. I either didn't borrow or negotiated extensions. Then, by the end of my second year, I started to disregard the borrowing period, and leave notes for the person in charge of the library: "If you want the books, let me know; otherwise I'll bring them back with me on the next external weekend."

When I was studying Revelation, I ran into some problems with periodicals. There were three issues of *Semeia* that I wanted to consult. This journal was held by my college library, but all the issues I wanted were missing, with no record of who had them.

Another article that I particularly wanted was in a journal we didn't hold. I rang the Melbourne College of Divinity to see if they could supply it, or tell me where I could obtain it. They suggested three possibilities. Library A and Library B didn't hold the journal. Library C did have it, but told me to go through my college library, which belonged to the same denomination. So I wrote to, and rang, the person in charge of my college library, but received no reply. Two months, and a number of requests later, I still heard nothing. And I felt trapped. I'd been told I could not deal with Library C as an individual, and yet my college library was functioning without a librarian, and the person responsible was too busy to respond to my request. So my time ran out and I didn't get to see the article I needed.

Because I had some connection with Library A, I was able to borrow books by post from them from time to time. However sometimes it happened that a book I needed was on reserve, or 3 day-loan, which prevented me from having access. On one occasion, books I needed were out on loan. They were finally sent to me about two months after my essay was due, which was frustrating for me, and dead money on postage. Obviously, we hadn't clarified the "use-by date".

For my work on the Didache the lecturer sent me an extensive list of material dealing with the Apostolic Fathers in general, but giving no indication of format, content or availability. I sent a copy of this to Library A, having marked with a highlighter what I hoped would be useful. The Librarian did a search and put a number of articles in the post for me. Unfortunately, the package didn't arrive. I waited about a week before I acted, which was probably too long. The package couldn't be traced; the librarian went on leave; my time ran out; and I never got the materials.

A couple of the references in my reading had lined up to indicate that a particular book would be extremely useful. Finding exact bibliographical details was tricky. Finding a location in Australia was even more tricky. I made a written request to Library A. They found a location and made an ILL request. But the book was not on the shelf - "lost, stolen or strayed". This was in April. That stage of my work was due in June. So, my bad luck! Library A tried again in August, because to a degree my work in this area was on-going. But the story was the same. A year later we tried again. By this time, I was in Sydney, no longer a D.E. student and preparing to continue in this work. The library still had my letter, and the original ILL request. This time we were successful. But after 18 months of waiting, I was only able to have the book for 3 weeks! - less, actually, because transit times had to be taken off the borrowing period.

Issues that emerge

Time

Waiting is a fact of life for D.E. students. We're used to delays for locating, handling and postage, and because we can't be on the spot to follow up our requests. But deadlines still operate for us, just like with any students. To be successful or stick with D.E. for any length of time you have to be well-organised and plan ahead. But an extra week is lost in all work for postage back and forth, and time runs out. Also, while we are waiting for material we may be experiencing "dead time" - we can't make do or go on with something else, because we have nothing else.

Energy

All this organising and liaising and persevering takes a great deal of effort. Distance education, as well as being isolated and ill-resourced, is quite exhausting. Even dealing with people you don't know and have to keep reminding, and feel as though you are badgering, is very demoralizing. Continually having to explain who I was and what I was doing became an extra burden to me at times.

Financial cost

Postage can be expensive - books are heavy. Phone calls add up - for me it was always STD daytime peak rates. Photocopying also adds up over time. These costs are in addition to the normal institutional and course fees. But postage and telephone are vital. I communicated with my lecturers, received and set work, purchased materials and used the library all via the phone and the post. Now e-mail and the Internet offer some alternatives, but a lot of D.E. students wouldn't have access to these.

Photocopying can be a great help with articles, chapters of books, even contents pages, introductions or abstracts, if there is some doubt as to whether or not a book is worth sending. This, of course, is a staff-time cost for the library; but D.E. students can't come in and browse and choose. So the library and library staff are a vital link in this.

Link

As my work became more specialized, the library became more important to me. Once I had established a working contact with Library A, that's where I stayed, and who I began to depend on. Time and cost were wearing me down, but the link with my library kept me viable. Even so, I felt as though I had to deal with the same librarian each time. Because although we hadn't met, she knew about me and in her enthusiastic, down-to-business way, she encouraged me. D.E. can in fact be desperately lonely, and the library and librarians become a personal contact of great importance.

All of these factors point to the importance of the reference interview. If done well, it can keep the costs down, save time, maximise the usefulness of material sent, and establish a firm and effective personal link.

What does a library need to consider?

- You are a personal contact in my work. You are a vital link and often an ally against the pressures and demands of lecturers and examiners.
- Depending on a person's physical and financial resources, monetary costs can be a big or a bigger problem.
- Although D.E. students are prepared for some waiting, please don't forget about us because we are "invisible". We have deadlines too, and the same is expected of us, as of internal students.
- We have no direct or preliminary contact with the material. We can't browse. We have no access to catalogues, holdings lists or reference shelves. We are largely "flying blind".
- Loan periods are often inappropriate. There is a need for maximum flexibility. Take transit times into account when setting borrowing periods.
- Keep records and dates. The students must do this, too. It can save much time, money and energy. Tell the students what the library needs to know in order to help them. Ask for clear, specific details, alternative titles and key words. Clarify deadlines. Keep records of responses, dead-ends and works in progress, and tell the students to keep these too.
- Providing D.E. services is a big undertaking for a library. It consumes resources, money and time. The work may be best handled by one person, and written into their job description. It will involve adjustment of the priorities regarding acquisitions, availability of materials and the allocation of resources.
- D.E. requirements are often "unreasonable", and may seem to be "unfair" to normal library users. Should they be given special consideration? And what happens when the needs of different D.E. students compete with one another?

Conclusion

I hope that this excursion into some of my thoughts and experiences has been helpful to any libraries thinking of, or being drawn into the provision of Distance Education services. It's a big undertaking, but a real need, and a very worthwhile area.

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Site insight : Canberra College of Theology

Having only been a librarian for six months, the experience of attending my first ANZTLA conference was daunting to say the least. I felt more at home upstairs in the Moore College Library with the students, whose air of slight tension as they researched books for essays slightly overdue was very familiar to me. I completed my degree in Theology last year, at the Canberra College of Theology, a process which took a long time as I struggled to look after family, part time job, and study. This year I have become a graduate student at the University of Canberra, doing a Graduate Diploma in Library & Information Management. I have discovered the mystifying new world of acronyms such as ABN, OCLC, and now, AULOTS (could it be some prehistoric mammal discovered by ANZTLA), also the ARI (is this the secret password for IRA, I pondered as I watched secret lunchtime meetings with suspicious characters whispering together).

The Canberra College of Theology is a small college affiliated to the Christian & Missionary Alliance denomination. This is a small and not well known church in Australia despite its long and distinguished history of missions. Because of its emphasis on missions, particularly in China and South East Asia, there are more ethnic congregations than western, especially Chinese and Vietnamese. This poses a problem for the college to meet their special needs. Also most of these churches are situated in the coastal capital cities, so the College has had to develop a strong Distance Education program.

The College has 10,100 monographs, and a modest collection of tapes (1000) and videos. We subscribe to 39 journals, a huge expense for such a small library. We are constantly reassessing these to ensure they are the most relevant for our needs, and to provide a balanced collection. Our strongest collection area is in Biblical Studies and Missions. Canberra is amply provided with excellent libraries. St Marks and the A.C.U library are frequently used by our students, also the A.N.U. library.