

---

# Extending Roaming (or Roving) Reference Service into the Classroom

*Ed Hughes, Director of Library Services, Memphis Theological Seminary*

**ABSTRACT** Students prefer in-person communication but, in the past decade, librarians are seeing fewer students in the library. Finding ways to reconnect with students has been a challenge. Here, I suggest that we go into the classroom as auditing students to build relationships with students.

This paper is about extending roaming (or roving) reference service into the classroom. The essence of the idea is to audit seminary classes as a way of meeting and interacting with students and faculty. In recent years, academic librarians have been trying various strategies for reaching out to students. As near as I can determine, becoming a student along with other students has not been a systematic strategy used by academic librarians.

This program resembles similar efforts that have been made by academic librarians generally known as “personal librarian” programs. Among these efforts have been programs involving “embedded personal librarians.” All of these programs rely on a close working relationship with the instructor (Meals 2022, 1). What I am proposing is developing a close relationship with students by becoming a student.

Having the library staff audit classes is part of our revisioning of library services that includes some of the concepts from the Chronicle of Higher Education’s publication *The Library of the Future: How the Heart of the Campus is Transforming* (Carlson 2022). I wish I could say that this was a planned effort, but the events that triggered this move were mostly outside the Seminary’s control.

One long-term event was the declining use of the physical space in the library and its print collection. Usage crashed between 2010 and 2012. As we purchased more digital resources, students visited the library less. A more recent event was the COVID-19 pandemic during

which we tried to maintain viable library services, which I will discuss later. A third event was reduced library staff, in part due to budgetary constraints and in part due to pandemic-triggered workforce drop-outs. We went from 5 FTEs to 1.5 FTEs. Even if we could have stayed open during the pandemic, our open hours would have shrunk.

Once we were in the depths of the pandemic, we had only emails and occasional phone calls for interacting with students or faculty. Our first steps were twofold: we initiated a controlled digital lending program using two new scanners. With just two people to respond to students, we seemed to be scanning all the time. Our peak was during 2022 with 192 scans.

We also purchased any eBook a student wanted, included required and recommended readings for the course, and using the seminary library that was donated to the Internet Archive.

Even after the pandemic, very few students returned to the library. This was in part due to our success in meeting student demands during the pandemic, but it also led me to believe that our print book collection was of marginal value. If that was true, I wondered why we continued to pay so much for our Integrated Library System.

The price never went down in all the years we owned that ILS, but cost per circulation increased as the number of checkouts declined year after year. When we first bought the system, we were paying about \$2.60 per checkout plus labor costs. By the time I discontinued that ILS, it was costing us nearly \$23.00 per checkout plus labor costs.

Consequently, I looked for the least expensive system to replace it. In the end, the cost savings were large, at least for our library. With the savings and on advice from our Dean, we purchased the Digital Theological Library (DTL). The Digital Theological Library fills most of the gaps that were in our digital collection and allowed us to go to closed stacks.

This still left the problem of helping students directly and most virtual services never seemed satisfactory. As Tara Mawhinney noted in her 2020 study of virtual communications with students and faculty, “Participants expressed a preference for modes of communication that are personal, informal, perceived as safe and secure and conversational” (Mawhinney 2020, 1).

With students no longer coming to the library, I thought I might try going to them. To develop some rapport with students, I began auditing one class per semester via Zoom. This was made easier because the Seminary moved all classes to online during the pandemic.

I continued auditing classes after the pandemic. I also began hosting one-hour Zoom sessions, two at the beginning of the semester and two at the end. Students needing additional meetings got them at times convenient for them.

My status as an auditing student was for the purpose of establishing a personal connection with our students, their assignments, and the faculty. It does not mean that I can offer in-class help to students or faculty. However, I am occasionally asked in class about the availability of resources by the professor or students.

To begin auditing a class, I ask permission of the professor. Of the six classes I asked to audit, no one said I could not. My goal is to audit most of the classes offered at Memphis Theological Seminary with advice from our Dean. Once I am in a class, I am usually introduced as the library director at the beginning of the course. Most of my interaction with students develop outside the classroom but may not have happened had I not audited the course. What I think happens is that students know me from three sources: a class I am currently auditing that they are also in; a class we were in previously; or a student who knows me tells another student. This last process happens more often than I thought it would. Sometimes it is the faculty who tells the student that they should contact me about their research needs.

In all my classes, I am allowed and even encourage to submit assignments including reflection papers on the readings. Occasionally, when reading other student reflection papers, I sometimes mention that they might consider looking at a library resource that they had not used.

It is not just the interactions between people that has improved our ability to respond to student needs. When auditing a class, I get information that I would not normally get. There are three worth mentioning here. First, nearly every professor has favorite titles that are not part of the syllabus but, when they are mentioned in class, I make sure we own them. With money I saved on cancelling our ILS, I have a good ebook budget and can buy even expensive ebooks. Second, assignments become less mysterious, at least in the classes I have audited. If you have had years of working with a professor's assignments, this is not a problem but if you are relatively new in the job, as I was, or if the professor is new, auditing a class is a good way learning what these assignments are. Third, in my emails directed to "all students," I address them as "Fellow Students." I think it makes me less frightening.

My contacts with students outside the classroom mostly consist of emails and Zoom sessions. Emails show up at nearly every hour.

In the last two years, only 2:00 AM showed no emails. I am not using any chat service because I think they are misleading. If a real person cannot answer a chat at one in the morning, then it is not twenty-four-seven. We cannot answer a 1:00 AM query (although my colleague once did). Instead, we tell students that a real person will respond via email between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday and Sundays from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Technically, we do not have enough staff hours to cover these hours. We have 1.5 FTEs, or 60 hours per week, to cover 80 hours. However, because I am an exempt employee, I can cover more than 40 hours. Given our thin staffing levels, our response time is not as quick as it could be if we had more eyes monitoring emails. Depending on the circumstances, our turnaround time can be as high as two hours. This is an improvement over our earliest efforts during the pandemic which frequently went to 12 hours.

Working at this more personal level, I discovered that most students have a personal rather than professional style of communication that can be used by the librarian to engage students. Some students were surprisingly unfamiliar with free Microsoft accounts and managing citations with either Microsoft Word or Google Docs.

As noted earlier, we rely heavily on digital resources. My goal has been to make every acquisition digital. This is almost, but not quite, possible. Thus far this fiscal year, we had to buy five books that were only available in paper.

Looking to the future, I see more reasons to pursue the establishment of personal connections with students. For instance, we may be able to dispel the growing fear of AI technology by showing how it can be used responsibly.

## REFERENCES

- Carlson, Scott, and Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. 2022. *The Library of the Future: How the Heart of the Campus is Transforming*. Washington, DC: Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Mawhinney, Tara. 2020. "User preferences related to virtual reference services in an academic library." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 1 (January). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.102094>.
- Meals, Catherine. 2022. "Evaluating the Impact of Personal Librarians on Academic and Affective Outcomes." *College & Research Libraries* 83, no. 1 (January): 25-44. <https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/25263>.