

Special Forum: Distance Learning

Online Library at Catholic Distance University

by Sr. Rebecca Abel, OSB

When COVID-19 called for closure, many schools began scrambling to find ways to offer distance education. Not so with Catholic Distance University, which has had distance education since 2004 when all degrees were completely online. This means there is no campus, nor buildings for classrooms or library. The only bricks and mortar are administrative offices that reside in Charles Town, West Virginia, and a small print library, housed in one of the offices. Students reside throughout the United States and in several foreign countries. No students reside on campus and they live in different time zones and locations. As a result, classes and services need to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is possible via our LMS (learning management system). All student services, classrooms, library, student center, café, and chapel are online. These services reside on the LMS making CDU a “virtual” rather than an “actual” space. The following is a description of the digital library the CDU librarian has designed on the LMS, called Canvas.

THE LIBRARY

Our online library has modules instead of rooms. These modules resemble LibGuides linking to multiple pages on a specific topic. These pages contain research resources and can be accessed through embedded links, videos, PDFs, images, and other formats. Nine modules contain library resources. For example, the first module, “Browse the Library,” links to a page called “Index,” a sort of card catalog for the online library. An additional page in this module, “General References Online,” lists websites offering open access to resources. The next module, “Check out an eBook,” links to the Atla E-Book Lending Program, which supports consortial purchase and sharing of e-books. The program has its own website (www.theologicalebooks.org), so students use a username and password to check out e-books. An additional page in the “Check out an eBook” module is “Books: Open Access and Public Domain.” This page contains links to open access books required for classes or relevant to their studies. Another module, “Journal Articles and Dissertations,” contains links to EBSCO/AtlaSerials and Project Muse. Students access these databases through Canvas, with no need for additional passwords. Online encyclopedias are also accessed through Canvas in this way. A module on “Research and Writing” accesses pages with links to the online *Chicago Manual of Style*, to the other various writing guides, and to specific term paper and citation guidelines required by the CDU faculty. Pages on writing skills are also included. Other modules access various library resources. These nine modules contain the greater part of the CDU online library, making resources easily accessible to students and faculty 24/7. The e-book library and a small print library also are available via web access and require passwords.

The librarian’s role is twofold: to maintain the online library and to assist students and faculty with research and resources. Maintaining the online library means maintaining links. The course link evaluator in Canvas is a great help. Other tasks include acquiring content and distributing it onto Canvas or the e-book library. Assisting students and faculty is perhaps the easiest duty, as the communications provided by Canvas are efficient, including both email features and an online chat line called Pronto. Announcements regularly make students and faculty aware of new e-books and

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other sources of information. Students can also contact the librarian via regular email or telephone, with contact information posted on Canvas. Another source of communication for the librarian to use with students is Zoom. This resource is helpful both as one-on-one and small-groups work. The “share screen” option provides an excellent white board for teaching. Zoom recordings can be used to develop teaching videos, such as “How to” topics and introductions to “Literacy, intellectual and online.” Using these and other tools provided by Canvas, the librarian is able to develop and maintain a digital space for the library.

CDU’s library does not involve bricks and mortar but does provide digital and downloadable material. Digital information, besides being available around the clock, provides economical and practical ways to make more resources available as budgets shrink. A “Single Sign On” feature means accessing all library services on Canvas is simple and economical. But Canvas has its limitations. There is no “one search for all” as with discovery software, so students and faculty must do extensive searching. Access is limited to students and faculty who have a password for Canvas. Library staff cannot share that password with patrons outside the library. A library website could provide access to alumni and staff without an account in the learning management system.

Not all theological texts are available in digital formats, especially older texts not in the public domain. CDU does have a small print library housed in the offices at West Virginia and staff coordinate the interlibrary loan books delivery of books to students. The librarian, however, is in Indiana, so cataloging and maintaining the print collection requires travel. Given COVID issues, at present, no personnel are available to mail books. Moreover, because there is no full-scale brick and mortar library, CDU cannot participate in the Atla interlibrary loan project with other libraries. The librarian does maintain a close connection with library colleagues and is able to request resources from them. The librarian also contacts other librarians for permission for CDU students to use nearby libraries in accord with various library policies. Communication is limited in the online library environment. Zoom and similar programs can provide opportunities for social interaction, but they cannot really replicate the value of face-to-face interaction. Of the pros and cons CDU’s online library has faced, these are the main issues the librarian is working to address.

The online library at CDU has and continues to be a project in discovery and learning. How to provide adequate resources that are easily accessible to students and faculty in a digital world of learning is the challenge. Collaboration among colleagues, sharing of resources through consortiums, and working with Atla and other library associations are part of the answer. Thomas Phillips and his efforts for obtaining Open Access is providing much needed resources. Vendors are finding ways to give access while maintaining their companies. Harnessing technology to managing the digital space of an online library requires time and technical expertise. Working with technicians to design programs and simplify the process will enable online libraries to become digital gateways. If it “takes a village to raise a child,” it “takes all of the above and more for designing a gateway to digital resources.”

Before COVID, the thought of distance education and online libraries might have been in the realm of “the future of libraries,” but the pandemic has clearly brought this idea “into the present.” The administration, faculty, staff, and librarian of each academic institution will have to decide how best to implement this idea and perhaps the above information will provide them with thoughts on how to embrace more electronic resources distance education in the future.