Using HorizonLive to deliver library instruction to distance and online students

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Abstract

With the move from satellite to Web-based course delivery systems, librarians have greater opportunities, as well as greater challenges, regarding the best way to deliver information literacy instruction to distance students. Providing distance education through course delivery software like WebCT and HorizonLive is a growing trend in higher education. In addition, the opportunity to provide "real time" reference service to these distance students is afforded by the availability of live chat software. Librarians at California State University, Chico, decided to collaborate with distance education professors to use HorizonLive and chat reference to provide traditional library instruction, albeit in an untraditional format, to distance students. This article details the project and reports on its success.

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Introduction

The use of Web-based classroom management tools, like WebCT and Blackboard, in combination with live virtual classroom collaborative e-learning solutions, such as HorizonLive, is a growing trend in higher education promising to change the way universities deliver distance education to their students. Librarians also have new choices regarding the best way to deliver information literacy instruction to distance students. The librarians in the Library Instruction Program at California State University, Chico, decided to explore the live virtual classroom environment of HorizonLive, which was being used on our campus to deliver distance education, to see how well it worked for delivering library instruction.

About HorizonLive

HorizonLive is a virtual classroom product that enables instructors to simulate a collaborative classroom environment on the Web through the use of streaming media, chat, shared applications, and pushed content in the form of Powerpoint slides, JPEGS, GIFS, and Web pages. Although some of its features work only in a synchronous or live environment, it can easily generate archives from live sessions for on demand, asynchronous playback. Because it requires no special software other than a java enabled browser and the RealPlayer plug-in, works on all platforms, and can run on modem speeds as low as 56K, it is accessible to a wide range of users.

Distance education at California State University, Chico

The availability of new e-learning technologies is changing the concept and definition of distance education. In *Distributed Education and Its Challenges: An Overview*, Oblinger *et al.* (2001) state that: "Distance education and on-campus instruction are converging, with online delivery systems and approaches being employed for distant, commuting, and residential students." To reflect this

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convergence, terms such as "distributed education" and "distance and online education" are replacing the term, "distance education." These new terms take into consideration that many students are not choosing online instruction because they live at a distance and cannot come to campus, but because they prefer the flexibility that an online course provides them, especially the ability to participate synchronously or asynchronously from their own home.

California State University, Chico has a long history of delivering distance education. From "portable" faculty who would drive to regional centers and teach classes, we moved in the mid 1970s to a closed circuit television microwave network relaying televised courses to students at regional centers throughout Northern California. With the addition of a satellite uplink in the 1980s, the campus became one of the first California State Universities to offer national teleconferencing capability. By the 1990s, the Chico campus had two telecourse rooms sending out classes over microwave and/or satellite to 43 regional learning sites in northeastern California and 26 corporate sites across the nation. Originally it had been thought that other campuses would buy into the university's satellite system. But as many campuses opted instead to use computers to deliver course content, the price of maintaining the satellite became too great and the university launched an investigation of how to transition from satellite-based academic programs to a live Internet and Web-enhanced format (Evans, 2001). As of 2002, the university no longer teaches any distance courses via satellite. Instead, using either WebCT or a combination of WebCT and HorizonLive, all of the university's distance classes are delivered via the Web to a personal computer.

Distance education and library instruction

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) conducts a yearly Academic Trends and Statistics Survey. In addition to their standard questions, every year the survey chooses a different library trend or service to survey in depth. In 2000, the trend examined was distance education (ACRL, 2000). From the survey results the authors were able to see how colleges offering bachelors and masters degrees delivered library instruction to distance students. We were initially surprised to see that of the 384 colleges surveyed, face to face instruction was the most frequently reported mode of delivery, with 78 percent of the schools using this form of library instruction for distance students. This could be explained by on site orientations before the beginning of classes (Thompson, 2002). The second most common mode of instruction delivery was interactive Web pages, followed closely by e-mail and then telephone. Only two schools reported using Webcasting technologies (which would include technologies like HorizonLive) and 16 reported using live chat software. These survey results show that although universities are using new technologies to deliver distance and online education to their students, most libraries are still using more traditional avenues of delivery for library instruction. Reviewing the literature, we found that Cox and Pratt (2002) used streaming media to deliver library instruction to "missing" students, but we could find very little information about other libraries using e-learning products to provide instruction.

Distance education and library instruction at California State University, Chico

Before the move from satellite to Internet delivery, the university's distance education librarian taught library instruction for satellite courses, coordinated with the regional center libraries, and helped students retrieve the books and articles they needed for their class research. Additionally, early in the semester every distance student watched a broadcast in which the distance education librarian introduced herself, provided contact information, and talked about the library services available to them.

The move to Internet-based delivery changed all that. Instructors, perhaps because they were trying to adjust to HorizonLive themselves, have requested library instruction only once. Without the librarian's broadcast via satellite, it is probable that distance students are not even aware that a librarian is available to help them.

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Many distance students use the general reference e-mail and telephone services when they require assistance, although since they do not always identify themselves as distance students it is difficult to keep statistics on this. Because quite often reference librarians are able to refer students who call or e-mail to full-text information resources, the shift from the distance education librarian supporting distance students to the general librarians doing the same job has not been a problem. In all likelihood, when the distance education librarian retires next year the job of supporting distance students will fall to the reference librarians at the desk, with more in depth needs or requests devolving to the appropriate subject librarian. Part of the impetus for the project described below was to be prepared for this shift in responsibilities by having a model for delivering library education to distance students in place for the subject librarians to use.

The project

To begin an investigation into the use of the live virtual classroom for library instruction, we needed to find distance classes taught by instructors interested in and/or willing to accommodate to the project needs. Reviewing a list of distance and online classes scheduled to be taught the following semester, we found three classes being taught by instructors we knew either socially or professionally. We contacted those instructors, described our project, and asked if they would participate. We had decided to offer the instruction as an archived presentation rather than a live session because we felt that instructors would be more receptive if they did not have to give up class time. Essentially our plea went something like this:

> Hi, (Guy or Angela or Matt). You remember me, (Kris or Sarah), from the library. I'm interested in improving the information seeking skills of your students. Would you be willing to link an archived HorizonLive library instruction presentation and a quiz to your WebCT class page and to require that your students watch the presentation and take a quiz on it before completing one of their research projects? I will be responsible for developing and recording the presentation and will give you the quiz questions. I will also be available during scheduled hours for live chat to help your students complete their research assignments. You won't have to do anything, unless you'd like to, and you won't lose any class time as the students can view the presentation and take the quiz as homework.

We were surprised and pleased at how readily all three instructors agreed to our proposal. Since time was short, we immediately began discussions with the individual instructors about their research assignments for the class and the type of instruction they felt their students needed most. I decided to focus my session on how to find scholarly journal articles and Kris chose to do one session on using our ReSEARCH Station and another on using our Periodicals List.

Learning about HorizonLive

Before we could begin to develop our presentations, we needed to learn more about the capabilities and limitations of HorizonLive. Both of us had attended sessions for instructors on how to move courses to HorizonLive, but since at the time we attended we had no plans to teach an actual class, much of what we learned did not really sink in. To refresh our memories we viewed several archived presentations from classes that had been taught using HorizonLive the previous semester. By chance, we had both registered for a teaching/learning/technology (TLT) group teleconference on information literacy which used HorizonLive as the conferencing tool. By participating as conference attendees, we were able to look at the technology and come away with ideas about what we liked and did not like for use in our own presentations. Finally, we met with the campus HorizonLive technical support staff person and asked lots of questions. He provided us with practical knowledge that we used throughout the project.

Content development

Our intent was to simulate a live library instruction session, not to create a tutorial. Our first decision was to use still images in the presenter's box rather than streaming video of us instructing. We felt that the quality of the video was poor and sometimes more distracting

than helpful. Additionally, we were concerned with the amount of bandwidth required for video and decided that substituting still images would make our presentations accessible to more students. Writing the script was simple as we had taught the material many times before. However, what proved time consuming was determining what content to push at the students and creating the appropriate content or slides. Each 20 minute presentation had over 40 slides. Many of these were screenshots that we made using TechSmith Corporation's Snag-It software. Most of these screenshots needed to be imported into Macromedia's Fireworks or Adobe Photoshop so we could highlight pertinent text or superimpose additional text or images. Every slide had to be resized in order to fit correctly into the HorizonLive content window. Some of this work could have been avoided if we had used live Web pages, but we chose to use screen captures for several reasons. First, when you display a live Web page in HorizonLive, the screen dimensions are not large enough to display an entire page and the student must use the scroll bar to go down the page to view items you mention in your presentation. Also, if you use a live Web page, the students cannot see what you are typing on the screen or when you are clicking on a link so when you conduct a search, you have to tell them what you are doing at every step. Finally, if you are accessing IP protected Web pages and your students do not have a proxy server set up, they would not be able to access the Web pages you are showing.

Adding humor

Having spent some time researching the use of comedy in library instruction, we were interested in how we could make our HorizonLive presentations entertaining. Humor proved even harder in a HorizonLive class than it is in a real class as options are limited. Graphics were the main device we used to lighten the mood. In the presenter's box we would randomly substitute the still images of ourselves with images of beautiful actresses. However, since the resemblance between ourselves and the actresses was often so uncanny that the humor of the substitution might be lost on some, we also used still images of more fantastical heads, such as an avocado head with eyes and a nose and a mouth (hopefully this substitution was more obvious). We also interspersed humorous graphics in the content window, finding photos of students and teens at rock concerts and adding facetious captions to them such as "the crowd at our last library instruction session." Using Adobe Photoshop we added images and text to screenshots of Web pages to add humor. We had originally hoped to be able to use music or additional sound tracks, but this is not possible with the HorizonLive software. Finally, whenever possible we tried to add humor into the script or into the examples we used for demonstrating searches.

Recording the presentation

Recording the presentation was fairly simple. The only problem we had was when we discovered the hard way that HorizonLive does not accept file names that use spaces or symbols (it does acccept underscore). It is also important to number your slides using 01, 02, etc., so that the computer sorts them in the right order. Both of us lost time during our first presentations with slides that needed to be renumbered, or renamed, and with 50 slides per presentation this is to be avoided. Although you can now record a HorizonLive presentation from your own desktop computer, we chose to go into one of the two recording rooms where most of the instructors teach their HorizonLive classes. Because in HorizonLive you cannot go back and edit a presentation, we decided to do several takes of each presentation so we could choose the one we liked the best. Since the technical support staff loaded the slides, operated the recording equipment, and archived the presentations very little technical knowledge, other than the slide preparation, was required of us.

Using chat reference

The original idea of this project was to deliver library instruction to distance and online

students. We thought a nice complement to this would be to follow up our instruction with chat reference services in case, after viewing the presentation, students had questions about the presentation or their research assignment. Since we were already piloting a chat reference service this was easy to do. We had the instructors announce the hours we would be available for live chat, and we also advertised the chat reference hours staffed by other librarians. To identify those students enrolled in distance and online education classes, we included a question in a survey given to all chat reference users.

The quiz

The final step of our project was the requirement that students take a ten question quiz after viewing the HorizonLive library presentations. Our rather jaded estimate of student behavior was that some of them might forget to view the presentations if there was not a follow-up quiz. We provided the questions and the instructors all chose to administer the quiz through WebCT. The questions we asked were simple, measuring a basic level of knowledge, and giving us an indication of who had actually watched the presentations.

Assessment

At the end of the semester, all three instructors involved in our HorizonLive project expressed their intentions to use the presentations again and relayed positive anecdotal feedback from their students. Our feeling was that we had found a feasible avenue through which to reach our distance student population. One of the things that helped make our project a success was that HorizonLive was already being used in two of the classes, so it integrated well and was familiar and accessible to the students.

In the class that was WebCT only, several of the students had difficulty accessing the HorizonLive presentation. Next semester we would be sure to give the students in WebCT only classes the information they needed ahead of time to view the HorizonLive presentation successfully. Another advantage of HorizonLive was that it required very little technical knowledge or training for the instructor. However, there are a few drawbacks to HorizonLive. Unless your university is already using it in their distance education program, the cost is prohibitively expensive. Also, as noted earlier, we found that preparing the slides for the class was very time consuming. Of course this does not necessarily have to be the case as you could record a class with only a few slides or reduce the number of slides used by pushing live Web pages. Also, if you made your presentation general enough, you could use it in more than one class, and possibly for several years, so that the initial time invested would even out over multiple usages. The limited editing capabilities of HorizonLive were also a disappointment. If you made a mistake in your presentation three-quarters of the way through, you had to either live with it or re-record the whole thing. You can, however, change a slide in your archived presentation as long as your audio still relates to your new slide. The quiz results were generally good, and reflected that most students had watched the video. The least successful part of our project was the use of chat reference as a follow up to our class presentations. As far as we could ascertain through the chat participant surveys, nobody from any of our classes asked a question. Next semester we are not planning to announce chat reference to the classes that use our presentations, but are instead hoping to have the instructor allow us to start a discussion thread on the WebCT bulletin board related to the presentation and the research assignment.

Conclusion

HorizonLive, especially when used in a class that is already using the technology, is an excellent way to deliver library instruction. We will continue to work with instructors teaching distance education classes to incorporate library instruction sessions into their classes. We will also encourage other librarians to become involved in providing instruction through HorizonLive.

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