Embedded Librarian Best Practices

A guide for embedding librarians into online courses

Jessica Mussell, Instruction and Public Services Librarian

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Best Practices for Embedding Librarians in Online Courses

Purpose of this document
The purpose of this document is to provide guidance and strategies for faculty, instructional designers and librarians around the process of embedding librarians into Royal Roads University courses. It also outlines the expectations and parameters of this service.

Terminology
**Embedded librarian** – Embedded librarian refers to a librarian that is integrated into an online course for a specified period of time to provide library instruction at point-of-need. Another definition to express the idea of embedded librarians might be, “academic librarians who are acting as key collaborators by providing significant integrated support within courses where they are not the primary instructor” (Konieczny, 2010, p.48).

**Ask-a-Librarian forum** - A generic term used to define a discussion forum set up in an online course with the purpose to specifically embed a librarian.

Why embed a librarian in a course?
While the Library provides an array of online research support for learners (website, electronic collections, research databases, guides and tutorials), we want to be able to provide a more integrated service to support learners with their research at point-of-need, and meet them in their own environment.

Studies show that learners today are frustrated and confused by research, unfamiliar with the complex information landscape, and desire “just in time” assistance (Tumbleson & Burke, 2010, p. 974). This is especially true in the Royal Roads context, where we have many mid-career learners, learners with limited formal academic experience in their background, and international learners, who struggle when asked to do research.

Benefits identified from several studies as well as internal discussions on the topic of embedded librarians include:

- “Students and faculty value and appreciate this service” (Bennett & Simning, 2010, p. 454)
- Librarian responses are shared with the rest of the class reducing duplication of like-questions and assisting learners in applying/adapting concepts to their own questions.
- Faculty receives librarian knowledge and expertise which helps to enhance their course offering (Figa, Bone, & Macpherson, 2009).
• Librarians gain better insight into the research learners and faculty are conducting to help inform Library collection development.

• Anecdotally one might argue that another benefit to embedding librarians could be that the overall quality of the assignments submitted for instructors to mark improves.

By providing this human element of a “live” librarian in course, librarians can directly share their knowledge and expertise with learners when they need it most, and point learners to the best databases and collections for their assignment.

With all of the courses offered at Royal Roads University being taught through an online platform (moodle), embedding a librarian in a course seems a logical/natural extension of both our face-to-face and online services. As one article succinctly put it, the embedded librarian “maximizes impact, minimizes cost, and is versatile. Upper and lower division courses, all disciplines, and any course format, whether traditional, online, or hybrid, can benefit” (Tumbleson & Burke, 2010, p. 974).

Best Practices

For faculty and instructional designers

Be strategic with course selection
It is a better use of the librarian’s time if they are embedded in courses where learners have an assignment which requires them to do research (Konieczny, 2010, p. 53; Herring, Burkhardt, & Wolfe, 2009, p. 631; York & Vance, 2009, p. 205). An example of this in the Royal Roads context might be embedding a librarian in a course that has a:

• Literature review assignment for doctoral level courses;
• Literature review assignment tied to a graduating project, OMP, OLP, or thesis component for graduate level courses;
• Capstone project for undergraduate level courses, or a market research component.

Be strategic with time
There simply are not enough RRU librarians to embed a librarian in every class, or for lengthy amounts of time. To maintain the ongoing sustainability of this service, librarians should only be embedded in a course at the point where their services are most needed, and for no more than four days. In the Royal Roads context, this means choosing the days when students are most likely to be embarking on some form of research that will require them to utilize the Library’s resources and they are most likely to have research-related questions.

Be strategic with resources
Do not embed all the librarians at once into a course and never subscribe the librarian’s main email account (reflib@royalroads.ca) into a course. Instead, embed only the librarian who has been assigned
Embedding librarians into a course

If you are interested in embedding a librarian into your course, contact Jessica Mussell, Instruction and Public Services Librarian (jessica.mussell@royalroads.ca or 250-391-2600 ext. 4128). The Instruction Librarian is responsible for overseeing and scheduling all library instruction sessions, to ensure adequate librarian coverage.

In this initial discussion, provide information about:

1. The course you are interested in embedding a librarian in,
2. The specific assignment you need the librarian for, and
3. The date you are interested in having the librarian begin.

After the initial discussion, the Instruction Librarian will seek out a librarian to embed in your course. If a librarian is available, Jessica will put you in touch with him/her.

When you connect with the librarian that will be embedded into your course:

1. Have a discussion with him/her in advance, to go over any expectations and concerns you might have to “ensure the desired level of librarian involvement [is] provided” (Konieczny, 2010, p. 52).
2. Contact your course’s instructional designer if you require any assistance setting up a forum for the embedded librarian. Refer to the section on Where to situate the Ask-a-Librarian forum in a course, for further information.

When announcing to learners that a librarian will be embedded in your course, “make it clear that the librarian is a resource person and teacher and is not there to do the students work” (Herring et al., 2009, p. 633). The goal of the embedded librarian is to guide students so that they can eventually become more knowledgeable and “information literate”, and ultimately improve their information seeking behaviour.

Try to provide as much advance notice/leadtime as possible to ensure a librarian will be available. We require at least three weeks notice to capitalize on librarian availability.

Where should the Ask-a-Librarian forum be placed in the course?

Situate the Forum within the specific unit where the assignment lives (see screenshot below), that way it is most visible to learners at their point-of-need, and the connection to their assignment is apparent:
Give the embedded librarian discussion forum a name that makes it obvious to learners the purpose of the forum (e.g.) Ask-a-Librarian, Librarian forum, Ask [Librarian X]

Once the forum is set up, provide the librarian with a link to your course so that they can subscribe to the forum when it is time for them to be embedded. Consider adding it to the course schedule.

For librarians

Confirm with the instructor the information that the instruction librarian has forwarded and ensure that you and the instructor are “on the same page”.

State your purpose of being embedded in the course

Explain the parameters under which you will be embedded. Depending on your consultation with the course instructor, this can vary, but you want to make it clear to the learners the focus of your discussion forum in your first post to the forum. It also helps if the course instructor makes this clear in advance. The clearer the expectations, the less confusion around your presence in the course.

Monitoring the “Ask-a-Librarian” forum

When you subscribe to the forum you are embedded in, you should immediately receive email alerts when questions or comments are posted. For more detailed information on participating in moodle forums, please refer to the following documentation provided by CTET - http://faculty.myrru.royalroads.ca/learning-technologies-rru/moodle (CTET’s pages for info on using moodle 1.9 and moodle 2.1)
**Initial Greeting**

Always provide a friendly and welcoming introduction to yourself. Remember, you are a guest in the course and the learners may not necessarily know who you are. A little background about yourself and your knowledge will make you less of a stranger and ideally make participants feel more comfortable posting questions to the forum.

Uploading a photo of yourself to your moodle profile is recommended for further personalization and familiarity (put a face to a name).

You may even want to have the instructor introduce you prior to you joining the class, that way the learners will already know a bit about you by the time you are embedded (York & Vance, 2009, p. 205).

Don’t be afraid to use a little humour or some other form of ice-breaker, to get the conversation started.

**Sample initial greeting message:**

Hello, and welcome to the ‘Ask Jessica’ forum. My name is Jessica Mussell (no relation to the shellfish), and I am one of the many librarians you will find happily waiting to assist you at Royal Roads Library. I will be in your course, monitoring this forum from Wednesday, September 21 through to Wednesday, September 28 (one week).

If you haven’t already read the Introduction provided in Unit 6, the purpose of this forum is to give you a space within your course, at point-of-need, to present you with useful bits of information that will assist you with the research you will be doing for your literature review assignment. I will be posting tips throughout the week to provide you with some guidance to help you navigate all the various resources you can use to do research, as well as tips on refining your searches.

You are welcome to pose questions or comments related to my posts and my responses will be shared with your class. Chances are your questions or comments are probably something your colleagues have been pondering as well, so ask away!

To get things going, I’d like to provide you with a couple of links to help you get started:

This first link is to the Library’s Leadership Recommended Resources guide. This guide provides you with a list of databases available in the Library’s collection that either specialize or contain a good amount of leadership literature. If you’re not sure where to start your search, this guide will provide you with some options.
Recommended resources for leadership -  
http://libguides.royalroads.ca/content.php?pid=71796

Because you are to focus on finding information from peer-reviewed journals and other scholarly sources and books, this second link is to a unit in the Library’s InfoQuest Tutorial which will provide you with guidance on how to identify scholarly material from popular material.

Academic vs. Scholarly Sources - http://library.royalroads.ca/infoquest-tutorials/articles/academic-vs-popular-sources

--Jessica

Be proactive
To avoid repetition in answers (and additional work), be proactive and begin discussion threads around topics you expect the learners might struggle with. Discussions with the instructor may assist you in determining what aspects of research you might want to focus on initially. Some examples of topic threads are provided in the screenshot below.

Screenshot from the Ask-a-Librarian forum used in Lead 563 – note the number of threads and how they focus on specific topics.

Often times a welcome post or a post covering some search tips will get the conversation going. To keep the conversation going, you may want to try incorporating a new post each day on the themes you notice emerging from the previous day’s discussions. In other words, keep the conversation going, and keep it relevant to learners current information needs.

If you find you are getting very little discussion, this is not necessarily a “red flag”. It could be that the learners are very busy doing other things, or it could be that they are actually using the information you have provided. Many learners work during the day, so you may notice a flurry of posts appearing throughout the evening and they will be waiting for you to respond to the following day.
If you are getting absolutely no discussion, then this may be a “red flag” and you may want to check in with the instructor to find out why this is, and potentially discuss other approaches or strategies to assist while embedded.

**Make use of other instructional tools**

There are many different learning styles, and there is a wealth of learning objects available for explaining library research concepts. Rather than typing a lot of dry text, try and make use of already existing resources, such as animated tutorials, LibGuides, and other tools to incorporate into your posts.

In the following example, rather than writing a lot of text around search strategies, I have linked to some interactive animated tutorials that will provide the learners with the same information, but in a more visual way.

[Example image of animated tutorial]

**Signing off**

When signing off from being embedded in a course, ensure the learners know that they are still able to get help from a librarian, even though your time in their course has come to an end. Thank the instructor for inviting you into their course, thank the learners for their questions and discussions, and provide contact information for further assistance.

**Sample sign off message:**

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Hi everyone,

It’s been a great pleasure assisting you over the past week. There were some really good questions and lively discussions. I hope my presence helped guide you in your own research.

I’m signing off now, but if you need any further assistance, you can contact the reference librarians through the following means:

- Email: http://libanswers.royalroads.ca
- Phone: 250-391-2575
- In-person by appointment
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Thank you for welcoming me into your course, and thanks to [instructor’s name] for making this possible!

--Jessica

Follow up with the instructor after being embedded to get feedback on how things went in their opinion as well as any feedback gleaned from learners. By having some time to debrief, you will be able to identify what you did well, and what you can work on (or do differently) to improve future sessions.

**Keep copies of your posts**

In the event you are asked to participate in future offerings of a specified class, it is recommended that you keep a copy of your greetings and posts on the O: drive for reference. This helps to make this service manageable, creating a “knowledge base” of responses for all librarians to share and personalize accordingly (Bennett & Simning, 2010, p. 454). Samples of embedded librarian postings can be found in the Public Services-Instruction>Embedded Librarian folder.

**Limits to Librarian support**

While the librarians are happy to share their expertise, there are some areas that occasionally pop up in discussions that are best handled by the instructor or referred elsewhere.

Questions asking for assignment interpretation should always be referred to the instructor(s) of the course as they are in the best position to answer such queries. Ideally, instructors will also be monitoring the Ask-a-Librarian forum to assist in answering these sorts of questions, but the librarian may want to alert the instructor to ensure the question does not go unnoticed.

Similarly, librarians are not citation experts and any citation or academic writing questions should always be referred to the Writing Centre (http://writeanswers.royalroads.ca), and a reference made to the Writing Centre website: http://library.royalroads.ca/writing-centre.

If you are referring a learner to support outside the course, privacy issues apply. Using the example above, if the question is best answered by the Writing Centre, rather than forward their post directly which contravenes a learners right to privacy, explain to the learner why there is someone more suited to answer their question, and provide them with contact information so that they can follow up if they wish to.
References


Figa, E., Bone, T., & Macpherson, J. R. (2009). Faculty-librarian collaboration for library services in the online classroom: Student evaluation results and recommended practices for implementation. *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning, 3*(2), 67-102. doi:10.1080/15332900902979119


