WISE Libraries:
Building the Online Course of the Future

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Abstract

Web-based Information Science Education (WISE) is a unique and groundbreaking opportunity in online education. Through WISE, thirteen leading library and information science schools from the United States, Canada, and New Zealand have extended their reach on a global basis to broaden the educational opportunities available to students. WISE uses advanced online technology to enrich education and foster relationships among students, faculty, and universities. The vision of this initiative is to provide a collaborative distance education model that will increase the quality, access, and diversity of online education opportunities in library and information science. For more information, please see our website at www.wiseeducation.org

In 2006, the WISE consortium received a $936,000, 3-year grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to fund *WISE+ Leveraging the Power of the Network to Increase the Diversity of LIS Curriculum.* Funding for *WISE+* supports partnerships between WISE member schools and professional library associations to increase course offerings in diverse or specialized areas of study.

The first WISE+ course is *WISE Libraries: Designing the Public Library of the Future.* This paper and presentation will examine this cross-institutional, international, online course, offered in the spring of 2007 in partnership with WISE, Syracuse University, and

the Americans for Libraries Council. Students from each of the WISE consortium schools, living in New Zealand, Germany, Australia, Canada, and the United States work in cross-institutional teams to design the public library of the future. Online guest lecturers for this course include award winning librarians, designers, and architects.

Introduction

In the spring of 2002, representatives from Syracuse University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign met to discuss the possibility of collaborating to improve and expand upon their existing Library and Information Science (LIS) distance education programs. The intent of the collaboration was to establish quality metrics in distance education while facilitating course sharing between the two programs. The concept took root, and by the fall of 2002 the two institutions began cross enrolling students in elective online courses.

In summer 2004, a two-year grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) provided the foundation for the Web-based Information Science Education Consortium (WISE). This grant allowed the founders to expand upon their initial venture to include LIS programs at other schools. The goals of the proposal included the development of a cost-effective, collaborative distance education program which would increase the quality, access and diversity of online educational opportunities available to LIS students. In addition, three pillars were defined which highlight the ideals of the consortium: quality, pedagogy, and collaboration.

WISE established itself as a member of the LIS distance education community through presence at several national and international conferences in the following year, including the Association of Library and Information Science Educators (ALISE), The Sloan Consortium, Distance Learning Administration (DLA), the American Library Association (ALA), and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) among others. WISE continued to garner support, and by the spring of 2005 the consortium had grown to include 13 member institutions.

The WISE consortium places a high value on sound pedagogical training. In the spring of 2005, WISE launched a series of face to face pedagogical instruction opportunities at conferences such as ALA 2005 and ALISE 2006, supplemented by online teaching modules. In addition, outstanding WISE educators are rewarded for their attention to quality online instruction with the Excellence in Online Teaching award, instituted in 2006.

In summer 2006, the WISE consortium received an additional three-year grant from the IMLS. The grant supports the WISE+ initiative which aims to expand the institutional consortium to include professional library organizations. WISE students now have access to a broad variety of specialty courses taught in conjunction with these organizations, bridging the gap between education, theory and practice.

Online Consortia Models: What Works and What Does Not Work

There are a number of online consortiums functioning under three alternative models. In the *Transfer Credit consortium* model, online courses are advertised via the consortium and students register at any one of several universities to receive credit for taking a

course from that university. However, students must transfer the credits between institutions for the courses to count in a degree program. In the *Unified Program consortium* model, online courses are offered as consortium courses in a single program, using faculty from the institutions in the consortium. Students may register at a home institution that is geographically close to them, but they typically pay a common tuition and receive the same degree regardless of their home institution. In the *WISE consortium* model, students are able to take online courses at another university through a consortium agreement that allows for home school registration in the course without the need to transfer credits between institutions.

Examples of the *Transfer Credit* consortium model include the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and The State University of New York Learning Network (SLN). The challenges of this model include the additional advising needed by students to be aware of courses that fit into their program and the burden placed on students to transfer credit between institutions. This consortium model is the same as students taking courses at another university and transferring the credit. Former consortiums using this model include Borderless Access to Training and Education (BATE) and Edlearn. The Pennsylvania State University System still advertises some online programs from their member institutions but no longer supports the Keystone University Network.

> **SREB** [http://www.sreb.org/] is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works with leaders and policy-makers in 16 member states to improve pre-K through postsecondary education. More than one million college students were enrolled in online academic courses at institutions in SREB states in 2006, but it is unclear how many students took courses from another member of the consortium and transferred the credits back to their home institution.

> **SLN** [http://sln.suny.edu/] SLN is one of the nation's largest distance learning programs which provides educational opportunities to more than 70,000 students through 4,000 courses but it is unclear how many students took courses from another member of the consortium and transferred the credits back to their home institution.

An example of the *Unified Program* consortium model is The Great Plains Interactive Distance Learning Alliance (Great Plains IDEA). The challenge of this model is the burden on consortium partners to maintain the consortium and the willingness of faculty to participate in it. Now defunct consortiums that used this model include The Wisconsin Program for Training Regionally Employed Care Providers (WisTREC); The Missouri Online Higher Education Consortium (MOHEC); and AllLearn, a joint venture of Stanford, Oxford, and Yale universities.

> **The Great Plains IDEA** [http://www.gpidea.org/] was founded in 1994, to create a marketplace for sharing distance education courses and programs at the graduate level. The consortium consists of 11 colleges and universities. This consortium currently offers inter-institutional masters degrees and graduate certificates in Family Financial Planning, Gerontology, Youth Development, Community Development and Merchandising.

The WISE consortium model focuses on quality online education, offers pedagogical resources to consortium members, and offers students access to excess capacity in

online courses. Consortium institutional partners pay an annual fee to maintain the consortium infrastructure and offer anticipated excess capacity in courses to the other institutional members. Students register for a "special topics" course at their home institution and are placed in the online course by the institution offering the excess seats. A system of student registration imports and exports is maintained. Programs pay a per-student charge for every student export, (i.e. a student taking a course at another institution) and receive a payment for every student import (i.e. a student from other institutions taking a course at the program's institution.) Programs that balance imports and exports do not pay or receive any additional funding.

The WISE model works well because it focuses on quality, minimizes student effort in registering for courses from other institutions, minimizes the administrative effort of home institutions, and leverages the excess capacity of specialty courses to increase the curriculum diversity of each member institution. It also has a common culture of students: those in programs in library and information science who have already been exposed to online education.

WISE Libraries: Designing the Public Library of the Future

The 2006 WISE+ Leveraging the Power of the Network to Increase the Diversity of LIS Curriculum project connected the 13 WISE Consortium members with 18 of the leading professional associations in library and information science. The partnerships were formed to create new, diverse online coursework on specialty topics in LIS. Some of the first courses included *Theological Librarianship* in partnership with the American Theological Librarians Association; *Digital Libraries* in partnership with the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications; and *WISE Libraries: Designing the Public Library of the Future* with the Americans for Libraries Council (ALC).

ALC is a US nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing innovation and investment in the nation's libraries. Their Libraries for the Future project examines the needs of patrons and communities for the library of the future. In partnership with the WISE consortium, ALC supported the WISE Libraries online course, *Wise Libraries: Designing the Public Library of the Future*, taught by Professor Kingma and Rebecca Shaffer-Mannion in the spring of 2007.

Twenty students from eight institutions residing in five countries registered for this course, including Ellen Forsyth, a co-author of this paper. The course sought to provide students with the knowledge, resources, and skills to participate in the design of a public library, and to foster new connections between schools and encourage the sharing of ideas by including two or three students from each of the WISE members.

Students explored the future of public libraries and librarianship through readings from a variety of disciplines, collaborative assignments, and hands-on design exercises. The goal was to answer these questions:

- What will make up the information world of 2030?
- What does the future hold for the public library?
- What does the public library of 2030 look like?

Course topics included human resources, developing a plan of service(s), technology, budgeting, politics, internal workings and processes, and more. Students then investigated how these considerations relate to the external and internal design of a library building.

The course also introduced the concept of "**management by design**," an initiative concept that seeks to integrate the ideas of design into project management, organizational development, and general business practices. Designers use this concept to discover how ideas from design can inform and improve management and how it complements analysis and decision-making as core managerial skills.

Guest lecturers included **Lori Brown**, Assistant Professor at the School of Architecture at Syracuse University; **Anne Grenon Chernaik,** Librarian and Instructor for the College of Lake County in Grayslake, Illinois; **William Connors** a partner in Woodward, Connor, Gillies and Seleman Architects; **Nolan Lushington,** founder and President of Lushington Associates; and Josephine L. Piracci, director of the Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public Library.

Assignments for this course included individual design project, as well as a team project. Students worked in five member teams to design the library of the future. The final projects were incredible, with each team incorporating "management by design" concepts to design the ideal Library of the Future. The final team projects can be viewed at:

> **http://iststudents.syr.edu/~blue600**
> **http://iststudents.syr.edu/~green600**
> **http://iststudents.syr.edu/~orange600**
> **http://iststudents.syr.edu/~red600**

There were five judges for the library designs. **Anne Grenon Chernaik** (see above) is one of the American Library Association's Emerging Leaders for 2007. **Gloria Coles**, National Director of the Americans for Libraries Council's Life Long Libraries Project, brought decades of experience in public library work to the judges table. **Sari Feldman**, Executive Director of the Cuyahoga County Public Library, rounds out the judging panel with her experience as a pioneer in the field of public library programming and development. **Jeffrey Scherer**, FAIA**,** is a founding principal of Meyer, Scherer, & Rockcastle, Ltd., (MS&R), one of the nation's leading architecture and design firms, Scherer's work has included the design of over one hundred public, academic, and private libraries. **Nolan Lushington** (see above) has dedicated himself to the improvement of library facilities since 1970.

Teaching Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges faced while teaching this course were heavily outweighed by the opportunities. The online group dynamic was the most prevalent difficulty: students worked in the WebCT course management system without face-to-face interaction. They also came from a variety of academic institutions, each with its own expectations for academic performance.

Some students asked to work alone, yet the underlying objective of the course was to provide group-produced projects that were created from a diverse group of students. Resumes were evaluated and groups were created after the course had started. This allowed for a balance of strengths, whether they were technological, writing, or leadership skills.

The diversity of academic institutions also led to varying expectations, such as the quality of discussions, quality of assignments, and academic rigor. The syllabus provided the expectations of the students work, yet some students still struggled. Some had not previously used a course management platform, and some were not familiar with WebCT. There was a short learning curve.

Communication among students, groups, and faculty was a key concern. We used video, websites and video IM to present information and share ideas among the faculty and students. However, the web cams that were provided to students were not compatible with Macintosh computers, creating a challenge for students. The IM was used heavily in the beginning of the semester and waned toward the end. Schedules were a hindrance to the use of video and live chat as students could not use the equipment or service while at work or coordinate with time zones.

Interruption in the use of these technologies led to student frustration. They were essentially 'shut-out' of class, with no opportunity to participate. In addition, frustration mounted when technology was slow or limited.

This course was specifically designed to include two students from each partnering university. Groups were built to include representation from different schools, with the premise that groups must find their own solutions to group communication.

Students are closely monitored and tools within WebCT allow for measuring participation, discussion posting numbers, assignment submission times, and times when students logged onto the course. This proved to be a challenge for some groups as certain members did not participate as much as others. This dynamic is a given in any group situation and students were encouraged to communicate with all group members and find workable solutions to the challenges.

The course provided many opportunities and was enjoyable to teach. Applying aspects of library design, human resources, architecture, technology and creative writing, it was a unique experience afforded to participants. When building the groups, each student was asked which type of library they would like to create, i.e. urban, rural or suburban. It was felt that if they worked toward a shared goal, the groups would be more successful. Research by Brown (2001) on how members defined a group or community, found that having something in common leads students to feel more a part of a community and more willing to share ideas and thoughts.[1]

Diverse students from different academic institutions allowed for differing perspectives and a broader range of skills and experience. Students were able to work with those

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[1] Brown R. (2001). The process of community-building in distance education learning classes. Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 5(2), 18-35.

outside their home school and share ideas. Integrating existing academic backgrounds, work experience, and cultural backgrounds allowed for more diverse discussions.

Multi-country perspectives were provided by students from three countries: New Zealand, Canada and the United States. These students brought a global perspective to the course, and it became evident that libraries in these countries have similar problems, standards, and policies. As libraries have similar missions, there was much discussion about libraries as community centers and how they integrate with other civic and cultural institutions. These positive exchanges led to greater communication and understanding of cross-cultural library issues and concerns.

Student Challenges and Opportunities

Participating in a course through the WISE libraries consortium is an excellent way to be able study a program which is not available in one's own country, or not available through the institution one is studying in. The consortium provides access to courses not accessible in countries with smaller populations, but also allows expertise from smaller as well as larger countries to be shared. It facilitates a global approach to learning. The actual learning tools provide a different approach to a subject – in this case public library buildings. With the proper technology, it is a very accessible method of learning and sharing ideas. It is an interesting way to study and be involved in a broad discussion about public libraries.

While promoted as being asynchronous learning, this learning method is only partly asynchronous, and this was around the course work. Once the group projects started, it was important for students to be online at the same time at least once a week. Students simply had to work out a meeting time, and make sure it was clear what time zone that meeting was in. The same issues of getting together can happen when everyone is in the same town or city, and it does require people being flexible about what time they will be online.

The software is easy to use but relies on a Windows platform, so that not all parts of the course were accessible on a Macintosh. With the complexity of the work being done, it would be helpful to have even more software available, for example, some basic computer aided design.

The group assignment components require a very high level of mutual trust, as students are working with people they have not met before. It can be rather fun working with new people, from different cultural backgrounds, and having to solve problems in an online environment. This worked well. But there are very high risk factors associated with group assignments when you are still getting to know the other participants. Instant messaging and online forums become important. The first few individual assignments were well designed to encourage creative thinking for student interaction. Having to post assignments and have them commented on by other students, and comment on theirs in turn, was a quick way of getting to know the other students and discover their different personalities and interests. This pulled everyone into the right mindset for the class.

In an online course, like any course, you have to work hard to make sure you are contributing fairly to the whole. As in a classroom, students need to be aware of not dominating the discussion or of not speaking up enough. Like any discussion between students, the benefit is highest when many are engaged in the discussion.

It is important to remember that it is a learning experience for lecturers as well. How do the lecturers provide constructive online feedback or encourage someone? What is the online equivalent of catching up with people when you meet them in the corridor or run into them in a café?

In order for innovation to take place, the innovators first need a common understanding of the current practices. Each student was aware of some aspects of the best of current public libraries, but unaware of many other aspects. As a result some time was spent re-inventing ideas that are already practiced in public libraries. The course progressed from abstract/general/creative to specific, but could have been strengthened by the class initially discussing the most inventive and impressive aspects of public libraries that they have seen, or perhaps the presentation of actual library buildings could have come earlier in the class.

Following up the creative work with a sharing of resumes may have been useful in getting the team projects started, and in allowing students to network. Once the small group work started, so much energy was required that it was difficult to network with students in other groups. With the high percentage of collaborative assignments, there is a high level of trust and responsibility required towards the other students assigned to the small groups. Participants need to work hard, and share ideas. The use of instant messaging and online forums for brainstorming were critical, and a collaborative style of discussion brings different strengths to the work.

This method of study has the potential to spread around the world. It could be operating in a range of languages, so that major library schools could be involved and students could participate depending on their language. It is important that people have very high level language skills in whatever the language of discussion is.

A conflict resolution protocol should be developed. It could operate with similar principles to the Wikipedia community which are "Assume good faith!, Intentional vulnerability, Accountability rather than gatekeeping"[2]

There should be a strategy for helping quieter students be more involved. Like any course it relies on what you put in. That is fair, but face to face there is the opportunity for a lecturer to have a bit of a chat and ask a student for comments to draw out the quieter students. Perhaps e-mail could be used to encourage some individuals to participate more.

The learning outcomes include skills in the collaborative learning environment from a technology perspective, and from a human interaction perspective. This is a smart use of technology, and helpful for learning about public libraries in different cultures.

Conclusion

WISE has established itself in the online education community as offering high-quality online courses and having a sustainable and scalable consortium model. In October of 2006, WISE received the Effective Practices Award from the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-

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[2] Bonnemann, Tim, Jimmy Wales : three principles for building the Wikipedia community, 24 January, 2007, Planblog, http://www.plansphere.com/blog/?p=543 Accessed 6 May 2007

C), an organization comprised over 1000 institutions dedicated to excellence in online learning. The award recognizes the WISE Consortium's leadership role in the advancement of quality, scale, and breadth of online courses.

Eighteen professional associations in library and information science have now become WISE partners to increase courses diversity. One of first of these courses, *WISE Libraries: Designing the Public Library of the Future*, successfully combined students worldwide from several programs in a course on a specialized topic.

By spring 2007, 264 students from 13 programs will have participated in 161 WISE courses. Students and instructors from across the world have contributed to this ever evolving global classroom. As the WISE consortium continues to develop, emphasis on quality, pedagogy and collaboration continues to grow stronger.