

## Not always a straight line: Connecting IL instruction to online students

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Online education represents a significant trend within higher education in both the United States and Canada. Courses delivered online have grown steadily in the United States from 8% of undergraduate courses in 2000 to 59% in 2016 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). In Canada “90% of universities and 80% of colleges offer distance education...[and] 98% of the institutions offering distance ed offer online courses” (Usher, 2018). Higher education in both countries offers degrees obtainable entirely online.

Educational institutions incorporate online learning for a variety of reasons. Diversity initiatives are enhanced through the inclusion of geographically dispersed and socio-culturally diverse students. Additionally, online learning affords educational opportunities for students lacking the resources (e.g., money and time) to physically attend a traditional university. Institutions also enjoy financial advantages, including lower costs of delivery, increased numbers of students, and reduced infrastructure requirements.

Librarians seeking to support online students with information-literacy (IL) instruction face challenges of access and scalability. They often do not have direct access to online students, nor are librarians always able to connect with these students when and where they learn. Online tutorials might fill this gap, but they fail to support active learning. Nor do they afford the student-librarian communication exchanges that can enhance relationships with the library and promote learning. This lack of direct IL instruction can result in reduced research and critical-thinking skills, which disadvantages online students and complicates inclusivity efforts. Librarians’ attempts to “push” the same kinds of instruction received by face-to-face learners directly to all online students are unscalable and unsustainable. A new approach to providing online IL instruction is needed.

Network theories of communication can provide insights on structuring connections between librarians and online students. Applying this theoretical perspective, the authors set forth a rationale for a train-the-trainer model to reach online students via their faculty. The authors propose this model in the belief that teaching critical-thinking literacies, including IL, is everyone’s responsibility and that equal access to critical-thinking literacy instruction is everyone’s right. In this model librarians support course faculty by training them in IL pedagogies and instructional design. Faculty are empowered to provide IL instruction and research support in times and spaces when course instruction occurs, allowing them to support learners at the point of need. The paper ends with a discussion of additional advantages to instructors, students, and librarians that can be realized by implementing the train-the-trainer model.