

Effective Use of “Guest Lecturers” in Online Instruction

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Abstract

“Guest lecturers” can share insight and experiences, especially in classes that support professional programs, but how can they be best utilized in the online teaching environment? In presenting this paper at DLA 2018, the authors seek to discuss this question, drawing upon their recent, empirical research investigating the role of guest lecturers in online library science classes.

Introduction

The genus of this paper lies in its authors’ own professional experiences. Both authors are experienced, practicing academic librarians working in public services roles in American universities. The authors have also worked as Adjunct Professors, serving as course instructors for online classes delivered in an American Library Association (ALA)-accredited Master’s in Library and Information Science (MLIS) program. In the context of their work as librarians, the authors have, from time to time, served as “guest lecturers,” providing insight about their work to library science students; as Adjunct Professors they have invited guest lecturers into their classes.

Bell (2003, p.10) observes, “Guest lecturers are often used to give students the best possible learning experience by combining academic theory with real work experience. They are typically subject experts who can bring to life what students only read in a textbook.” The MLIS curriculum, supporting a professional, vocational program, would therefore lend itself to including librarians as guest lecturers. Academic librarians present an appealing resource to MLIS professors as potential guest lecturers. Frequently holding faculty status themselves, employed in colleges and universities, and, in the case of public services librarians, experienced in working with students on a day-to-day basis, academic librarians appear almost tailor-made for the guest lecturer’s role.

An additional factor to be considered is the place of online MLIS programs within library science education. The ALA reports accredited MLIS programs at 60 institutions; of these, 34 institutions are categorized as offering a “100% online program” (ALA, 2018), although such institutions may offer their 100% online programs alongside traditional, face-to-face or hybrid models. Focusing on the 100% online programs, this research investigates how guest lecturers are used in online MLIS programs, and, drawing upon data received from participants who teach MLIS classes, offers suggestions for effective use of guest lecturers.

Literature Review

The most frequently noted reasons for inviting guest lecturers into the classroom are to increase student engagement, to vary the method of content delivery, to connect students with practicing professionals, and to connect course material with real-world applications. Professional programs of study such as the health professions, education, and business frequently invite practitioners to have contact with students. For instance, guest speakers for accounting and pharmacy professional development events have helped prepare students for interviews, licensure exams, and potential career paths (Metrejean, Pittman, & Zarzeski, 2002; Zorek, Katz, & Popovich, 2011). Marketing classes benefited when provided with a preparatory framework encouraging students to “link real-world issues to class concepts” and “analyze real problems and offer recommendations” (Dalaks, 2016, p. 95). The barriers of time and distance were overcome by nursing leadership instructors who, with their students, started video recording 10-minute interviews with guest practitioners to help students gain “insight into what it means to be a nurse” as well as leaders (Sortedahl & Imhoff, 2016, p. 114).

The distance learning classroom offers guest lecturers additional opportunities to overcome barriers of distance and synchronous timing. Early discussions of the visiting speaker in the online classroom recognized the risk of technological problems while emphasizing the “collegial” nature of the discussion-based online course that “allow[ed] everyone to have equal access to the guest” (Varvel, 2001, para. 10). Use of a guest “expert” interacting in an online class enhanced the professional development of special education needs coordinators by emphasizing the participants as “members of a community of practitioners” (Wearmouth, Smith, & Soler, 2004, p. 91). Social work course instructors were able to move beyond local geographical limitations to find “the best speaker to stimulate the topical interest and needs of the students” in the online synchronous classroom (Sage, 2013, p. 386).

As online course management systems have become more user-friendly, pedagogical benefits have increased. In an undergraduate bilingual teacher preparation program, Ostorga and Farruggio invited a guest author/speaker into the asynchronous class discussion to help students discover the author’s “perspective on what they saw as inconsistencies between the field experiences and the course readings” (2013, p. 2147). As noted in one business course utilizing a social constructivist pedagogy, the guest speakers’ input helped improve “credibility of the course materials” (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009, p. 420). Comparing two guest speaker experiences in an online instructional technology graduate course, Hemphill and Hemphill (2007) concluded that frequent guest speaker postings on asynchronous discussion boards were not necessary; as long as the postings were oriented toward higher-order thinking, they encouraged higher-level student responses. An additional benefit includes the opportunity for students to review transcripts to draw connections among other course materials.

Within the library and information science setting, Rowell and Guistini (2008) have used guest speakers to add variety to course material within a constructivist- and problem-based-learning-oriented health librarianship course; speakers included a number of former students who had moved on to health librarianship positions. A recently graduated vendor has reflected on her experience as a guest lecturer in an MLIS class to address students’ apprehension about working with vendors (Apostol, 2007). The use of guest speakers or lecturers in the LIS setting has otherwise received little attention in the literature. The current study seeks to add to existing literature on guest lecturers in the LIS and other disciplinary online courses.

Methodology

A Qualtrics survey was devised which principally sought to ascertain the status of MLIS course instructors (full-time MLIS Professor vs part-time Adjunct Professor), the nature of classes using guest lecturers, reasons for using guest lecturers, perceived levels of satisfaction with guest lecturers, and inclination to use guest lecturers in future classes. IRB approval for the research was obtained from Valdosta State University and James Madison University. The Qualtrics survey was distributed to the email addresses of course instructors currently teaching in ALA-accredited 100% online MLIS programs, identified by consulting the *Directory of ALA Accredited and Candidate Programs in Library and Information Science*, along with publicly available information from the websites of institutions offering MLIS degrees.

Results

Responses were obtained from 87 participants, 78 of whom returned sufficient data to allow for analysis. At time of writing (March 2018) the survey remains open and continues to garner responses. Data will continue to be collected in accordance with IRB parameters, and may be used for possible, future research, comparing online use of guest lecturers to the role of guest lecturers in the face-to-face classroom. Approximately 100 hundred emails sent to subjects yielded “vacation” messages or email “bounces.” The response rate for the research, as reported in this paper, was 9.1%.

Quantitative Data

Table A.

Classes Taught and use of Guest Lecturers

<i>Classes taught</i>	<i>Full-time faculty</i>	<i>Part-time faculty</i>
0 to 2	7	14
3 to 6	41	6
7+	8	2
<i>Guest lecturers used in classes?</i>	<i>Full-time faculty</i>	<i>Part-time faculty</i>
Yes	42	12
No	14	10
<i>Number of classes involving guest lecturers</i>	<i>Full-time faculty</i>	<i>Part-time faculty</i>
At least one	10	6
Some	19	2
All	13	4

Table B.

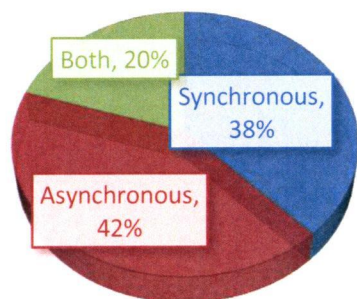
Nature of Classes Involving use of Guest Lecturers

<i>Class topic area</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Public Services / Reference	41
Archives & Special Collections	12
Public Libraries	12
Digital Libraries or related initiatives	11
Management	6
Technical Services / Metadata	6
Collection Development	5
Foundation (introduction to library science)	5
School Libraries	5
Research Methods	3

Note: For the purposes of Table B, classes that contained two or more identified themes, for example, "Public Library Management," were coded by all appropriate identifiers ("Public Libraries" and "Management").

Figure A.

Whether Guest Lecturer Involvement with Classes was Synchronous, Asynchronous, or Both Synchronous and Asynchronous



Professional Librarians as Guest Lecturers

Participant responses indicated that 70% of the guest lecturers described in this research were professional librarians, with the other 30% of guest lecturers pursuing other careers. The professions (other than librarian) mentioned most frequently were representatives of publishers or vendors and IT specialists.

Levels of Satisfaction with Guest Lecturer Contributions, and Likelihood of using Guest Lecturers in the Future

All participants indicated satisfaction with the work of guest lecturers, stating that the guest lecturers had “significantly” or “somewhat” enhanced the instruction, with 100% of participants who reported recent use of guest lecturers indicating a willingness to use guest lecturers again.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was sought in four key areas:

- Reasons guest lecturers were not used (a question asked of respondents who reported not using guest lecturers)
- Motivations for using guest lecturers (a question asked of respondents who reported using guest lecturers)
- Positive attributes the guest lecturers brought to instruction
- Problems or concerns with guest lecturers

For reasons of brevity, the first and second most frequently codified response for each of these categories is reported:

Reasons why Guest Lecturers were Not Used:

1. Technological concerns
2. Scheduling concerns

Motivations for Using Guest Lecturers:

1. Adding a practicing librarian’s perspective to the class
2. Adding another professional’s perspective to the class (examples include publishers’ representatives, copyright experts)

Positive Attributes:

1. Connecting students to working professionals in the profession the students aspire to join
2. “Variety” – an alternative to the usual course instructor adds interest to the class; practitioners offer a change from theoretical perspectives

Problems or Concerns:

1. Technology issues – problems with ensuring student access to the guest lecturer’s contribution to the class
2. Scheduling/time commitment concerns – issues with synching the guest lecturer’s contribution to the class with the class schedule; concerns about placing an undue burden on guest lecturers

Discussion

Among full-time MLIS faculty respondents, 25% of respondents reported an unwillingness to include guest lecturers in their teaching, compared to 45% of respondents who are part-time adjunct faculty. One possible reason for this difference is that adjunct faculty who participated in the research overwhelmingly indicated that they were, themselves, practicing librarians, or working in a related field (Media Curator or Information Architect). The practitioner might not need to bring another practitioner’s perspective to class, but the issues of variety and alternative viewpoints referenced in the qualitative data suggest that adjunct faculty may wish to think more broadly

when considering possibilities for guest lecturers: could this be a good opportunity to include professionals from outside librarianship?

Well over one third of the classes focused upon public services or reference work. This fact did not surprise the authors (as Reference Librarians, they are experienced in guest lecturing or serving as embedded librarians). The high frequency of archives-related classes is also unsurprising. Archivists may be seen to represent a profession within a profession in terms of librarianship; this situation likely results in professional Archivists being welcomed as guest lecturers in related classes. Something which is notable, however, is the low frequency of classes addressing technical services. The authors can offer no explanation for why the elements of librarianship involving cataloging and metadata are not better represented in the research data.

The qualitative data, taken in conjunction with the high number of classes limited to asynchronous guest lecturer involvement, suggests that concerns about technology continue to provide a barrier to including guest lecturers, or limit the guest lecturer's participation to discussion boards or other asynchronous contact with students. Common responses included sentiments such as difficulty "overcoming the technological hurdles when providing access to the guest and the time required to clarify the means of delivering the guest lecture," and "I find the logistics of providing guest access to the system challenging." It seems that problems with guest lecturer access to learning management systems may be preventing course instructors from using guest lecturers as a resource, which seems unfortunate, given the positive response to guest lecturers described earlier.

Conclusions

Those course instructors who regularly use guest lecturers greatly appreciate the guest lecturers' work. Further work may be necessary to understand whether barriers and limitations to guest lecturer involvement are unique problems for online learning, or also cause difficulties in the hybrid learning environment. In the interim, the authors of this paper encourage course instructors contemplating the inclusion of guest lecturers to partner with colleagues in their institutions with expertise in, and responsibility for, learning management systems. Institutional questions and technical problems with an LMS or related technology ought not to preclude students from benefitting from the pedagogical enhancements guest lecturers may add to a class.

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