

# Library Services for Distance Education at Athabasca University

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What is distance education?

My personal working definition is: any instructional situation where the learner and the instructor are not in the same room, and which is characterized by a high degree of learner control over the pacing of the material.

Marcie Kisner Thorson, in *Campus-Free College Degrees*, says that nontraditional education “provides self-direction and pure autonomy through independent disciplined study...learning is considered an on-going process and time is of lesser importance. Accomplishments and results are of the essence.... Basically, the nontraditional system of education is learner-oriented.”<sup>1</sup>

The Distance Education Clearinghouse at the University of Wisconsin provides a page of definitions at its Web site. Perhaps the most comprehensive is the one from the University of Maryland System Institute for Distance Education: “the term 'distance education' represents a variety of educational models that have in common the physical separation of the faculty member and some or all of the students.”<sup>2</sup>

The distance separating the student and the instructor need not be great. When I began my Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Saskatchewan, I was delighted to discover it was offered in distance mode, which meant I would not be required to negotiate time away from my job to attend classes. One of the attractions of

distance education is its convenience. Distance education students do not lose income by having to attend day classes full time. Many Athabasca University (AU) students live in metropolitan areas close to a traditional university, but for various reasons find that distance education allows them to accomplish educational goals more easily than attending day or evening classes.

In the context of library services, a Web-based library instruction tutorial is an example of distance learning. The student can work at his or her own pace, without the physical intervention of an instructor. Another example would be the interactive videoconferencing or teleconferencing of a CAML conference session to a chapter of IAML members in Europe.

Many distance learners are employed adults. At Athabasca University in 1996-97, 60.9% of our undergraduate students were between the ages of 25 and 44. In 1997-98, 66.7% of our undergraduate students already have some post-secondary education before they enter an AU course. From a library perspective, this is a very different user population than in a traditional university where instruction is only offered on-site through face-to-face contact with the instructor. The typical distance education student is not the new high-school graduate living away from home for the first time, but

is an adult fitting an educational opportunity into an already hectic working and personal life. Often, they are pursuing a course which is directly related to a career.

### **Athabasca University**

Athabasca's mission statement says that "Athabasca University is dedicated to the removal of barriers that traditionally restrict access to and success in university-level studies and to increasing equality of educational opportunity for all adult Canadians regardless of their geographical location and prior academic credentials. In common with all universities, Athabasca University is committed to excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, and to being of service to the general public."<sup>3</sup>

Athabasca University students are enrolled from all over the world. The Library has taken calls from Greece, Saudi Arabia, and the Virgin Islands as well as across North America. Athabasca University has an accounting program in Tokyo and a nursing program in Indonesia. The Library has faxed journal articles to Canadian ice breaker ships in the Arctic and sent books to prisoners around the country.

Athabasca University offers three- and four-year undergraduate degree programs, a number of certificate programs, and two master's degrees in business administration and distance education. The curriculum is weighted towards the social sciences and humanities. Courses in the sciences are offered, but the parameters of the distance education mode make it difficult to learn effectively in areas which require extensive

lab work or, in the case of the humanities, where studio or performance work is required.

The majority of courses are offered in home-study mode. This may be through correspondence, the Internet, or via radio and television broadcasts. Athabasca University has strong alliances with CKUA, a non-profit radio network which functions similarly to National Public Radio in the U.S. and is donor supported. We also offer many "telecourses" through Access TV, the Alberta equivalent of TV Ontario.

Some programs and courses are offered in "paced" mode, meaning there is scheduled, face-to-face contact. These are often made available through institutions that collaborate with AU and that recognize block-credit transfers between AU and their own programs. One of the challenges for the AU Library with paced-mode courses is determining which services each library will provide. While all AU students may access the services of the AU Library regardless of the mode of delivery of their courses, students in paced courses who are taught on-site at a collaborating institution will naturally gravitate to that institution's library services. Sometimes the collaborating institution functions as a pickup and delivery point, referring students to the AU Library for requests and services.

Athabasca's mission of providing educational opportunities "regardless of...prior academic credentials" indicates another characteristic of AU students. The University does not require its undergraduate students to provide proof of a high school diploma. Anyone can enrol in a course at any time. Registration is continuous and courses can be started on the first day of any month, subject to availability of tutors.

From the library perspective, this has two implications. While many of our users have post-secondary education before enrolling with AU, it may have been many years since they used an academic library. Some may never have used one and have no idea what to expect. Continuous registration means that there is no predictable down-time in the AU Library. Summers can be just as busy as the autumn. Many students are pursuing AU courses throughout the summer, which they will transfer into a degree program at their home institution in the fall.

In an average month, the AU Library assists 130 people on a walk-in basis, answers 400 telephone calls and 166 e-mails, and circulates 1,800 items in all formats, which translates into approximately 300 packages to be mailed.

There are 13.5 full-time equivalent positions to fulfill the Library's mandate. The 4 librarians include Steve Schafer, Director of Library Services; Douglas Kariel, Technical Services and Systems Librarian; Cory Stier, Library Web Gateway Developer; and myself as Reference Services Librarian, which includes responsibility for supervising circulation. There are 3 full-time support staff in technical services, 2 in interlibrary loan and 3.5 full-time support staff in circulation. One of the circulation staff also catalogues material for the course-materials collection.

### **Models for Library Services**

Library services to support distance education can follow several different models, but the common characteristic is that they are

heavily dependent on the instructional design of the specific course. Since students likely will not be accessing the library on-site, the various instructional strategies used in a course will have a high degree of influence on library use. For example, students in a course provided with a set bibliography will approach the library with different expectations than students in a course which requires them to develop their own essay topic and to choose appropriate resources. Likewise, staffing strategies can be influenced by the prevailing instructional design. Courses which only require retrieval from a selected list of known items do not require professional-level staff, at least after the initial collection phase is completed. Courses requiring more discretion on the student's part will probably require more discretion on the part of library staff as well and will also involve bibliographic instruction and professional input.

Because distance education courses are more packaged than traditional on-site lecture courses, they are often purchased and adapted from other institutions. AU has several courses in this category. In this case, the student guide and bibliographies must be carefully perused to ascertain whether comments regarding library services are applicable to the AU Library (often they refer only to the library of the institution that developed the course) and that call numbers are referenced to the AU collection.

A literature search did not reveal any published taxonomies of library services for distance learners. Therefore I have developed one on the basis of my knowledge and experience; there may be local variations on these models.

### *1. The Self-Contained Model*

The course is self-contained. The student purchases the texts and other required materials at the beginning of the course. Assignments do not require the student to explore resources beyond the compulsory materials. In such a course design, there is little or no need for library services. This is a very traditional design in distance education and still forms the basis for most courses offered through the Open University in the U.K.

### *2. The "Visiting Scholar" Collaboration Model*

Courses require exploration of resources beyond the text, but most learners are concentrated in a particular geographic area. Library services may be provided by the institution offering the course in that area, or the institution's librarians may negotiate borrowing privileges in the area on behalf of the distance learners. This is the model used by the Saybrook Institute, which provides graduate distance education in psychology, mainly to students in southern California. Borrowing privileges at nearby institutions are negotiated for Saybrook students by the librarians attached to the Institute. There is no physical library at the Saybrook Institute. A variation on this model would be the depositing of block collections in various institutions to support paced courses in the area. For example, the University of Saskatchewan had an "off campus" collection which was boxed up and shipped out every summer to various summer school locations across Saskatchewan.

### *3. The "Offload to Your Local Library" Model*

Courses require the student to explore resources, but no support or guidance is given. The student usually falls back on the local public, university or college libraries, which may not collect in the subject area of the course, or may not be able to provide materials at a sufficient academic level. Some students may discover the option of purchasing community borrower cards at their local post-secondary educational institution, but again the collection may not provide the resources necessary for a particular course. There may or may not be a formal agreement between the institution offering the course and local libraries for the provision of library services.

### *4. The "Distance Education is Extra" Model.*

In this model, distance education courses are offered as an additional mode of instruction, but distance education is not the primary focus of the institution. The primary focus remains as traditional on-site university instruction. Library services to distance education students are seen as additional (and sometimes peripheral to) services provided to on-site students. Another aspect of this model may involve extra charges levied on distance education students. The University of London has an extensive external degree program, including a Bachelor of Music, but requires its distance education students to pay for library services. In an attempt to avoid the charges, a student may choose the "Offload to Your Local Library" model, whether or not that was the intent of the home institution.

## 5. The "Central Depository" Model

The AU Library is an example of this model. AU students can access library services and resources at one central location. Library services are designed specifically for distance learners.

### Library Procedures

A registration in an AU course triggers a request for a course package to be mailed. The course package includes a student manual, perhaps a textbook, or a reader developed in-house, information on assignments, information on contacting the Library, the tutor assigned to the student, etc.

A "student kit" is sent to students who are new to AU. The course package and the student kit are sent by the Course Materials unit.

AU students may contact the Library through a toll free telephone number from anywhere in North America, or by a direct line if they are outside of North America. Telephone is still the most common method of contact. The telephone is staffed from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. MT, Monday to Friday. At other times, students can leave a voice-mail message. E-mail is another frequent method of contact. Fax and Canada Post are also options.

All telephone calls are recorded on request forms. These forms are kept for the current year plus an additional year, both for statistical purposes and as a record of contact with a particular student. Requests may be for specific materials, such as from course bibliographies, or they may be for subject

materials. A subject request usually involves AU Library staff in selecting materials and/or instructing the student on how to access various databases. Depending on the assignment, AU Library staff will search for journal articles and books in the collection and databases and then mail out the appropriate resources. Although we encourage students to use local libraries, especially if they live in a metropolitan centre, many of our students are in rural areas, especially in northern Canada, and do not have access to any library resources beyond the AU Library.

The AU Library contains two principal collections: the main collection, which is our normal circulating collection, covering a broad range of subject areas relating to AU courses; and our course-materials collection, which is comprised of videos, audio recordings, kits, etc. that are required to complete a given course.

Inter-library loan services for students are restricted to journal articles. Due to mailing times and distances, it is difficult if not impossible to guarantee to the lending library that material will be returned by the due date.

Canada Post is the normal delivery system. AU also maintains Learning Centres in Edmonton, Calgary and Fort McMurray. Students in those locations have the option of picking up and returning library materials to those learning centres. An internal courier service runs weekly to Fort McMurray and on alternate days to Calgary and Edmonton. Occasionally, commercial courier services are used, although usually this is at the student's request and expense. If deadlines are short and the information package consists mainly of journal articles, fax is another option. The AU

Library pays the cost of the faxing.

All AU Library services are provided at no extra cost to the student, including photocopying. Postage is paid both ways on transactions in Canada, using postage paid envelopes and return cards. Postage is paid for outgoing parcels to non-Canadian destinations. Students living outside of Canada are responsible for return postage.

AUCAT, our catalogue, is available on the AU Library home page at [www.athabascau.ca/main/library.htm](http://www.athabascau.ca/main/library.htm). The WebPAC of the Innovative Interfaces system was recently installed. Through WebPAC, students will soon be able to renew items on their patron record, place their own holds, place interlibrary loan requests, and request that specific items be sent to them. The Web Access Management component of the system allows patrons to access journal databases by simply entering their names and student numbers.

Successfully offering distance library service means rethinking policies for library patrons and staff. For example, the AU Library does not charge overdue fines and is generous with renewals. It costs more in staff time to process a small payment, than it does to offer the postage paid return service and make it as easy as possible for patrons to return materials. Overdue fines do not serve as a deterrent when it is not convenient for the student to visit the Library. It is more convenient to return the materials. Patrons are billed if they do not return materials and this procedure triggers a block of further registrations, transcripts, grades, etc. until the bill is paid. Since the business of Athabasca University is distance education, the entire

institutional structure supports the approach taken by the Library. An institution offering distance education as an addition to traditional classroom courses will have to decide at many levels whether it will make the exceptions necessary to offer quality service to distant students, or whether it will penalize distant students through extra fees and quotas on service and materials.

### **Music at Athabasca**

History is the area of music study that lends itself most easily to distance education mode, and that is what AU has chosen to offer. AU does not offer a degree in music, but does offer several music courses. MUSI 267 is a music appreciation course; MUSI 268 is a survey of the history of classical music. HUMN 285 and 286 are courses in the history of popular music from 1900 to 1970. HUMN 421 is a course on the folk music revival before 1945. HUMN 423 is an independent studies course in popular music. We therefore have very few scores in our collection. All of the music courses have specific recordings, which are either in compact disc or audio cassette format. The audio cassettes are principally recordings of companion radio shows which are broadcast on CKUA. A few of the music courses have companion video recordings.

MUSI 267 and 268 have recordings that accompany the texts and also a companion video series that are broadcast on Access TV or can be borrowed on tape from the AU Library. The video series is called "Music in Time," while the textbook with five companion audio cassettes is entitled *Musical Involvement: A Guide to Perceptive Listening*.<sup>4</sup>

HUMN 285 and 286 and HUMN 421 have companion radio shows on CKUA, audio cassette copies of which may be borrowed from the Library. HUMN 285 uses a selection of textbooks in addition to the radio show "The Long Weekend" which is broadcast in Alberta over CKUA. HUMN 286 is similar, but the radio show is called "Bop to Rock." Both shows are hosted by Professor David Gregory, who gives Athabasca University permission to make tapes to loan to students. The syllabi for these courses are available from the Athabasca University home page at [www.athabascau.ca](http://www.athabascau.ca).

All of the music courses include extensive bibliographies specific to each assignment. The music courses do not usually generate many reference questions since students are directed by the course coordinator to the lists.

### **Impact of the Internet**

Athabasca University has two models of electronic courses. Model A is available for all courses. The course materials such as the textbook and readings are delivered in print, but the student may contact the tutor and the library through e-mail, and submit assignments electronically. Students who do have electronic access have additional capabilities of accessing journal databases and data from the Internet, which may result in an enhanced educational experience.

Model B is available for selected courses that have been approved by the Vice President, Academic. Model B is used for graduate programs at Athabasca University and increasingly for undergraduate courses. Model B provides electronic course content, perhaps through student conferencing areas,

links to Web sites, and CD-ROMs as part of the course package.

Overall, I would say that it is the instructional design of the course that drives the decision to make the course electronically available. For instance, music courses usually involve a listening component. Delivering sound through the Internet is still a chancy business, even with the newer compressed file formats. Delivering a course electronically presupposes that there is an adequate market of students who desire it in that format, with enough students to support the development time it takes to convert a course into electronic format. Enrollment in humanities courses at Athabasca University is low compared to courses in the social sciences.

The Internet has become the platform for most library services, at least in terms of how patrons contact us. On the first day of the installation of our new Web OPAC, students were already marking and e-mailing catalogue records to place their requests. As noted, patrons will also be able to place requests on specific items, place their own holds, and initiate their own renewals. The majority of our journal indexes are now available through the Internet. Many of the databases provide the full text of the journal article in several formats. Some databases allow articles to be e-mailed, which is of use to Library staff if the student requires us to choose articles on the student's behalf. This capability has been very useful for many of our overseas students with slow Internet connections or who are restricted to a text-only e-mail account rather than a graphical browser.

Remote bibliographic instruction is an area of development for the Athabasca

University Library. We respond to individual requests for help with databases and search strategies, and we are converting our help sheets to HTML format. Growth in use of the Internet by AU students has not decreased the number of requests processed by the AU Library. In fact, requests have increased as students have more access to more citations in journal databases and as our catalogue has become more accessible through a graphical interface.

2. University of Maryland System Institute for Distance Education, "A Conceptual Planning Tool." Found in "Some Definitions of Distance Education." Retrieved Jan. 29, 1999 from the World Wide Web: [www.uwex.edu/disted/definition.html](http://www.uwex.edu/disted/definition.html).

3. Athabasca University. *Annual Report, 1997-98*. Retrieved March 2, 1999 from the World Wide Web: [www.athabascau.ca/report98/index.htm](http://www.athabascau.ca/report98/index.htm).

## Notes

1. Marcie K. Thorson, *Campus-free College Degrees: Thorson's Guide to Accredited Distance Learning Degree Programs* (7<sup>th</sup> ed; Tulsa, OK: Thorson Guides, 1996), 5-6.

4. *Music in Time* (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities, 1982). Donald J. Funes, with the assistance of Stephen E. Squires, *Musical Involvement: A Guide to Perceptive Listening* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College, 1992).

