Back Talk: Is It Time to Hitch the Academic Library's Wagon to Online Education?

Tony Ferguson
NYU's Shanghai Campus, awf2@nyu.edu

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have never been identified or shared with the public. As a growing
culture of technology users opens the pathway for materials to
be shared, and as the public demand for access develops, then I
believe more and more individuals will be interested in sharing
resources to varying degrees of effectiveness).

The final, sixth chapter is a sort of survival
manual. What should libraries be doing to
survive in this new environment? Basically,
based upon my reading of this chapter, I think
what we need to be doing can be boiled down to
three things:

1. Analyze and determine the immediate
   needs of your hybrid and full-time
   online students. Online education is
different, don’t try to get away with
   simply adapting our print world
   solutions to the problems of the online
   world. Page 90 in the report provides
   a useful beginning list of what online
   learners want from a library.

2. On the basis of this analysis, decide
   what services/resources need to be
   provided, but make sure they are con-
   venient, immediate and personalized.
   This is what students like about online
   education. They can watch lectures
   when they want and as many times
   as they want. Readings are one click
   away; we can’t expect online students
to embrace the old time-consuming
practices of the past. These students
need immediate help, not MWF from
2-3 PM. They may drive their teach-
ers crazy with emails at all hours of
the day and night, but that is part of
their world.

3. Advertise these services: Out of sight
   is out of mind — that is our problem:
   we are too often overlooked or ig-
nored.

Chapter Five summarizes what has been
learned in the earlier parts of the report and notes
that “Confidence [in the value of online educa-
tion], easy-to-use Web platforms, the ubiquity
of mobile devices, and the steep cost of higher
education are fueling consumers’ appetites for
more convenient, more cost-effective education
options.” The question for all of us is, what has
all of this to do with libraries?

Below is a transcribed letter from the Sleeper Collection provided by Asbury University, Archives & Special Collections.


Transcription of Letter

229. N. 18th St
Phila Apr 21.
My dear Brother
I have recd (received) your kind letter, I cannot answer you as fully as I could
wish owing to the affliction which this atrocious affair has brought upon us – My
wife is as well as I could hope and the children entirely so. I trust that this may
find you and yours in the enjoyment of good health –
Yours affectionately
John

Ruth Slagle explains: This letter holds significance because it was written to
George W. Sleeper from his brother, John S. Clarke, a week after Lincoln had
been shot. John Wilkes Booth was John S. Clarke’s brother-in-law. This letter shows
that John S. Clarke wanted to let George know that his family was doing
due relatively well following the circumstances, telling him that the children were fine
as well. Asia, his wife and Wilkes’ sister, was doing as well as he could expect
following the shock Asia had just experienced since she was 6-7 months pregnant.
Such a shock could have easily induced labor. To me the letter shows that family
connections are stronger especially in times of dire straits. John S. Clarke wrote
this on the same day that John Wilkes Booth’s letter to the nation was published
in the Philadelphia Inquirer. I hold Asia in high esteem because of her tenacious
courage in facing life. She wrote the memoir The Unlocked Book about her brother
John Wilkes Booth completely in secret.
I assume many of you have already taken steps to make your library a much more friendly place for students to get their work done, e.g., food, separate noisy and silent study areas, larger individual laptop/study desks for graduate students, comfy chairs and couches, Friday night TV events, and you are open 24/7 or some such schedule, etc. But it is time to simply give up on the brick and mortar library and go with the virtual library for the virtual students?

OCLC has a new report out that is well worth the time needed to read its 106 pages on developments in online education and their impact on academic libraries: “At the Tipping Point: Education, Learning and Libraries: A Report to the Membership” (oocl.org/en-US/news/releases/2014/20142dublin.html). This report doesn’t give you all the answers, but it will help everyone interested in improving their libraries get a better handle on what the problems are so that librarians can figure out what they want to do at their locations.

The report begins with the undeniable fact that access to the Internet/electronic information now dominates our everyday lives. This is certainly true for me: I am now writing this essay on a tablet connected to the Web; but earlier this morning, after staggering out of bed — up too late watching “Call the Midwife” using my Apple TV, I checked my email and Facebook page so I could see pictures of grandchild 19 born yesterday; I then checked the online news application Haystack to see what was happening in the world; and finally as I walked around the small lake in our community, I kept track of how many of those fishing were also reading email or surfing the Web while they were waiting for a bite (90% — but one man was actually doing a newspaper crossword puzzle). Interestingly, six months ago when in Shanghai I found that about 90 percent of all subway riders were likewise reading email, watching TV on their smartphones, or surfing the Web while waiting for their stops.

But the central point in the “At the Tipping Point” report is, just as the Internet now dominates how we obtain the informal facts and figures needed for everyday life, how we shop for daily needs, and how we communicate with family, friends, colleagues and clients, we have now reached the tipping point (“that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips and spreads like wildfire,” Malcolm Gladwell, gladwell.com/the-tipping-point/ ) where the Internet will also dominate the ways in which we and our children receive our formal educations.

This report is full of facts and figures taken from a wide range of other articles and surveys about developments in education and how libraries are now being used. Chapter One focuses on what it is about online education that argues that we are at the tipping point of changing from traditional to online education. Basically, three points are made: online learners are satisfied because they like the flexibility and convenience of online education; parents who are paying the bills are positive about it in hopes that it will save them money; and students who are funding their own educations are also happy to save some money.

The report does not completely ignore the downsides of online education: the lack of interaction with other students and teachers and the need for so much self-discipline. My own view is that the problem with online education is that it is not as fun as on-campus education. When I went off to college at age 18, I realized that I would have to go to some classes but it was the excitement of being on one’s own, of having scores of opportunities for finding friends, etc., that made going to college so attractive. As stated in an article produced by an online university promotion group:

“If you’re looking for the traditional college experience of living in a dormitory, hanging out on a campus, and meeting dozens or hundreds of other undergraduate or graduate students socially, you won’t get it at an online university. Online schools are totally focused on academics, and because you aren’t living in close proximity with the other students in your classes, the likelihood of social relationships developing out of your school is basically nil.” bestonlineuniversities.com/5-advantages-of-online-universities-vs-traditional-universities/

Chapter Two deals with the perceptions parents and students have about higher education that have created an opportunity for the growth of online education: Both students and their parents are doubtful that the value of a traditional on-campus education equals its cost. These costs have increased dramatically over the past ten years: a 40 percent increase, the total costs of an on-campus education over the past decade and a total student debt of 1.2 trillion dollars. This doesn’t mean that parents and students don’t want an on-campus education — it is just that most of them don’t see it as affordable. It seems clear, therefore, that the growth of more affordable online only, or hybrid online educational programs are highly likely.

Chapters Three and Four swing the focus of the report to libraries in this changing environment. Chapter Three starts with a discussion of the library “brand.” Studies have shown that when people are asked to say what comes first to their minds when they hear the word “library,” they say “books.” Libraries typically conjure up visions of buildings full of books that can be read in relative silence. Many people treasure libraries for these qualities, and for those still rooted in the print world, they will continue to value the book-centered library. But for the students and teachers who are operating via the Internet (online lectures, live chat rooms, reading materials presented via their laptops, etc.), such a library brand is of little worth. The question then becomes, as formal education changes from classroom based to Internet linked, what can libraries do to remain relevant? The answer seems to be that libraries need to change how they are viewed and they need to make sure that the services/resources they provide the student the next time she/he visits the library in person or virtually are relevant to their new Internet educational environment.

Among many other things, Chapter Four tries to describe what on-campus and online students want from their libraries. On-campus students now seem to value the library as a reliable place where the tools and resources needed to help them get their work done are available. Online students value and want access to library online content, tools for conducting research, and instruction on the use of online resources.

Perhaps one of the most important observations in this part of the report is that while the value of the library is not totally discounted, most undergraduate students don’t immediately understand the need for libraries. While this is.....