The three C’s of distance education: Competence, creativity and community

Ruth V. Small
Marilyn P. Arnone
Barbara K. Stripling
Renee F. Hill
Blythe Bennett
Syracuse University, USA

The School of Information Studies at Syracuse University has long been an innovator in library and information science education, including the establishment of the field’s first Web-based with limited residencies library and information science distance learning program in 1993. This article describes Syracuse’s school library education (both distance and campus-based) in terms of developing student competence through a competency-based curriculum, bringing research into the classroom, and the use of technology for teaching and learning; fostering creativity through inquiry and “scholarship in action”; and building a community of inquiry among school library faculty, students, and practitioners through the use of social media and a variety of inclusive techniques.

Introduction

The nationally-ranked, ALA-accredited School of Information Studies at Syracuse University (iSchool@Syracuse) has a long and rich history of leadership and innovation (Small, 2003). Founded in 1896, the school was the sixth library science school in the United States.

Syracuse has been the site of many firsts in library and information science education. In 1974, Dean Robert Taylor changed the name of the School of Library Science to the School of Information Studies, making it the first information school in the U.S. (Small & Settel, 2003). In 1980, under Dean Donald Marchand, Syracuse became the first information school to offer a master’s degree program in information resources management (later information management) and, in 1987, the first undergraduate program in information management and technology (Taylor, 1980).

In 1993, Syracuse established a distance program specifically for people who wished to become librarians, but who (1) lived in remote areas of the country where no such programs exist or (2) had full-time jobs, young families, or other responsibilities that precluded them from attending traditional part-time programs (Small & Settel, 2003). Syracuse became the first program in the nation to establish a distance program in library and information science that combined online courses with limited on-campus residencies. Soon thereafter, distance programs were established in the other master’s-level programs at the School (information management, telecommunications and network management) and recently, a distance executive doctoral program.

In this article, we describe school library education at Syracuse University in the context of developing student competence through a competency-based curriculum, bringing research into the classroom, and using technology for teaching and learning; fostering creativity through inquiry and “scholarship in action”; and building community among school library faculty, students, and practitioners through the use of social media and a variety of inclusive techniques.
Both distance and on-campus courses are taught by a highly interdisciplinary faculty. Because our School houses three different master’s programs, our school media students have the benefit of learning from some of the top scholars in information management and telecommunications, in addition to library and information science. This provides them with a more global perspective on the information profession. Brief (2-5 days), on-campus residencies allow distance students to network with campus-based students and faculty and to participate in “technology training, hands-on labs, and group activities while facilitating bonding of cohort groups” (Small & Settel, 2003, p. 318).

Research conducted by Small (1999) explored differences in the educational experience of part-time campus-based and distance students in the Syracuse program. Results revealed that campus-based students find it harder than distance students to (1) balance their academics with their work/family responsibilities and 2) bond with peers and faculty. The study also found that teaching and advising at a distance requires substantially more time commitment by faculty and that ongoing training and technical support for both faculty and students are critical for effective distance learning programs.

These issues have been addressed and continue to be addressed as the distance learning programs at the School evolve. Most courses are offered in distance or blended format so that all students can take advantage of their convenience. Technical support and ongoing training for students and faculty are provided but demand ongoing experimentation and assessment.

A follow-up study found that some distance students appeared to miss elements of the traditional learning experience, while some campus-based students were resistant to taking online courses (Small & Paling, 2002). While attempts to address these issues have been made by, for example, using various Web conferencing software to allow distance students to participate interactively in a variety of campus-based activities (e.g., guest speakers, faculty presentations, town meetings), continuing to offer some blended courses, and offering both campus-based and online sections of some courses, even more effective solutions continue to be explored.

The School Media Program

The school media program is a specialization within the Library and Information Science (LIS) master’s program. The school media program prepares students to be leaders in their schools, districts, and profession, focusing on knowledge and skills for effectively serving preK-12 children in the areas of inquiry learning, literacy, and technology fluency.

Students.

School media students represent a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Most are female, represent limited diversity, and live within New York State, with between 5-10% each year coming from other states and foreign countries. They typically number between 25% to a third of the total LIS program enrollment. Approximately 20% are full-time, campus-based students while 80% are part-time local or distance students. Approximately 30% of students are enrolled in our campus-based program and 70% are distance students.

Course Formats.

The 37-credit hour school media program consists of five broader LIS, seven school library-focused courses (including practica), one 1-credit course for all three masters’ level students, and fieldwork. Courses are delivered through face-to-face, online, and blended formats, using a variety of course delivery methods that help ensure that all students will have similar opportunities and experiences. Courses that are delivered solely online and courses that blend online learning with brief, face-to-face residencies utilize Blackboard Learn™, a learning management system that facilitates the building of online learner communities, often supplemented with videos and other e-learning technologies.
Competence

For learners to feel self-determined and be intrinsically motivated to learn, the learning environment must provide: (1) learning autonomy is supported through choice and independent learning opportunities, (2) relatedness opportunities to interact with peers, instructors, and others are provided, and (3) students’ perceived competence increases their learning confidence (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985). These three factors are addressed through a competency-based curriculum that brings research into the classroom, introduces a range of technologies that facilitate teaching and learning, and enhances coursework with authentic library-based experiences.

Competency-based Curriculum

In the 1970’s, the school media program was among the first in the U.S. to base its curriculum on a set of identified competencies for school library professionals. A self-assessing competency checklist was developed to align with AASL professional standards and is regularly updated as those standards change and new standards are introduced. The current competency checklist (see attached) aligns with the updated versions of the ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians [and approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)], the New York State Teaching Standards, the ALA Core Competencies of Librarianship, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, ISTE Indicators for Teachers, and ISTE Indicators for Administrators. That instrument includes five general areas of competence, 57 specific competencies, and five dispositions.

The checklist helps students and their advisors document their incoming knowledge at the beginning of the program and assess their learning at three key milestones, allowing them to chart their progress through the program, identify gaps that need to be filled and select appropriate projects and activities during fieldwork or practicum experiences. An e-portfolio, the final, assessed program requirement, uses the competency categories for consistency and to provide culminating evidence of competence.

During the residency portion of some online courses, such as Youth Services and Resources in Libraries and Information Centers and Motivating 21st Century Learning, students are immersed in scenarios and simulations for practice-based learning; for example, (1) students demonstrate (and are assessed by a panel of faculty and library practitioners) performance aspects of teaching as their peers role play as K-12 students and (2) simulate readers’ advisory scenarios in which they encounter a variety of typical and realistic challenges.

Bringing Research into the “Classroom”

Based on the premise that pre-service librarians need to be aware of research findings that impact their chosen profession and what they will be learning and doing, the program requires every school media course to incorporate the most current, important and relevant research. This includes research conducted by the faculty with whom they are learning (e.g., Barbara Stripling’s influential work on inquiry, standards and the Common Core, Renee Hill’s work on diversity and cultural competence, Ruth Small’s research on motivation and digital literacy and her New York State impact studies, and Marilyn Arnone’s work on curiosity and reading motivation), as well as seminal research by colleagues at other universities and professionals in the field, and data on LM_NET.

In addition to reading about existing research, it is important for pre-service library students to have an understanding of and direct experience in research methods and evidence-based practice. Therefore, another way in which students are exposed to research working with faculty on their research projects, either as research assistants, in which they have experience in all aspects of the research process, or as participants in a research study. Some of these experiences will be described in more detail in the section on Creativity: Scholarship in Action through Funded Projects.
Technology for Learning and Communicating

Since its inception, the iSchool @ Syracuse’s distance learning programs have operated on a foundation of Internet-based technology, beginning with email and transitioning to Web-based learning management systems. Today, both faculty and students utilize a wide range of technologies (both hardware and software) and media for teaching and learning, creation, communication, and collaboration. There are technologies that school librarians use to do non-instructional tasks, such as creating a library Web site to communicate what is happening in the library to teachers, administrators and parents, interlibrary loan technologies for sharing and accessing resources, and databases to search for professional resources and for collection development planning and evaluation. An example of the collaborative use of technology in a real-life application is found in the Information Technologies in Educational Organizations course in which students collaborate with in-service school librarians from their local school districts to design and implement technology solutions to meet an identified educational need.

There are also a number of technologies school library students must learn to use to deliver instruction, such as tools like SmartBoards to create and deliver interactive lessons and presentation software (e.g., Prezi) to organize and present information, and technologies students use to teach their students how to use for finding resources, such as online catalogs and databases. Wherever possible, opportunities for distance students to learn technologies difficult to learn online (e.g., SmartBoards) are included in residencies.

Library-based Learning Experiences

Students have multiple opportunities to enhance their classroom-based theoretical knowledge with authentic learning experiences in real school library settings through assignments that require on-site work. Fieldwork and practicum experiences allow students to practice their knowledge and skills independently while working alongside experienced school library professionals.

Fieldwork.
Students complete 100 hours of project-focused, required, non-credit fieldwork (50 hours elementary school library, 50 hours in secondary school library) with a school library professional. The librarian guides, and with the faculty supervisor, assesses the student’s selection of and work on a relevant project that improves the student’s mastery of one or more competencies; the deliverable responds to a specific library needs.

Practicum.
Following completion of fieldwork and 25 hours of completed coursework, students are eligible to enroll in a practicum. While similar to fieldwork, the practicum requires 120 hours in an elementary and 120 hours in a secondary school library, focuses on the full library experience, from reference to management, from instruction to collection development and uses an apprenticeship model in which the on-site practitioner guides the student, serves as a role model, and assesses/provides feedback on her progress and activities. The practicum provides opportunities for students to:

• Apply knowledge gained from previous coursework, research, and independent study in an authentic school library setting.
• Extend understanding of the administrative, operational, and various other tasks involved in managing a library media center.
• Identify their areas of strength and areas for continuing improvement.
• Develop professional attitudes and effective interpersonal relationships and networking with exemplary experienced professionals.

Students are required to teach lessons, use technology, develop special projects, keep a daily journal, and participate in all aspects of library work. They also must participate in a one-semester online seminar that provides practicum students with an interactive forum for information sharing (relatedness) about their practicum experiences throughout the semester. Practicum students must design a project or series of projects to be completed by the end of the semester. Examples of practicum projects include:

• Collaborating with classroom teachers to plan and deliver a unit of instruction.
• Organizing and facilitating book clubs.
- Creating and facilitating a podcast book review program.
- Teaching staff to use new technologies.

These culminating experiences activities provide the opportunity for students to apply knowledge and skills learned in their program, as evidenced by the following excerpt from a practicum student’s journal entry: “I have been teaching every day! I love it and am so glad to have had the opportunity to practice so much. I have gained more confidence and feel really good about the job I have been doing with developing and presenting the lessons.”

**Creativity**

Navigating the twists and turns of building effective distance learning environments requires a fair amount of creativity and experimentation by both faculty and students. In this section, we describe ways to foster students’ positive dispositions, some creative methods for teaching inquiry, and opportunities for faculty and students to work together to demonstrate scholarship in action.

**Fostering Positive Dispositions**

Just as today’s students in grades K-12 must learn to be creative and innovative thinkers, so must school librarians. School librarianship demands that library experiences be designed to engage students in active and productive learning within the less structured and sometimes distracting environment of the library. The rapidly changing world of information, diversity of student needs, and constant influx of new technology tools and applications dictate that librarians have the dispositions necessary to embrace diversity, commit to the principle that all children can learn, pursue their own personal and professional growth, develop productive relationships, and meet high standards of ethical behavior.

Although dispositions are ways of thinking and acting that cannot be taught directly, and the modeling of the behaviors associated with productive dispositions is more difficult in the distance-education realm, library educators can foster the development of dispositions by providing experiences, instruction, and assignments that require library students to demonstrate them in their writing and practice. The management course, for example, guides students through a process of starting with their own beliefs to build goals and actions for a specific school population.

The dispositions listed below are required by NCATE for all teachers seeking certification and thus are appropriate for all school librarians. Under each disposition, examples of experiences and assignments that have been used in at Syracuse are provided.

**Valuing Diversity and Addressing Social Injustices Fairly and Equitably.**

The disposition of valuing diversity is fostered if the library students themselves represent different ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, languages, and rural/suburban/urban library situations. Distance education programs must actively recruit for diversity and must target diversity in scholarship programs. Library students gain an understanding of the importance of diversity and social justice when they develop policies for scheduling, use of resources, acceptable use, and collection development. Posing scenarios and simulations for practice-based learning also offers students the opportunity to develop this disposition and feel comfortable in exercising it.

**Enacting the Belief that All Children Can Learn.**

Central to effective school librarianship is an understanding of teaching and learning and a focus on the learner in all programmatic decision-making. Strategies for enabling all students to achieve academic and personal success are embedded into every course. Especially helpful are the focus on differentiated instruction, integration of technology, user-based services, motivation, inquiry, needs assessment of the students and school, and assessment of student learning (diagnostic, formative and summative). Students translate these areas of focus into authentic plans for differentiating instruction by, for example, developing a Classroom Management Plan. Students hone their understanding of teaching K-12 students with disabilities throughout their program. As an enhancement to classroom-based simulations, these pre-service professionals participate in fieldwork and practicum experiences that allow them to interact with diverse K-12 students and
meet their information needs through active and meaningful design and implement of library programs and services.

Engaging in Personal and Professional Behaviors that Promote Self-Growth.
To facilitate development of reflective practice and continuing professional growth, courses incorporate evidence-based practice, real-world application through field study and practicum experiences, and assignments that call for self-assessment of their own vision, goals, and practice. These pre-professionals also prepare demonstration lessons and provide feedback to each other to improve design and delivery. Students use a reflective practice instrument to set personal goals and develop a personal growth plan for their first year as a practicing school librarian.

Developing Interpersonal Behavior that Promotes and Fosters Collaboration.
Interpersonal behavior that promotes collaboration may be the most difficult disposition to incorporate into a distance program, because most students have limited face-to-face contact with each other during the program. To help develop this disposition, pre-service librarians are provided a number of instruments for assessing their own approach, including rubrics to evaluate a school library program, a checklist to assess the library climate and its conduciveness to learning, a leadership practices inventory, a model for collaborative planning and teaching, and multiple templates and tools for communication and advocacy with administrators, teachers, parents, students, other librarians and community. In every case, students are asked to apply their self-reflection to the development of goals, instruction, or program planning and to share their thoughts and aspirations through online discussions.

Demonstrating Conduct and Ethical Behavior Suitable to the Profession.
Probably the most effective strategy for helping distance students develop professional behavior is to set an expectation for every assignment and online interaction. Assignments are designed to bridge to the professional world, not to be simply class assignments. Students are expected to demonstrate a professional level of language and thinking, as well as attention to principles of the profession. Discussions and interactions in which students cite examples from their own experiences in schools are conducted without naming particular librarians or students, so that students learn the importance of maintaining the privacy of others.

Creative Methods for Teaching Inquiry.
Inquiry provides a stable organizing influence on our distance education program because we use the same inquiry model for all assignments and conversations about information skills, integration of technology, the interaction of motivation and inquiry, instructional design, alignment with the Common Core, and collaboration between the librarian and classroom teachers – the Stripling Inquiry Model (Stripling, 2009). Students are encouraged to pursue inquiry investigations for themselves -- to ask questions, investigate and construct their own understandings as they complete assignments that ask them to develop policies, personal philosophies, projects using social tools and technology, and instructional units and lessons.

The major emphasis of the distance education program is to enable each student to articulate his or her philosophy of school librarianship and create a portfolio of real-world applications that were developed individually or in a group. Through various class assignments, students are expected to follow their own inquiry process to design a library program that engages all learners and engenders strong support from administrators and teachers. Every student develops a Personal Growth Plan that includes the following elements: Instructional Program/Collaboration; Literacy and Independent Reading; Library Environment; Collection Development/Integration of Resources and Technology; and Administration/Leadership/Advocacy.

Teaching strategies used by faculty in the online courses are constructivist-based, with active learning experiences, scaffolding, direct teaching, and interaction built in to every course. In one course, for example, the class is writing an electronic textbook, with each student responsible for working in a small team to write two chapters. The instructors create short videos to provide context for learning modules and to provoke conversation around intriguing questions. Discussion board prompts ask students to investigate and generate their individual responses to in-depth extensions of the ideas presented in the modules. During residencies and in the online
environment, students develop and present projects to their classmates. The feedback they receive from their peers supports their revisions and continued reflection and growth.

**Scholarship in Action**

When she arrived in 2004, Syracuse University’s Chancellor Nancy Cantor instituted a bold vision of “Scholarship in Action,” a commitment to long-term engagements of University faculty and staff with the public, private and non-profit sectors of both the local and global community in order to collaboratively work toward solving the range of problems and challenges facing those communities. Through coursework, virtual fieldwork experiences, and involvement in a range of funded projects, school media students, both campus and distance, have had a variety of opportunities to participate in activities that demonstrate the Scholarship in Action mission.

**Scholarship in Action Through Courses.**

The emphasis on Scholarship in Action provides another opportunity for students to engage with both the central New York community and, in the case of distance students, their local communities. For example, in one course some students worked collectively to develop Web sites, videos, library collections, and digital collateral materials that provided innovative solutions to information challenges facing under-funded neighborhood organizations. One of the students and her teammate used her library and information skills to develop informational Web site and advocacy videos for a grassroots non-profit organization that helps refugees learn English and develop literacy skills for participating in the local workforce. These types of real-world learning experiences not only allow students to practice their skills but also teach them the importance of serving their communities, as evidenced by the following student comment:

> The community service media project pushed me to achieve more than I would have for just another classroom project. As students, we frequently create projects and write papers that are mainly just practice. We may put them to work for us on an individual basis, but they fundamentally lack a deeper reason to commit and test ourselves. Doing a live project for community members who were not only generous enough to donate their time but who truly needed the work we produced inspired me to really pour myself into the work and give them everything I was capable of. I think it also resulted in a sense of accomplishment and confidence among the students that never would have happened with an average class project.

**Scholarship in Action Through Virtual Fieldwork Experiences.**

In spring 2011, Syracuse’s school media program received State approval to enter into a collaborative relationship with Trailblazers Academy, a small public, high-needs charter middle school for students who “have not been successful in traditional school environments and need a different learning environment to reach their full potential” (Trailblazers Web site), located in Stamford, Connecticut. More than 90% of the students at Trailblazers qualify for free or reduced lunch. Since the school has no librarian, we agreed to offer our distance students the opportunity to complete one of their fieldwork experiences, beginning fall 2011, through a virtual placement at Trailblazers. During the first year of this experiment, students have assisted 8th graders with their science projects using Museum Box, provided instruction on using reliable Internet resources, created an annotated bibliography, and found text and electronic resources to supplement the 6-8 grade curriculum. These projects were completed electronically, using Skype, email and other communications technologies.

These experiences not only benefit students with the flexibility of completing a distance-based fieldwork experience but also foster dispositions by allowing them to deliver valuable services to at-risk students and to a school with limited resources. Another, more subtle potential outcome is that our students are demonstrating to Trailblazers faculty and administrators the importance of having the services of a well-trained librarian to motivate them to seek funding for a full-time, certified school librarian. There is evidence that this has already had an impact.

**Scholarship in Action Through Funded Projects.**

Founded in 2003, the Center for Digital Literacy (CDL) is a research and development center at the iSchool, in partnership with Syracuse’s School of Education and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. More than 70 graduate students from throughout Syracuse University,
including nearly 40 school media students, have been funded or have volunteered their time to work on a variety of research, development, and training projects at CDL. For example, several school media students, both distance and campus-based, had hands-on research experience through their participation as observers and data gatherers in the IMLS-funded New York State impact study (e.g., Small, Snyder & Parker, 2009). In a current IMLS-funded project, Project ENABLE, intended to train librarians in New York State to collaborate with both general educators and special educators to provide effective services and programs to students with disabilities in their schools, a group of both distance and campus-based students is pilot testing comprehensive online training that is under development for that project.

Community

Building a community of learners requires a range of specific characteristics, such as engagement, choice, and opportunities, in which the learning environment allows both learning and learners to thrive (Tompkins, 2010). In this section we describe ways in which we establish and maintain a sense of community online and encourage community participation by both faculty and students.

Fostering a Sense of Community

The Syracuse program exemplifies a community of inquiry, as envisioned by Garrison and associates, in which “(o)pen and purposeful communication occurs through recognition, encouragement of reflective participation, and interaction” (Akyol, Garrison & Ozden, 2009). In addition to ensuring a virtual social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) in distance courses, it is also essential to set up appropriate expectations for participation and interaction by both instructors and the students. This can be accomplished by clearly articulating, in syllabi and course announcements, a set of concrete specifications for online participation. For example, some faculty participate in all class discussions in order to keep the flow going and to stimulate ideas along the way, while others choose to wait until the end of the discussion so as not to stifle ideas or inhibit critical analysis (teacher presence). Students are given parameters for discussion posts (cognitive presence), so as not to dominate conversations or go off task and to avoid impinging on everyone’s time unnecessarily, while providing opportunities for students who have more to say or who want to go beyond the confines of the particular discussion topic. One method for doing this is by having designated discussion boards that allow additional or off-topic material to be posted with the option to access or not by others. This provides autonomy by allowing students to enrich discussions with additional information and share it with others when motivated to do so but also gives the other students a choice as to whether to allocate time to read it. This type of social presence has been found to be an important antecedent to collaboration and critical discourse (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

Beyond fostering a sense of community during courses, the faculty also works hard to ensure that distance students are included in the life of the School wherever possible, using email and a variety of social media. When a student has shares an idea to improve the program with the director, that student is invited to the program faculty meeting, either in person or via Skype, to present the idea and participate in the subsequent discussion. Before every meeting, the program graduate assistant invites all students (via email) to submit questions/concerns that are subsequently brought anonymously to the meeting for discussion and resolution. When the program holds its annual Governing Council meeting (an external group of advisors), there is a student present to represent the student perspective and share meeting outcomes with peers. Finally, major events such as distinguished lectures and presentations by candidates for faculty and administrative positions within the School are accessible via interactive Webcasts and Webinars.

The Role of Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User-Generated Content” (p. 61). Social media have become an essential aspect of the school library education curriculum; they are part of the fabric of the business and academic
worlds where high school graduates will be expected to utilize social media productively. Social media align with Garrison’s concept of social presence and Deci & Ryan’s (1985) idea of relatedness, provide opportunities for pre-service librarians to satisfy what McClelland (e.g., 1987) describes as their “need for affiliation” within their academic social group, and exemplify applications for teaching, advocacy, and building community in their future schools.

**Teaching.**
Students in a number of courses within the school media program are able to explore the pedagogical applications of social media for K-12 students and many have shared their success stories from their teaching practica and, later, their school library positions. For example, one former student had wonderful success with a Twitter Book Club in a high school in which students were already using the social space of Twitter for communication purposes. Using Twitter as a forum for discussing a shared reading provided students with a social outlet for expressing their opinions and ideas and it felt “natural” to them. Graduate students engaged in research about the Twitter Book Club had to “catch up” with what the high students already knew about the conventions of using Twitter. Thus, our technology courses must be constantly tweaked to include new media applications to learning. Research argues that students will grow their literacy skills as much or more through avenues like social media that promote their own autonomy and free choice in reading as through direct reading instruction (Krashen, 2004).

Our graduate students use an array of social and new media tools to express their own learning. Faculty stress the importance of embracing social media and new technologies with an eye for purpose (organizing, collaborating, generating content) as opposed to focusing on a specific tool that may be leap-frogged by another tool in a matter of months. We hope that when they graduate, they will have developed the confidence to explore whatever social media tool will be most appropriate for the desired learning outcomes.

**Advocacy/Promotion.**
Future librarians will harness the power of social media to draw attention to library promotions, school events, and to stay connected to their colleagues in the school media field. In one course, Literacy through School Libraries, students create a family literacy event and many students include a strong social media component to promote the event. In another course, Youth Services and Resources in Libraries, students produce a library promotion video that they upload to YouTube or similar site and supplement their promotion using Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks.

**Building Community.**
Students learn ways in which to use social media to build community and maintain presence. In one course, students design a blueprint for their dream library web site. One student's design included social media as both a way to build community and as a way to deliver updated content seamlessly on her dream web site with little ongoing maintenance. She commented:

> Building feeds with Tweets from the librarian, school club leaders, team captains, student government, the administration, Parent Teacher Association and school newspaper would potentially engage a diverse group of school community members. It would also help foster a sense of community.

**Voices Heard**

The sense of community created through distance education can be strengthened by listening to the voices of students and practitioners. Through virtual and face-to-face conversations (town halls, Google Hangouts, Skype sessions, and online meetings), both opportunities and challenges for creating community among our students and between our students and the real world of librarianship have been uncovered.
**Opportunity: Empowering Individuals and Generating Interactivity**

Distance education enables individual students to express their own ideas and pursue their individual interests more than is generally possible in a classroom when many students do not speak up or offer their own point of view. Discussion boards and other interactive tools provide an environment where every student is individually responsible for responding to prompts, questions, and the postings of peers.

**Challenge: Building Community from Individual Interactivity**

Most of the interactivity in our online program is asynchronous and individual-to-individual, making it difficult to foster community, that sense of shared vision that is larger than simply a composite of individual perspectives. In addition, because online communications can easily be misinterpreted with no facial expressions to accompany them, students tend to offer support but little provocation to each other in their conversations. Certainly, Vygotsky (e.g., 1978) would say that the level of learning is dampened without that provocation and that the advantages of social interactivity for learning are being lost.

Library educators must build on the strengths of empowering individual voices and peer interactions and overcome the inherent challenges in order to create a strong community of inquiry. Successful strategies for creating community from empowered individual voices, include embedding the use of synchronous tools into coursework (e.g., Blackboard Collaborate, Adobe Connect, GoToMeeting, Skype), providing opportunities for “town-hall” discussions, designing assignments that require small-group collaboration, using social tools like blogging and Twitter to generate conversations, and integrating residencies into some of the required courses.

**Opportunity: Delivering a Dynamic Curriculum that Blends Theory and Practice**

Delivering school library education through online coursework provides a dynamic venue for connecting the students to the field. Not only do students have access to the latest research published in journals and on the Web, but they also can connect to experts in the field who use Web 2.0 tools for sharing their practice. Educators can bring experts to the students through recorded interviews and teleconferences. Because of the online environment, library educators can maintain flexibility in their course curricula and quickly integrate new ideas, research, and trends. Students have access to powerful social tools to enhance their own learning and boost the integration of technology into their practice. Students can use those tools to build a Personal Learning Network early in their graduate education and become a part of the larger community of librarianship before they graduate.

**Challenge: Countering the Pressure to Lose the Core of Librarianship**

Students are enticed by the exciting community of school librarianship that they see in the online environment. They do not see, and therefore may have little patience for learning, the less sexy but essential core elements that underlie good practice (e.g., organization of information, intellectual freedom). Many would like to use the latest technology and social tools simply because they are available, with little consideration for the reason to use technology – student learning. The main challenge for library educators is to blend the fundamental values and principles into the educational program so that students learn to base their practice on these ideas. A second challenge is to provide opportunities for students to gain experience in integrating use of the tools and technology with the core principles of librarianship and to share their growing expertise with their fellow students and the broader community of school librarians.

**Final Thoughts**

While faculty and staff have worked hard to ensure that distance students have as close to the same learning experience as campus-based students and that campus-based students have opportunities for a variety of face-to-face learning experiences, these goals continue to be
challenging and “in-progress.” Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that the Syracuse program is producing well-prepared and highly competent school library professionals. For example, on the mandatory New York State examinations for teaching professionals, in 2010-2011 Syracuse students had an overall passing rate of 91%, compared to the State average of 68%. In addition, student average passing scores were higher on all subscales than the State average. In 2012, the Syracuse average passing rate was 93% (State rates not yet unavailable). In terms of jobs, 89% (147) of Syracuse graduates from 2006-2011 were employed as school librarians, 4% (7) worked in academic and public libraries, and 7% (11) took positions in other settings. Anecdotally, our students are often selected over competitors in a highly competitive national job market.

We continue exploring, using a variety of instructional strategies, new media and technologies, ways to facilitate the teaching/learning process and maintaining a community of inquiry that supports students’ self-determination and intrinsic motivation for learning. The vision of delivering the most effective distance learning environments that blend seamlessly with our campus-based program and the promise of continually-emerging new methods for accomplishing this, including exciting new technologies being developed and tested by some of our colleagues here at the iSchool®Syracuse, keep us motivated to explore and experiment.

References


Authors Note

Ruth V. Small is Laura J. and L. Douglas Meredith Professor of Information Studies and Director of the School Media Program. She is Founding Director of the Center for Digital Literacy, an interdisciplinary research and development center. Her research focuses on the motivational aspects of information use for which she has received two national awards and many grants. She
has also received three teaching awards, including Syracuse University’s highest award, the Meredith Professorship.

**Marilyn P. Arnone** holds a dual appointment as Research Associate Professor and Associate Professor of Practice of Information Studies. She is co-director of the Center for Digital Literacy and has received several federal grants for a range of research and development projects. Her research focuses on the relationships among curiosity, motivation, information literacy and free voluntary reading.

**Barbara K. Stripling** is Assistant Professor of Practice of Information Studies. She was formerly the Director of New York City’s Office of School Library Services from 2005-2012. She is a former President of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and is currently president-elect of the American Library Association. She is the creator of the Stripling Model of Inquiry.

**Renee F. Hill** is Assistant Professor of Information Studies. Her research examines issues of diversity and cultural competence within library and information studies, specifically focusing on information access issues for underrepresented populations. She supervises school media students’ practicum experiences.

**Blythe Bennett** is Program Manager of the Library and Information Science and School Media Program, serving as academic advisor and coordinating services for campus and distance learners in both the masters and C.A.S. programs. She supervises students’ fieldwork experiences and assists in the implementation of program assessments and improvement. She serves as a moderator for LM_NET.