Realizing Dreams & Improving Library Service: Online LTA Courses at Ivy Tech Community College

by Susan Mannan

I *think I better go now. The chat has been great, but the storm is getting worse. It's thundering and lightening now, and I don't think the church parking lot is the safest place to be even though it's the best place for me to get a fast connection to the net. (I'm using the church's wireless connection for our chat.)*

That's what one dedicated LTA (Library Technical Assistant) distance student did to participate in her online course chat! While most Ivy Tech Community College LTA students' stories aren't quite so dramatic, they do paint a picture of dedicated students, juggling work, family, and classes, in order to better themselves and improve service in their libraries. It is the fully online nature of Ivy Tech's LTA program that makes this possible. Students may have timing issues or transportation problems, but they can manage an education that is flexible and asynchronous. The totally online nature of the LTA program also makes it accessible to students throughout the state and beyond—pretty much anywhere, anytime.

PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAM

The LTA Associate of Science degree program began at Ivy Tech a few years ago at the request of Indiana librarians who were looking for ways to recruit more people into library work and to raise the level of skill and professionalism in current library workers. The College responded by creating a two-year, 61-credit course of study. While the 25 credits of general education requirements can be taken online or at one of the 23 Ivy Tech campuses throughout the state, the core library courses are available only online.

STUDENT PROFILE

The program currently has over 100 students from around the state taking courses, mostly on a part-time basis. The promotion focus for the program has attracted mostly students currently working in libraries, although some students are new to the field. One such student, who had never worked outside the home before, has just completed the A.S. LTA degree and is planning to transfer to Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) as a junior for a Bachelor in General Studies before applying to a graduate program in the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) there. Another graduate of the program has been working in libraries since high school, starting as a page and moving to more responsible positions over time. She is also now moving on to the Indiana University regional campus in South Bend to complete her bachelor's degree and apply to SLIS.

The LTA students are mostly female, and their ages range from just out of high school to grandmothers who readily admit: "I'm an OLDER student, bear with me!" Some students already have advanced degrees in other areas and are looking for a change of careers. Some have never been to college before. They may start with some trepidation and nervousness; but by the time they have completed a course or two and made some online friends, they are feeling pretty successful—that is, if they have time to devote to the course work. They all have busy lives that balance work, families and school. They sometimes struggle to keep up, but their dedication reaps success in the courses.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Potential students often ask—"So how does this work? Do I have to be online at specific times? Can I start and move through the course at times of my own choosing?" The answer is—yes and no. Students are not required to be "online" at any specific time unless the professor holds a synchronous live chat, which might happen one to three times a semester. On the other hand, the students can't start just any time they choose. The courses follow a semester schedule, and students move through the course work together, week by week, developing and learning as a cohesive group. There are due dates for assignments and tests just as there are in a face-to-face classroom. Within these parameters, students have flexibility as to when they log on to the course management system to print out or read online the assignments and lectures, contribute to discussion boards, take tests and submit homework.

"How do I learn the material?" is another frequent

question. A variety of methods are used in the 10 professional courses of the core curriculum. The usual reading of texts may be supplemented with online PowerPoint presentations, audio or text-based lectures, projects (both group and individual), online class discussions in discussion boards, library visits, interviews and observations. The student then has an opportunity to try out the learned skills in a final semester practicum in a local library. During this practicum semester, students will also reflect on all they have learned as they create a portfolio to demonstrate that learning.

Ivy Tech uses an online course management system to run its online classes. This is where students find their course work and communicate with their professor and fellow students in discussion boards, chats, and instant messaging. An example can be seen on page 12 (Figure 1) of the initial announcement welcoming students to the class. The professor will post announcements to this page as needed throughout the course. Along the left are listed the options for moving to the other sections of the course.

An example of a weekly assignment screen from which students open documents and take quizzes is given on page 13 (Figure 2).

Figure 3 on page 13 illustrates a weekly quiz from LIBR102, the reference course.

See an example on page 13 (Figure 4) of a screen showing the various options for communicating. They include the Announcements (from the professor), Collaboration (chat rooms set up by the professor for the full class or small groups), Discussion Board (for weekly postings to questions posed by the professor), Messages (an internal email system), a Roster (which can lead to student home pages if they choose to set one up), E-mail (sent to an external e-mail address) and Pronto (an external instant messaging system).

Pronto is a recent addition to the options which allows students to touch base with a professor whenever they both happen to be online. It makes the course seem more immediate and personal. Questions come in as the student is working on an assignment—"Where can I find this book to review?" "I don't understand the instructions on this paper, and I'm trying to write it up now." Instant conversations can make the online experience seem much more like the classroom. Indeed, it can be even better in that these conversations don't always have to wait until class time or until the professor answers email.

See an example on page 13 (Figure 5) of what a student sees in "My Gradebook." This is the page a student goes to when checking for grades posted by the professor on the various assignments. It allows students to keep a running account of how they are doing in the course.

This full-bodied course management system gives students a varied experience that affords them depth of content, practical experience, communication with a subject expert and with their peers, and a chance to have their learning assessed. Most students do not find it difficult to use the online course interface, e-mail attachments, chat and other course functions; but for those who are technologically challenged, a tutorial on online learning is available. It is put into the course listings of every online student.

THE CURRICULUM

The focus of the curriculum is on addressing the knowledge, skills and abilities needed by library support staff and on educating them about their role on the "library team." All courses are developed and taught by MLS librarians with experience in the subject. They are reviewed by a team of librarians and instructional technology experts and piloted before they are offered. While the curriculum is fairly well set as initially structured, there are occasional reviews to allow for improvements and updating. And of course, faculty members have the ability to enhance the course when they see that students need something additional to meet their learning goals.

The following six "professional core" courses are required of all students:

Introduction to Libraries and Library Services (LIBR 101)
Introduction to Reference Sources and Services (LIBR 102)*
Introduction to Library Public Services (LIBR 103)
Introduction to Technical Services (LIBR 104)
Cataloging and Classification (LIBR 201)*
Electronic Resources and Online Searching (LIBR 202)
Library Practicum/Internship (LIBR 206)

In addition, each student must choose four courses from one of two specialty options:

Children's Services Option:

LIBR 203 The LTA &Library Services for Children*
LIBR 204 The LTA & Library Media Center Operations & Services
LIBR 205 Library/Media Materials & Equipment for LTA's

ECED 103 Curriculum in Early Childhood Classroom
ECED 120 Child Growth & Development
ECED 130 Developmentally Appropriate Guidance in
  Cultural Context
ECED 233 Emerging Literacy
ECED 223 School Age Programming
ENGL 240 Children's Literature

Technology Option:

CINS 102 Information Systems Fundamentals
CINS 252 Web Site Development
OFAD 103 Intro to Computers with Word Processing
OFAD 110 Presentation Graphics
OFAD 114 Desktop Publishing
OFAD 207 Integrated Applications
OFAD 214 Multimedia Design
OFAD 218 Spreadsheets

Courses under development for future offerings include:

Public Library Administration (coming in 2010)*
Selection/Evaluation of Media (coming in 2010)*
Library Technology
* *courses are approved by the Indiana State Library for use by those seeking initial public librarian certification at levels 4, 5 and 6*

TRANSFERABILITY, CERTIFICATION & LEU'S
(Forty-five of them--oh my! -- as Dorothy would say)

The AS degree transfers fully to IUPUI under an official agreement. Success has also been met transferring the credits to at least one other regional Indiana University campus. Beyond this career-bridging feature, the starred LIBR courses in the list above are approved for use in the state's initial public librarian certification program, and they all yield 45 Library Education Units (LEU) per course toward the state's new continuing education requirement. More and more library staff are coming into the courses through this certification route.

In addition, the College is working to become an approved provider in the now-developing national voluntary Library Support Staff Certification Program (LSSCP at http://www.ala-apa.org/lsscp/lsscpcompetencies.html). This program is sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA) and the Western Council of State Libraries and is partially funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. This will soon provide another avenue and incentive for Indiana library support staff to learn and demonstrate their skills.

STUDENT COMMENTS

How do students feel about their learning in these courses? Here are some comments that offer a window into their online learning experience in the Ivy Tech LTA Program. Each entry represents a different student. (Names have been changed.)

New Students:

"I am already employed in a library and was very anxious about what was required of taking an online library course. After the completion of this course, I feel that I am a better, more trained and educated employee of the library."

"I have just gotten started in this degree and feel like I know less than I thought I did before I started. I have learned a lot though and know I need a lot more before I would consider working in a library."

Busy Students:

"Hi Sue, you must be whittled down to a stick with all you are doing. Three classes and a full time job, and family! Like you, not working in a library, I did not realize what went on behind the scenes of a library. I guess I thought there was a book fairy or something."

"This is my fifth LTA class - all done online. I enjoy the freedom of this option as I am a stay-at-home with two children (ages four and six). This makes for some long nights, but better than having the kids in someone else's care… AND - it is the green thing to do as there are substantially fewer trips in the car!"

"I'm getting ready to write-up my observation report and realized I had never cleared the library with you. Since I work two jobs, it's hard to find a time when I'm not working and they're open."

"Just in writing this I think I am ready for a vacation. What have I gotten myself into!?"

Student Dedication:

"I am very sorry for just now getting to you, but I am going to have to drop the class because my daughter is ill. I have fallen too far behind to catch up. I was trying to do some of the work, but it was hard to get to a computer while going to the hospital. What do I need to do to drop the class and when is it offered again for me to retake it. I pay for my classes out of my pocket so this is really going to set me back, but what can I say. I want

to do my best so I don't know what else to do. Will you apologize to the class and my group for me. Feel free to explain the problem. The small period of time I was in your class was a pleasure."

In the end, this student did not drop the course, even though her daughter died during that semester. Still, she chose to finish the course with an extension.

Interaction/Communication:

"To my teacher and classmates, thanks for giving me a great online experience. I can't tell you how much I have learned because of your willingness to share your experiences. It's been a good class for me. Thanks Linda, for your teaching technique--I appreciate it."

"Everything from this class has helped me learn more about the library way of doing things. These classes have done so much for me. It is sad to finish some days, but I know so much more and am confident I can take what I have learned and put it to good use here at my library. One of the best parts though was the team work….Glad to meet you and have you for a partner in this class. I think all of us learned a lot in this class, especially that we can depend on each other if we need help, right?..."

"At the beginning of this project I was a little scared. As our group started working together we came up with more and more ideas. I truly had a great time working with our group, it seemed so real I wish that it was real. I learned so much and it was a great honor to work with the ladies in our group and I feel that the time spent on this project was well worth the effort."

"It is my pleasure to present the Opening Day PowerPoint Presentation. Terri, Sue and I enjoyed this project very much. It was a great use of the imagination and we look forward to (hopefully) answering your questions."

"Communication was more difficult with team members since we could never meet face to face. Figuring who would do what and WHAT what actually was, proved to be a challenge. I think we did a lot of brainstorming and emailing back and forth. Maybe in real life we would have arranged a face to face meeting or at least used the phone to hash out the details. But everyone, shared ideas, listened and worked hard. Thanks again Team Three!"

"I'm going to miss every one of you. You've all really helped me understand just how compassionate librar-ians and future librarians are. I hope all of you become successful and that I see you all in other classes."

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN EDUCATION

These snippets of the online experience show students eager to learn, appreciative of what they gain, and very aware of the importance of pursuing further education. It is not always easy and not without its challenges and frustrations, but the students are ready and willing to work hard. Online technology has made it possible for these students to realize their dreams and goals. It will also result in improved library service. That's an unbeatable, winning combination!

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Those interested in more information about the Ivy Tech LTA online courses and associate's degree program should visit this Web site: http://www.ivytech.edu/indianapolis/schools/public-social/library-technical/index.html. For person-to-person assistance, the reader may contact Susan Mannan (smannan@ivytech.edu) or select an adviser at an Ivy Tech campus near you from the list on the Web site (under the Additional Information link).See page 13 for (Figures 1-5).

Figure 1: The initial announcement welcoming students to the class. The professor will post announcements to this page as needed throughout the course. Along the left are listed the options for moving to the other sections of the course.
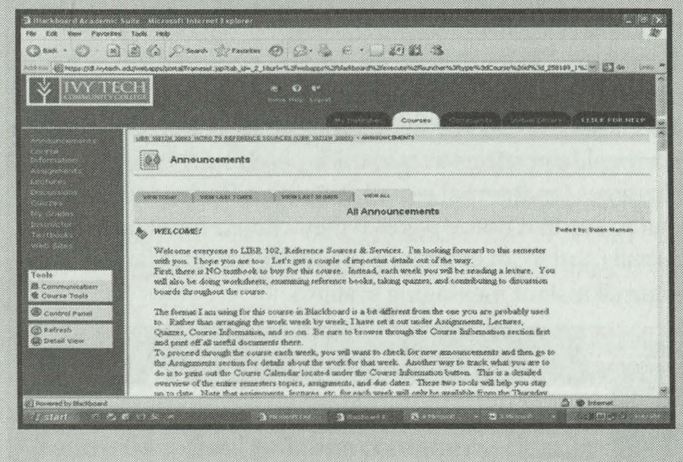
See Page 13 (Figures 2-5)

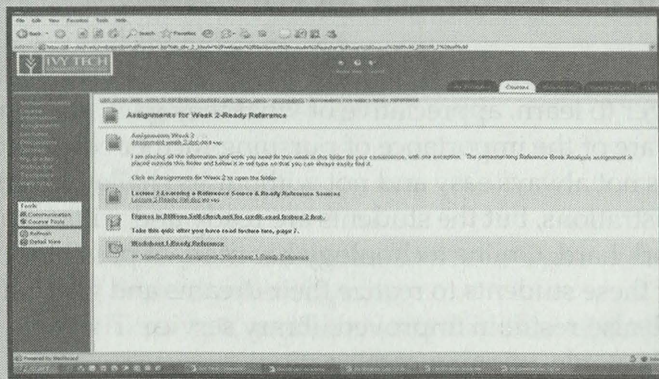**Figure 2:** A weekly assignment screen from which students open documents and take quizzes.

Figure 3: A weekly quiz from LIBR102, the reference course.
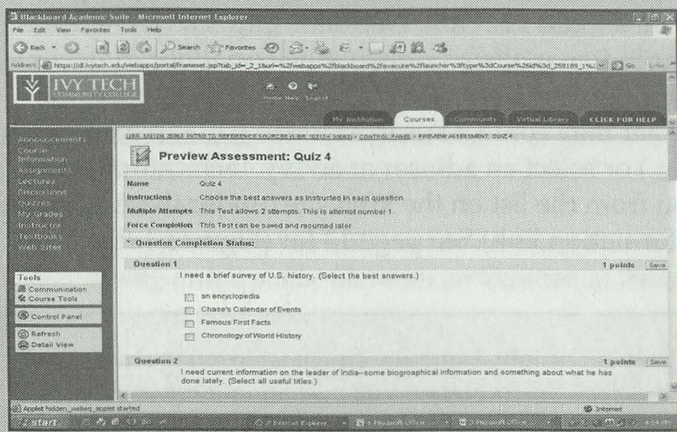

Figure 4: A screen showing the various options for communicating. They include the Announcements (from the professor), Collaboration (chat rooms set up by the professor for the full class or small groups), Discussion Board (for weekly postings to questions posed by the professor), Messages (an internal e-mail system), a Roster (which can lead to student home pages if they choose to set one up), E-mail (sent to an external e-mail address) and Pronto (an external instant messaging system).
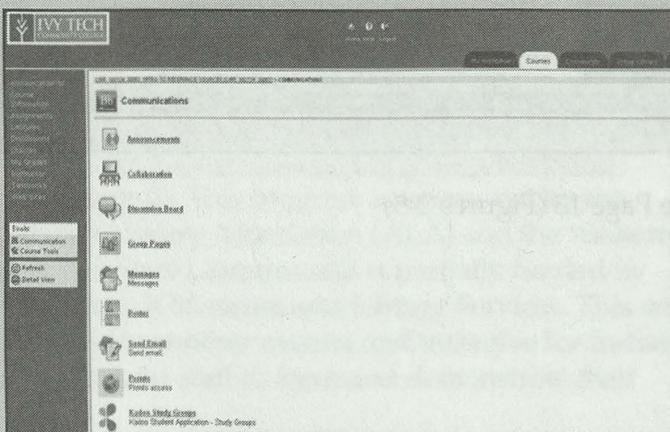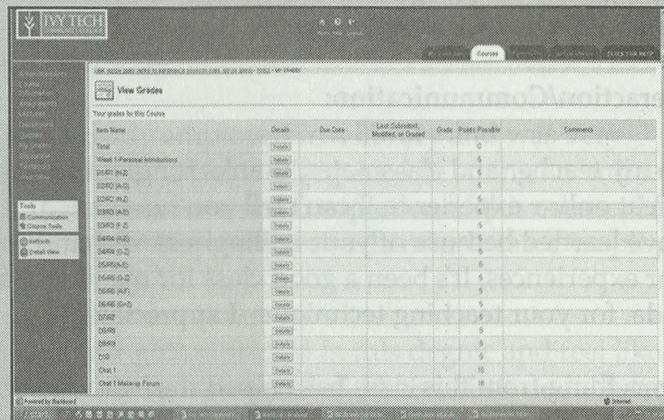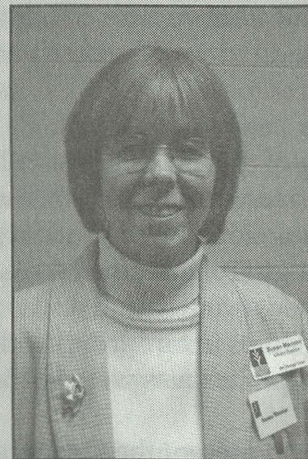

Figure 5: What a student sees in "My Gradebook." This is the page a student goes to when checking for grades posted by the professor on the various assignments. It allows students to keep a running account of how they are doing in the course.

About the Author

Dr. Susan Mannan

Dr. Susan Mannan is currently serving as the program chair of Ivy Tech Community College's Library Technical Assistant Program. Dr. Mannan has also been the library director of Ivy Tech Community College's Central Indiana campus in Indianapolis and taught courses as an adjunct lecturer in the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at Indiana University Bloomington.

E-mail: smannan@ivytech.edu