I am a lucky librarian. I was hired by the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, where I now serve as information services coordinator, while I was still in library school. Better yet, I was hired to be its young, hip techie librarian. Even though I only fulfilled the first part of this description, the college was willing to give me time to learn the “hip techie” part. So began my experimentation with various Web 2.0 technologies and tutorial creation software.

Problems With Distance Education

Not long after I started experimenting, I was approached by a faculty member in the School of Nursing. She was teaching an online research course to primarily distance-education students. These students had nearly the same access to resources as the on-campus students but had little-to-no opportunity to come to campus to receive help searching databases and locating journal articles. Yet these students would be required to use the medical databases for literature searching to complete their research projects.

The course was a graduate-level research class made up of mostly older students going back to
Distance Users’ Needs

Previously, we had conducted all of our classes live, occasionally even traveling to our campus in Athens, Ga., to reach students. This allowed us to demonstrate database searching and then observe and assist the students. With the School of Nursing expanding its distance-education programs to other parts of the state and beyond, we simply could not do this any more. These new students would never see a classroom and likely never see our campus. This would be the first of many classes that we would teach online. How could we teach database searching in a class where interaction with the students was limited to email and online discussions?

Online Publishing Answers Distance Users’ Needs

Creating online options for students has become more of a focus with the growth of distance-education programs. It has also become necessary with the growth of online databases, electronic journals, and electronic books. Patrons are becoming accustomed to finding all the information they need while sitting at their computers. In fact, most traditional services performed in the library have begun to find their way online. Reference questions are now answered by email or instant messaging. Interlibrary loan articles can be ordered online and delivered to an email address. Course reserves can be placed online.

Teaching classes is one of the few areas where libraries have not all switched to online access. While online tutorials are not new, they are still not common. Reference librarians still tend to prefer teaching and reference transactions to be face-to-face because this makes it easier to conduct a reference interview and guide patrons to their desired goals.

Online tutorials do not need to replace classes; they just need to be a supplement for the patrons who cannot reach the physical library. Online tutorials allow these off-campus users to enjoy the library’s services. Patrons can view just what they need, when they need it. Regardless of the library schedule, this online resource will always be available. This can be especially helpful for small libraries, such as ours, where hours of operation are limited.

How to Create an Online Tutorial

Learning new software and then creating a tutorial may or may not sound easy to you, but I’ve found that by following a general step-by-step process, I can produce a tutorial on just about anything.

1. Pick a topic. What do you want to teach? I have created tutorials on how to search various databases as well as our online catalog, but the possibilities are almost endless. Any service that is offered in the library will have to be explained to some patrons, so there are plenty of areas open to tutorials. It really just depends on where your patrons need the most assistance. Any topic that is seen as an off-campus need—or any one seen as a frequent on-campus need—should be made into a tutorial.

Sitting down with your colleagues and discussing library needs is a good way to get started. This is how I began our online catalog tutorials. Now school faculty, fellow librarians, and other staff members with requests and ideas approach me for possible tutorials. Currently, I am set to work on a tutorial to guide patrons through our interlibrary loan process and another to inform patrons about plagiarism.

2. Pick a path. Next you’ll need to decide how you want to teach your tutorial. If your tutorial is about searching the databases for literature or about what constitutes plagiarism, you may approach the subjects differently. For example, my tutorials for searching the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL; www.lib.mcg.edu/services/tutorials/cinahlebsco/index.htm) and MEDLINE (www.lib.mcg.edu/services/tutorials/medline/index.htm) take a step-by-step approach. I use basically the same language and format that I would with a live class; I just break it down into individual points. On the other hand, the plagiarism tutorial I’m planning will give students a section of information and then require them to pass a quiz before they can advance to the next section and complete the tutorial.

Start by deciding what you want your tutorial to accomplish, and remember that sometimes a good path in theory will not work in practice. The tutorial should show the information that you want covered, flow well, and be interesting for the patron. I suggest writing an outline. This allows you to quickly view all the pieces you’d like to cover and easily plan how to arrange each part. Planning all this beforehand will save you a great deal
of time and avoid a lot of frustration in the end.

3. Practice. I frequently teach the CINAHL and MEDLINE databases. However, when I sit down to create a tutorial, I practice using the databases, paying special attention to the path I have already planned out. Even if you are not covering a tutorial that you can go over online, it’s a good idea to rehearse in any way you can. This helps to set the idea in your head. This also helps you to remember everything you need in your tutorial the first time you record it.

There were a surprising number of things I included in my classes that I never thought about but that were important to have in my tutorials. These included details such as how to set up an account in a database, how to find information, or how to look at a subject tree—details that are not the main point of the lecture but that help the students have a successful experience. You can always go back and add those things you forgot, but taking a little extra time to make sure they’re there in the first round will make things easier on you.

4. Write a script. When adding sound to your tutorial, it is a good idea to have a script to follow. Even if you don’t plan on using sound, a script is great for planning out what you need. I basically take my outline and start filling it in, adding dialogue and any other information I think is important. Like a script for a movie, the tutorial should include not just dialogue but also scene changes, where special effects will be added, and the estimated length of time a section will take.

You may have taught the material thousands of times before, but until you start recording yourself, you will never realize how much you pause, say “uh” or “um,” or just slip up. Having a script in front of you helps you to avoid these mishaps. I start writing my script while I practice presenting the material. During practice I tend to talk more naturally, as I would in front of a live class. Writing down what you say when practicing gives the tutorials less of a scripted feel while still giving you something to follow.

5. Record/create the tutorial. There are a variety of ways to create your tutorial, and I have used many of them. I began by using PowerPoint. PowerPoint allows you to add sound and some limited effects. Later, I moved on to Flash. Flash allows you to create a range of effects but has a high learning curve and works best if you already know some coding languages. Most of the best effects have to be created using ActionScript, the coding language used in the Flash software. Since I only learned to use ActionScript in a limited way, I soon moved on to other options.

The latest software I’ve used to record and create my tutorials is Adobe Captivate. Captivate records your computer screen as you complete a task and saves your work as individual frames. This enables you to go back and edit, add, or delete frames. You can also add text boxes, mouse movements, buttons, and even highlight areas of interest.

There are other types of software as well, and most of them can be downloaded from the web for a trial period. I would suggest downloading any that look interesting to see which one you like best before you buy.

6. Add sound and effects. Even though Captivate will allow you to add sound while recording, I use a separate sound editor and add the sound to each slide after I’ve created the tutorial. There are many sound editors out there, both free and for a fee. I use a free one called Audacity. It’s a fairly simple sound editor that lets me record and do some basic editing. Anyone wanting to do more-advanced sound effects would want to look at more-inclusive programs.

Using a separate sound program also allows you to have someone else record sound for you. I started by recording my voice with the tutorial, but eventually I passed my script on to a colleague whom I thought had a better speaking voice. This allowed me to concentrate on

No tutorial is complete until you get feedback.
adding effects and editing the work. It also helped to bring the tutorial to completion faster, since we could work on different parts at the same time.

Captivate and a similar program called Camtasia provide a variety of effects that can be applied after your tutorial has been created. Both programs allow you to create highlight boxes, add text, and create quizzes. Captivate allows you to insert buttons that function as web links, open email addresses, or move the tutorial along. Camtasia has a zoom feature that allows you to enlarge an area on the screen. Depending on your needs, one program or the other will usually work for you.

7. Get feedback. No tutorial is complete until you get feedback. I created my tutorials and then asked for feedback from the faculty and staff. I was not able to get student feedback before we started using the tutorials, but I would suggest doing this if possible, perhaps using student focus groups. I can now collect feedback from the students on the tutorials, and I continue to make adjustments based on their comments.

Student Responses to Our First Publishing Attempts

Overall, students enjoy the MEDLINE and CINAHL tutorials. The availability of the tutorials 24/7 is the students’ favorite feature. In fact, the ability to access the tutorials anytime and anywhere appeals to both distance and on-campus students. (All students appear to enjoy homework more when they can work in their jammies.) In addition, having the tutorials online allows students to revisit the information as often as they need to while they practice their searching skills. It also gives them the ability to do the work on their own.

Students also commented on how easy the tutorials are to use. They like the step-by-step process used to teach database searching. This helps them to visualize the literature search process. They can also watch the tutorials one step at a time, switching to the actual database in between to practice. The tutorials walk students through breaking down their research questions into searchable subjects (medical students search by subject rather than by keyword) and end with showing students how to choose articles.

Evaluations submitted by online students showed that they appreciated learning how to search the databases—they felt that the tutorials helped to improve their knowledge of database searching and also to increase their confidence in doing their own searches. Students thought that the tutorials were relevant to their current school work and could be useful in other areas.

Where We Go From Here

Online tutorials have been shown time and again to be reasonable replacements for live classes. I’ve found that this was also true with my tutorials. Students in online classes scored well on their literature searching assignment. However, students in live classes still scored better. With this in mind, we set about looking at student comments on how to improve the tutorials.

Students primarily requested that the tutorials be more interactive and easier to review. In response, new tutorials will have quiz components to test user knowledge and learning. The new tutorials also will now be divided into sections—students will be able to view the whole tutorial, or they can choose which sections they would like to review. Reviews will be added to the end of each section, and there will possibly be an FAQ page at the beginning. Sections on advanced searching and additional features will be available for students who want more information.

We continue to update and refine the tutorials as interfaces and software change and as student feedback brings issues to light. In fact, a tutorial is never really finished. It will always be a working project, or it will quickly become out-of-date. This does not mean that you will spend all your time on tutorials—the bulk of a tutorial’s work is in its creation. Afterward, you will have maintenance and an occasional refresh. However, all the time spent on a tutorial goes into the mission of providing our patrons with better service, so it is worth the effort.

Lindsay Blake is the information services coordinator at the Medical College of Georgia. Her current research interests include health literacy, evidence-based practice in nursing, and online tutorials. She can be contacted at lBlake@mcg.edu.

EBSCO CINAHL Tutorial Evaluation

Please help us to decide how we can make improvements to this tutorial. Fill out the evaluation below and submit with your class work.

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<th>Place a tick to indicate to what extent you agree.</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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<td>1. The tutorial was relevant to my needs</td>
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<td>2. The tutorial was interesting</td>
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<td>3. The tutorial was well-structured</td>
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<td>4. The tutorial was well-paced</td>
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<td>5. The tutorial improved my knowledge of literature searching</td>
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<td>6. The tutorial improved my databases searching skills</td>
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<td>7. I feel more confident about my ability to carry out a literature search in the future</td>
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<td>8. Overall the tutorial was worthwhile</td>
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