Interview

Delivering Access: The Role of Course Reserves in Academic Libraries During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Lauren Bourdages (she/her) is the Copyright and Reserves Supervisor at Wilfrid Laurier University, currently serving on the Library's Accessibility Committee and the Student Advisory Council. As the Copyright and Reserves Supervisor, Lauren coordinates efforts to ensure students have access to course readings and materials online through the ARES platform and in the library. In her role, she handles copyright, accessibility, and supervising the office.

In March of 2020, the Wilfrid Laurier University campus shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted the rest of the term remotely. The library and its reserves team continued to deliver services to faculty and students, switching from print and electronic materials to a solely online model until health measures were put into place. In an environment which left students without access to the physical library, the delivery of accessible online course material has become more important than ever before. Lauren communicates with professors and students to ensure they have access to materials they need as the community navigates the impacts of COVID-19 on the higher education experience. These communications directly impact labour in the reserves office and, in turn, decisions about copyright, accessibility, and budget to ensure the best overall access to the community.

In December of 2020 I interviewed Lauren about how these decisions were impacted by the pandemic. Numerous professionals in the LIS community have been exploring or adapting methods of providing materials and services to their patrons remotely. I was interested in the process, specifically in the reserves community, as they were faced with an increased demand for their services during periods where print collections were inaccessible due to safety at times.

How did COVID-19 change the delivery of reserves to students?

When we closed on March 17th, reserves at the library went from a combination of print materials and electronic items to completely electronic. Students were no longer able to access the hundreds of textbooks on physical reserve for their winter classes. As the Spring/Summer requests started coming in, the decision was made to increase the budget so that acquisitions could purchase as many e-books and streaming media items as possible for use in the course reserves system.

With campus still closed, staff working from home, and Interlibrary Loans (ILL) only able to provide electronic articles and book chapters, what we could provide for Spring and Summer courses were limited to e-books, chapters that professors could scan from their own books, electronic journal articles, items we already had in the reserve system, and web content.

In July, the building re-opened for staff so that we could get back to scanning chapters from print books (and request them through ILL again). When curbside pickup started up, we made the decision not to restart the print reserves service. This is because Laurier is practising a 72-hour quarantine period between the uses of each book, that's three days. Between that and the length of the loans, print reserves aren't

going to be useful to students. We're heading into Winter 2021 and this is still the state of our reserves service.

What was the most challenging aspect of the adjustment to remote delivery?

For us, it's been the staffing. We were already doing a lot of electronic content, more than some other reserves services I've spoken to. The problem is because we were limited in what we could get, everything took a lot longer and/or was more complicated. Early in the pandemic, our team ended up down a staff member and it was challenging to find enough help to account for the influx of requests for electronic reserve content. This impacted our communications strategy as well, causing an additional challenge.

Did you see more engagement from students or faculty reaching out to the reserves department than in previous years?

Weirdly, no, if you only look at our stats. I think that goes back to the communications piece. There are a lot of professors out there panicking and unsure how to proceed with their readings. They may not be aware that course reserves exist and that we can work with their liaison librarians to help them redevelop their courses for the remote teaching environment. The drop in our stats can also be partially attributed to the cessation of print reserves.

What can the reserves department teach universities about supplying learning materials online?

We can teach professors how to open up their pedagogical practice. How to break free from traditional textbooks and put together reading lists that are flexible, cost effective, open, and tailored to their needs and the needs of their students. As higher education moves more towards the realm of open pedagogy and using open educational

resources, the course reserves service at university libraries acts as the bridge between proprietary and open. Not everything can be open, but almost everything that can't be can be provided by the library's course reserves service in some way. Once in the reserves system, those online learning materials are centrally managed and available for free to the students 24/7.

Closing

As a current MLIS candidate at Western, I have further developed my appreciation for the work that the reserves office conducts to ensure students have access to free materials through the library. By conducting this interview, I was left with an appreciation of the labour that is undertaken to provide students and faculty with the information they need in an accessible way. Lauren demonstrates that the Laurier reserves team is committed to accessibility, copyright, and service to provide optimal access to learning materials. Although the service provided by the reserves office has always been an instrumental component of education, it is now fully recognized as essential work that they continue to produce throughout the pandemic. The labour undertaken in the reserves office has remained a steadfast and critical component to ensure students have access to materials they need to learn no matter what happens during uncertainty and lockdown.

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