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Title: ‘How can we help?’ Developing library staff skills to support e-learners at the University of East London
Year of publication: 2010
Citation: Walsh, C. (2010) ‘How can we help?’ Developing library staff skills to support e-learners at the University of East London' SCONUL Focus 48 pp. 29-31
‘How can we help?’
Developing library staff skills to support e-learners at the University of East London

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Background to the project

In early 2008 I had an interesting conversation with our university’s e-learning manager about the potential to provide some training for library staff to help them support e-learning within our libraries.

At that stage I was clear that many library staff were already supporting e-learning simply because of the increasing demands for support coming from students. With the opening of the new-technology-rich Docklands library in 2006, enquiries and requests for help from library staff had risen by an astonishing 70%. As well as helping students with information retrieval and the like, staff were doing their best to support a range of networked e-learning services for which they had received little formal training.

Talking to colleagues from our learning and teaching committee, I found that there was a feeling that students could be better supported in their e-learning, particularly with developing their basic IT skills to enable them to access it in the first place. The common assumption that younger students would be better equipped with IT skills than mature students was not backed up by the evidence that library staff were encountering every day, with students trying to log on to the network for the first time and then trying to negotiate a very unfamiliar virtual learning environment.

This is not to say that the university had not taken account of this need – each academic school has its own help desk where students can get support with e-learning. However, outside normal office hours that support is very limited, and with libraries open 24x7 and staffed each day till 9pm many students come to library staff for help as they log in to the network and attempt to use the VLE for the first time (see Figure 1).

E-learning for library staff

I felt that we ought to be providing our library staff with some more structured training about e-learning in order to support our students as effectively as possible, at least at a basic level, so that they can access the VLE and get started. From that point existing online help tools would guide them through their course and more complex queries could be referred to their school’s help desk during its normal opening hours.

My first thought was that it would be highly appropriate to use an online learning package for our staff, not least because the experience of e-learning would help us understand students’ needs. It would also enable our staff to learn flexibly, at times to suit themselves, and would remain as a resource for consultation and refresher training whenever required. This would also provide a very practical solution for the large number of our staff who work part-time or unsocial hours and who find it difficult to attend face-to-face training sessions. The most obvious vehicle for this training was our own VLE, UEL Plus.

To develop a package like this we would need some time and some money, neither of which were available in large quantities within the existing staff teams or within our service’s budget. I decided to make a joint bid for some modest funding with our learning technology advisor, who was keen to work on the project with me. This would allow us to make a start on developing a training tool, working in collaboration with our colleagues in the school for distance and e-learning (now renamed UEL Connect). I had to make a strong case for what might appear to be, on the face of it, a staff-development project. The fund I was bidding for support from is focussed
on learning and teaching, but ultimately it was
agreed that introducing a project that would
enable library staff to provide support for e-learn-
ing would improve the student learning experi-
ence significantly, and the bid was successful.

**Learning Enhancement Opportunities (LEO)**

A little bit of background about LEO projects at
UEL might be helpful at this point!
UEL encourages staff from both academic schools
and services to seek to innovate and evaluate
areas of learning and teaching practice. LEO
project grants – provided with teaching quality
enhancement funding (TQEF) from the Higher
Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
– are available for small-scale projects. Proposals
have to be approved by the university’s learning
and teaching committee and the funding available
for a single project is up to £10,000 over a maxi-
mum of two years.

Our bid was fairly modest but the funding was
sufficient to ‘buy out’ some time for a learning
technology advisor to help us develop the tool in
our VLE and to employ a facilitator to run and
report on the focus groups we organised.

**Why UEL Plus?**

There were some reservations about using the
VLE as we were very aware that web 2.0 tech-
nologies have the potential to provide a more
interactive and engaging (and often more famil-
 iar) experience for our staff; indeed, many library
staff had been early adopters of the technology
and were already using it to communicate with
academic staff and students and among them-
 selves to plan meetings and projects. However, we
were also acutely aware that the majority of our
students currently use UEL Plus extensively for
their learning and the priority was for library staff
to understand this environment in order to better
support students’ learning in our libraries.

We were very clear from the start that library
staff cannot be experts and cannot spend a lot
of time tutoring students. Our aims were (a) to
increase library staff awareness and knowledge
of UEL Plus, and (b) to enable them to provide
some initial help for students and guidance to
more detailed online ‘self-help’ tools that already
existed.

An initial literature search revealed that, while
many library services are developing specialist
teams to work on and support VLEs and e-learn-
ing, there has not been much focus on the devel-
opment needs of front-line staff such as library
assistants and library shelvers, and these were the
people we particularly wanted to focus on.

**Focus groups**

In May 2008 we organised focus groups with
students at each of our campuses. These groups
were run by an external facilitator who was
also commissioned to produce a final report on
student responses. The groups comprised a cross-
section of the academic schools and included
undergraduate and postgraduate students.
Feedback revealed that the students, on the whole,
expected library staff to be able to provide basic
support with the full range of resources, facilities
and activities within the libraries. This included
support for using pretty much any of the standard
networked services available and particularly
with e-learning.

Focus groups held with library staff around the
same time demonstrated not only a lack of under-
standing about how students learn online with
UEL Plus but also an acute awareness that this
knowledge could only be developed effectively
by using the same technologies and becoming
familiar with the most common problems:

‘I don’t know what any of them [the technologies] do. I
have had no updates. It is not so much that [we are]
not informed but if we aren’t using it how can we get
to learn it?’ (Library assistant, May 2008)

Discussion with our learning technology advi-
sor led us to decide that we should focus on our
VLE to develop a model that might be used for
other aspects of e-learning. We agreed to deliver
the module in bite-sized chunks of learning that
could be fitted around day-to-day work, with
the chunks no more than 15 minutes long and
incorporating the support tools that were already
available to students. Learning outcomes for each
chunk were identified and a range of activities
agreed upon, including an initial diagnostic test of
existing knowledge and a final assessment, both
using online quizzes.

We used footage of interviews with students to
show their perspective on UEL Plus as well as
a PowerPoint presentation and downloadable
worksheets to guide staff through the VLE. The
most important aspect was the support section,
which contained FAQs (frequently asked ques-
tions) and directions to the existing online help;
this section was identified as most useful by staff
who evaluated the module because of its ‘quick reference’ nature – easily adaptable for display on a help-desk PC desktop.

**Evaluation and findings**

The VLE-based module ‘How can we help?’ was made available to all library staff in July 2009 and two introductory workshops were held to explain the purpose of the module and to provide basic information to get library staff started. Members of staff were encouraged to complete all the sections at their own pace and to submit feedback as part of the process. Feedback was elicited via online quizzes embedded in the learning module and staff were also encouraged to e-mail their additional thoughts and comments to the course developers. Feedback was particularly sought about (a) the relevance of the content, and (b) the experience of learning and development online.

In all fifteen members of the library staff accessed and used the module during the evaluation period, with three people spending between 1.5 and 2.5 hours completing the whole module. Most others sampled relevant sections, spending between 15 minutes and an hour on the selected sections.

Generally, feedback from staff demonstrated that they liked the flexibility of using a VLE to learn but would have liked more interactivity and less text-based instruction. Overall the module appeared to have fulfilled its aims, providing comprehensive and relevant information about UEL Plus and delivering an enjoyable, self-paced approach to staff development that was easily accessed by members of the library team. (See Figure 2.)

**Next steps**

Whilst web 2.0 tools have proved engaging for library staff in some areas of work, the value of using our VLE to develop a knowledge of e-learning has also been demonstrated by the staff’s very positive response to ‘How can we help?’. The next stage will be to develop further modules to complement the existing one. Recently the university’s academic integrity subcommittee identified a need to provide enhanced support for the Turnitin plagiarism-detection system. Turnitin is already embedded within our VLE and it would be highly appropriate for library staff to provide initial support for it, given our recognised role in helping students develop their referencing skills so as to avoid plagiarism. We are already considering developing an ‘add-on’ section for the ‘How can we help?’ module.

A little more ambitiously, we would really like to provide an induction package via e-learning for new members of library staff, although this is obviously a longer-term objective; whether it would be more appropriate to locate this within our VLE or elsewhere is a subject for debate.

**Some further reading**


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*Figure 2. Web page*