‘Help! I’ve got an assignment to do…’ Info skills at the University of East London

***Abstract:***

*In July 2011 UEL’s Library and Learning Services team received the UC&R Innovation Award for our web based resource, Info skills, and our proposal to host a one day conference on innovative approaches to information skills training. This article outlines the background to the project and the development of Info skills.*

For some time we had wanted to develop an online information skills programme for students at UEL, especially given increasing numbers of distance and work based learners and a high proportion of students who simply prefer to learn online. Ideally we felt that the information skills programme, or learning tool, should be open access, making it as simple as possible for all our students to use, both on and off campus, and providing help with making the transition from school or college into higher education. Our aim was not simply to help students make better use of the library and its collections but also to engender a better understanding of the importance of information skills as part of learning in HE and academic development.

We took inspiration from Staffordshire University whose Assignment Survival Kit (ASK) enables students to develop information skills within the context of planning and completing their assignments. We were very keen to ensure our students at UEL understood that time spent learning information skills is an important investment if they are to succeed at university and we wanted to provide them with options about the way they learn these skills. Our approach was to make the online option complementary to face to face sessions, but also building in some interaction and ‘self testing’ tools for those who miss out on face to face information skills training.

In May 2010 we were awarded funding by UEL’s Director of Academic Practice and Student Experience to develop an online resource. One of the drivers for the university was the need for an improved study skills offer for our students and the library project was seen as a pilot for the development of more online study skills support.

Many of our students come to university with limited information literacy and without a clear idea of the expectations regarding referencing or academic writing. A large majority of our learners are ‘first generation’ university students and we also have a high proportion of international students who are unfamiliar with UK libraries and our higher education system. It was clear to us that we needed to help all students not only to access and use our resources effectively, but also to develop critical skills when selecting and evaluating resources and referencing skills to avoid plagiarism.

Within UEL we are fortunate to have some professional expertise in learning design and learning technology to call on and two colleagues from the university’s distance and e learning team were able to help us realise our vision of an interactive online tool that really appeals to learners. Acting as joint project managers our colleagues Sue Harrison and Erica Plowman kept us on track, with Erica leading discussions on how we saw the ‘learning tool’ working and helping us to narrow our focus to level one students. Once we had clarified our audience and intended outcomes for the info skills tool Erica mapped the required content onto a clear structure of 4 sections – identifying, finding, evaluating and referencing information. Once this structure was agreed we commissioned our team of Subject Librarians, working in pairs or individually, to develop the content for relevant sections. Some of this content already existed in other forms but we wanted to ensure we removed any duplication of resources and provide a fresh approach to some of the critical information and support we were already offering. It was very important to us that the tool should be ‘owned’ by our Subject Librarians who are responsible for developing and delivering information skills training across the university. Without their buy- in this resource might prove a very expensive white elephant, and we recognised that we would rely heavily on the team to work with academic colleagues to promote it to students.

Once we had developed content for one or two of the key sections we organised focus groups with both library staff and students to gather feedback on a range of things including the look and feel of the resource, content, and the usefulness of the various media (video, demonstrations, and downloadable guides). Students told us that they liked the videos, that they wanted all content available in a range of media to suit different learning styles and that they enjoyed using the quizzes to test their own knowledge of a topic. In particular they were very keen on the content we had provided on referencing and academic integrity, which can be a challenging area for many of our students. Taking on board these comments, and the views of library staff, we were able to make some changes and continue to develop the resource in line with our users’ needs.

Erica, our Learning Designer, helped us to edit all the content into manageable length and to develop a consistent and ‘user friendly’ style for the text. We were also able to embed our online chat service ‘Ask a Librarian’ within Info skills to facilitate on the spot help for students who need a more personal touch when using our resource. This service is very popular with our students and provides an immediate virtual link with library staff for our off campus students and for those who prefer to communicate online for whatever reason.

Given the strong emphasis within the university on providing an outstanding student experience, and our own aspirations to develop a strong partnership with our students, it was very important to us to include their contributions and some of the student videos we made are really quite inspirational. We were able to film international students, UK based students, mature students and younger students talking about what they had learned from their own experiences of using the library and its collections and services and the development of their information skills. One of the university’s Student Liaison Officers, himself a recent graduate, provided us with a really lovely film encouraging new students to make the most of the rich library resources available to them to help them achieve their academic goals.

We also included films of academic staff to reinforce the message that developing information skills is an integral part of learning at undergraduate level, with lecturers speaking about how to use Google more effectively for researching topics and how important it is to evaluate resources before deciding to use them. There is also a video about the importance of referencing correctly and the potentially serious consequences of failing to do so.

One of our aims in developing Info skills was to offer learning support via a choice of media to appeal to a range of learning styles. We were also clear that while the resource needed to be structured in a way that allowed progression through the sections it also had to allow students to ‘dip in’ for specific help or as a refresher on what they had already learned. From the start we intended that items of content should be usable outside the tool, so for example videos could be used by Subject Librarians within their own tailored training sessions or by academic staff teaching on the compulsory level one skills module, and as the academic year has progressed we are increasingly seeing this happening.

An unexpected outcome of the project has been its value for UEL partner colleges. The ability to access, via the web, an open educational resource like this is invaluable to students at partner institutions as well as to ‘pre entry’ students, supporting their learning but also providing a flavour of the skills they will need to do well at university.

Currently we are evaluating Info skills with a view to improving and enhancing it for next academic year and we are hosting a conference on innovative approaches to information skills on 13th January 2012, entitled ‘Going it alone’, where we hope to be able to share our findings. Hits on the Info skills site are increasing and we have received lots of wonderful comments about it – it was even promoted by our VC at his start of year address for staff. More recently members of academic staff have approached us about using the tool within their own assessed modules and Subject Librarians are working with them to enable this to happen.

In the longer term we would like to look at developing some additional content for postgraduate students in particular, focusing on some of the more specialist information skills they might require, and of course we will continue to review and update Info skills to ensure it remains relevant and useful to our undergraduate students. We are always very pleased to receive feedback from colleagues so if you have time to look at Info skills please do send us your views.

Catherine Walsh

Interim Director of Library and Learning Services

University of East London

c.walsh@uel.ac.uk

References:

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/infoskills>

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/ask/>