The missing link: making the connection between information literacy and an excellent student experience

Review of conference held at Birmingham City University

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Library and Learning Resources at Birmingham City University have organised a series of conferences. 'The missing link: making the connection between information literacy and an excellent student experience' was the inaugural conference organised by the Learning and Teaching team.

The theme of the conference was driven by the increasing focus placed upon the student experience and satisfaction in Birmingham City University and higher education as a whole. Through collaboration with our academic colleagues we are very much seen as stakeholders, working towards ensuring retention, progression and achievement. As information professionals we are constantly looking to develop approaches and learning objects that cater for the variety of students we have in our institutions. It was hoped that our conference would enable us to share both experience and examples of good practice across the information profession.

A call for papers was sent out to various library groups and professional organisations and we were amazed as well as encouraged by the size and quality of the response, which meant that we could offer keynote as well as parallel sessions, thus providing delegates with a choice. There were opportunities to network over coffee and during lunch breaks and to visit our sponsors' stands.

In her welcome speech, Janice Bell, Birmingham City University's Deputy Director, Library and Learning Resources, contextualised the day by reminding delegates of the 'impact which effective information literacy can have upon the experience of students'. Janice then went on to explain the background to the approach to information literacy that Birmingham City University has adopted, which was strongly influenced by faculty / library restructuring and collaboration with other departments across the university.

Neil Donohue and Monica Casey from Salford University opened the keynote presentation for the day with 'Preparing Health & Social Care students for university: why this approach'. They presented their pre-induction programme, which is a full day of coordinated activities delivered jointly by the library, academics and student ambassadors. The objective of this pre-induction programme is to introduce students to studying at university and includes accessing IT, virtual learning environment (VLE), email, information literacy, referencing and assessments. Activities included Walsh and Inala's 'Bag of fears'[1] and a 'turning point quiz', which was useful for giving immediate feedback.

Evaluation gathered after the pre-induction day indicated that students felt more confident and prepared for university and that they would recommend the day to others. However, they did

raise the issue of repetition in the 'Learn to learn week'. Neil and Monica plan to increase the use of online activities and to put more focus on learning and less on IT.

Chris Bark from Coventry University and Liz Martin from De Montfort University followed with their presentation entitled 'Creating a reusable, online information literacy tutorial for researchers: a collaborative approach'. They provided a fascinating insight into their experience of a collaborative project between Coventry, De Montfort, Loughborough and Nottingham universities.

This project investigated the resource needs of researchers through surveys and interviews of over 200 researchers. As a result Chris and Liz went on to produce reusable online resources, one of which is 'Dissemination of your research' (http://cuba.coventry.ac.uk/emrsg/), designed with the open source software Xerte. Other modules identified for inclusion were ethics, information gathering, archives, grey literature, funding bids, reference management and data management modules. Future plans were to add this self-paced and interactive tutorial to Jorum and Xpert.

'Collaboration between Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) and Library and Learning Resources (LLR) to improve the student experience' was the final keynote presentation of the day. Delivered by Jenny Eland (CELT) and Christiana Titahmboh, both from Birmingham City University, this presentation focused on collaborative efforts between the two departments to up-skill LLR staff for a better student learning experience. Jenny provided a refreshing account from an academic perspective of this close collaboration. This has resulted in all Learning and Teaching Librarians undertaking courses on Designing and Implementing Student Support and the Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. Jenny emphasised the rationale behind empowering librarians with the vocabulary and techniques of learning and teaching in higher education.

In the second half of the presentation, Christiana outlined the benefits of both these courses by demonstrating the positive impact this has had on her information literacy sessions. This has enabled her to align the delivery of her sessions with the teaching methods, learning outcomes and assessment criteria for the various programmes. Student participation and independent learning have been encouraged by using various teaching methods

such as group discussions, peer–peer learning and problem-based learning. Empowering librarians, as stakeholders in students' learning, with the necessary vocabulary and techniques could have a positive impact on information literacy sessions, which in turn could contribute towards an enhanced student learning experience.

Delegates were offered parallel sessions during the morning and afternoon, and chose from the following:

Nicola Conway from the University of Durham highlighted the challenge faced by librarians to get information skills incorporated into programme modules and seen by academics as essential. Nicola acknowledged that progress has been made with some lecturers at Durham, who see the importance of information literacy in equipping their students with life-long learning skills. Their success was demonstrated by the development of the Scholarly Skills Exercise, which is a compulsory and assessed series of sessions followed by all first-year degree students. Nicola strongly advocated the importance of maintaining a presence in departments in order to sustain library involvement in the research process.

Dr Jenny Brine from Lancaster University discussed the difficulties that can arise when an institution has no clear vision or policy around the provision of information literacy. Her presentation demonstrated how much librarians at Lancaster have been able to achieve – from printed support through to online tutorials – whilst working without a formal policy framework. They have made various inroads, including inclusion on the university's staff development programme. Although recognising that such an approach has enabled flexibility and good teamwork, Jenny would still welcome the development of a university-wide information literacy policy.

Greta Friggens used her session to describe how receiving an award at the first student-led teaching awards ceremony at the University of Portsmouth raised her confidence and led her to develop an interactive learning object called 'UPLift! Library Information Tips' (http://www.port.ac.uk/library/helpyourself/skills/UPLift/). Greta demonstrated how the tool could easily be adapted to support various subject areas, and the ease with which various elements could be incorporated into the VLE to support teaching. One of the positives that Greta took from the experience was the opportunity to collaborate with staff across the university, and she hoped that her

seminar would encourage delegates to work with others to develop tools to enhance the student experience.

Kaye Towlson from De Montfort University commenced her workshop by asking delegates to reflect on their induction activities. She then explained how she had been given the opportunity to include a library module in the university's e-pre-induction. Kaye outlined how this opportunity had been used to deliver a more student-centred induction and how a library trail had been designed to be used in conjunction with the module. This approach had proved to be successful in offering a better student experience and delegates were encouraged to develop their own practice accordingly.

Robert Manderson and **Anne Pietsch** from Roehampton University reflected on their academic / librarian collaborative research project to study the impact of e-books on the student experience. They shared their project methodology along with a number of their initial findings, one of which was the positive response from lecturers. The results also demonstrated how most users preferred to access e-books through the library catalogue and the VLE. Throughout the presentation the speakers invited interactive feedback and reflection from the delegates by the use of voting handsets.

Dr Sarah Pittaway and **Catherine Robertson** from the University of Birmingham shared their experiences in using the open source tool Xerte to create a range of learning objects. They demonstrated the flexibility of Xerte in creating reusable and embeddable learning objects. Areas covered included deciphering reading lists and searching bibliographic databases. The speakers highlighted the versatility of the software, especially when creating learning objects for specific users such as distance learners and disabled students.

Feedback from the delegates demonstrated that the conference had been well received and had succeeded in sharing good practice and stimulating new developments and ideas. As a team, we at Birmingham City University definitely took away ideas for further exploration. The next conference in the series will be organised by the Collection Management team and will focus upon how to cope with increased demand in a climate of decreasing budgets.

Presentations for the day have been made available at http://library.bcu.ac.uk/conferencem-papers.htm; for a more personal reflection visit Damyanti Patel's blog at http://bcuelibrary.word-press.com/2012/03/21/missing-link-making-the-connection-between-information-literacy-and-the-student-experience/

Note

1   A. Walsh and P. Inala, *Active learning techniques for librarians: practical examples*, Oxford: Chandos (2010)