

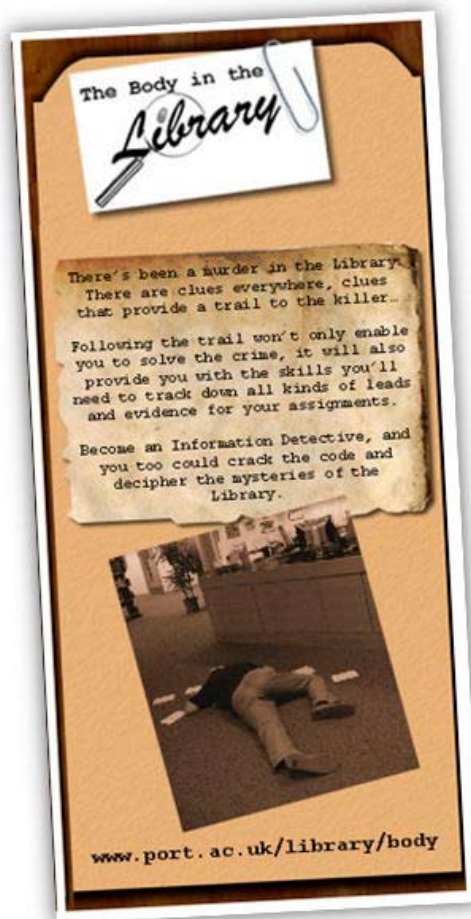
The body in the library: using collaborative working to develop effective and efficient online information literacy training for distance learners at the University of Portsmouth



Paula Thompson
Library Assistant
(Technical Services),
University of Portsmouth
Tel: 023 9284 3237
E-mail: paula.thompson@port.ac.uk

'The body in the Library' – a self-contained activity hosted through the University of Portsmouth's 'Victory' VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) – was launched by the Portsmouth university library in September 2009. Designed to address parallel concerns about information literacy teaching for distance learners and about the administrative workload of the law and criminology librarian, the activity has proved a positive experience in collaborative working and a beneficial tool in addressing the problems faced by both staff and students.

Distance learners have, for many years, been subject to a deficit in library instruction and guidance. Increasingly dependent on online research tools, they have found themselves largely without tailored teaching that presents material in an engaging and attractive way. The role of the librarian in supporting their learning has been to respond to



their enquiries at a point of need, with the possibility of a brief training session during summer schools or similar events. As such, a vast amount of the professional's time can be seen to be spent answering standard questions of a simple nature and solving problems of off-site authentication and access.

In the summer of 2008, I devised a murder-mystery board-game scenario for the induction of campus-based students during the annual 'Freshers Fayre'. This simple quiz – presented





using posters and a display utilising recognisable props such as a chalk outline, crime-scene tape and an adapted board in the style of 'Cluedo' – proved successful in engaging students with initial concepts such as opening hours, orientation and use of the library catalogue and in illuminating areas for our improvement, such as signage. Recognition that distance learners were not always included in freshers' events led to the fledgling idea of creating an online version designed to introduce that specific user group to services that would benefit them. Liaison with Linda Jones, law and criminology librarian with responsibility for the institute of criminal justice studies (ICJS), led to the idea gaining momentum and moving forward as a viable project, which, with its crime-centred theme, was thought to be especially appropriate for use with that particular student group.

Over the summer of 2009, I worked with Linda and the department for curriculum and quality enhancement (DCQE) to produce an online learning unit within the university's virtual learning environment, 'Victory'. Consultation with relevant academics in ICJS established the key resources required by students for their first assignment, and these were incorporated into the activity as integral parts of interactive clues. To complete the activity, students would be required to access and find information within databases, electronic journals, electronic books and the library website; collection of the correct information would result in them solving the mystery.

The creation of the clues – including ensuring their relevance to the learning experience of the students – was one of the most important elements of the design process. I began with a list of resources recommended by the academic staff, and then searched for elements within the

resources which could be matched with the intrinsic elements of the mystery – who, when, why, how, and where. Finding elements that would illustrate the various methods of accessing and searching for information was a time-consuming exercise, but one which I felt was integral to the success or failure of the project – if the clues did what they were intended to, they would provide practical, step-by-step demonstrations of searching and information retrieval from each of the key resources. If they didn't do this, the unit would have failed in its objectives.

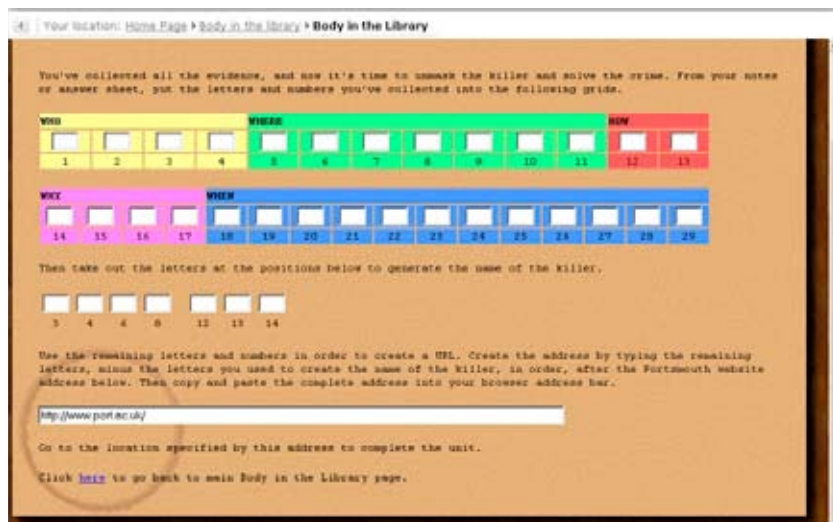
Once I had gathered a workable list of clues, the layout and presentation of the mystery was considered. I was keen to retain some elements of the previous designs, tying together the two projects and repurposing some of the design work I had already done. Working with DCQE on the project enabled me to draw upon their skills and expertise in transferring my ideas into an online presence. The design was intended to visually resemble a police case file, with dividing tabs that would facilitate navigation between the clue elements. Having each clue effectively on a new page meant that the focus would be kept upon the clue in hand. The use of board-game elements was retained, and utilised to link the online elements to real people who could help by way of e-mail links and telephone numbers. A combination of photographs I took in the library and stock images (such as textured papers) were used to create the impression of a vintage case file, which both appeared attractive and was thematically consistent. Finally, PDF files that had already been created by Linda were linked to in order to provide extra sources of help and reference.

To provide a conclusion to the activity, and create the illusion of having 'solved' the crime, students were asked to collect specific letters and numbers from each resource they visited. A matrix was devised into which these letters and numbers could be inserted to generate both the name of the 'killer' and a URL. The URL would then be used to take them to a 'case solved' location, which included links to further multimedia resources (such as playlists on 'Box of broadcasts') as a 'reward'.

The timescales involved in the project, which was undertaken during the summer vacation and

which was running alongside a major redesign of the main library website, meant that marketing of the activity to the target audience was minimal. The activity was launched live via a link on the ICJS website on 1 September 2009. Posters and leaflets were targeted at undergraduate students attending the study school later that month, and the activity was promoted verbally by both Linda and academic staff.

provides a strong indication that the activity achieved very positive results. Overall, in the first two months her total number of e-mail enquiries dropped by 75 per cent. At an individual subject level, enquiries regarding access (via Athens/Shibboleth authentication) had a 94 per cent reduction (from 292 to just 17), whilst enquiries about the electronic journal Criminal justice matters dropped by 97 per cent (from 66 to only 2).



Enquiries regarding the other resources used in the activity each dropped by between 40 and 50 per cent. These reductions paid noticeable dividends in terms of staff time at a key time in the academic year, with time that could be used more profitably for other purposes freed up from repetitive replies.

Although we are in the early stages of usage, tangible and measurable benefits can therefore

In the two months directly following the launch, figures extracted using Google Analytics showed that the activity had been visited 864 times by 407 unique visitors who viewed 3,442 individual pages. The same statistics showed that students visited an average of 3.98 pages per visit, staying for an average of 9 minutes and 25 seconds.

clearly be seen to have resulted from the project. Initial student feedback has also been positive, with e-mail and verbal comments indicating both that the students have recognised the direct correlation between the activity and their initial

Although the majority of the visits to the activity were from the UK, others were from registered students in more remote locations, including the Netherlands, Zambia, Canada, Ireland and the United States, indicating that the activity reached places traditional library instruction could never have hoped to. Peaks in usage were clearly visible and could be matched with instances of marketing and times when coursework was set, indicating recognition of the link between the activity and the practical application of the skills it introduced.



assignments and that they are willing to engage with this guided introduction to resources, which may at first have intimidated them. We intend to gather more structured feedback later in the academic year, when the benefits have become more apparent, and to use this to inform developments for the next academic year.

In the case of the administrative burden on Linda, statistical analysis of the e-mail enquiries alone

Following a presentation at the University of Portsmouth's learning and teaching conference in December 2009, discussions began with other academics and faculty librarians who are interested in developing the activity for use with their student groups. The priority in the initial stages of these discussions has been to emphasise the need for collaboration to ensure that an activity is tailored to the precise resources and techniques the students require – without this, the value of the activity would be greatly reduced and the engagement levels of the students would be likely to lessen significantly. For this reason, I designed a pro forma asking for the resources to be listed at the outset, providing a framework onto which other elements can be added as development progresses. I hope that beginning from this position will ensure that a coherent and valuable set of activities can be produced over the summer vacation in time for the start of the next academic year, when the outlay of time involved during quieter periods can be seen to have had positive benefits in terms of time freed up during one of our busiest periods for both staff and distance learning students.