Bridging the gap

Why the library is a necessary mediator in academic reading list provision

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The reading list project at Southampton Solent University provides students with readings required for their course, fully embedded in their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) unit page and in the correct referencing style according to their chosen subject of study.

WHAT DOES THE READING LIST SYSTEM DO?

First implemented in 2010, the Solent reading list system is a bespoke open source development based on the Open University Telstar codebase (http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/telstar/) integrating Moodle (VLE) and RefWorks bibliographic software. Via the system, reading lists are displayed in unit pages and linked to the library catalogue for easy access to print materials, e-books and digital videos. Hyperlinks to online materials such as digitised chapters and web pages are provided and individual articles are included via our link resolver, SFX. Reading lists can be accessed easily and securely by students and staff attached to the units both on and off campus and via mobile devices.

Linking the list via the library catalogue helps students to become familiar with the search process and has the potential to encourage return visits. Equally, providing information in the correct referencing format helps them to become familiar with formal academic writing. The software enables the referencing style to be changed to suit the requirements of the subject (e.g. OSCOLA for law or APA for psychology, as well as Harvard style), thus ensuring relevance.

Reading lists are flexible and can be as short or as long as needed – all at the request of the individual academic. Multiple reading lists can be provided within the unit page (including core reading, recommended or topic-based reading or weekly lists) and the lists remain adaptable after upload to the VLE, as changes and adjustments

are easily facilitated at any time by dedicated library staff.

Solent has a dedicated reading list team who process reading list and digitisation requests. Queries are sent directly to the reading lists mailbox (readinglists@solent.ac.uk) from the academic or through the relevant information librarian for the subject concerned. The service standard for a response to a request is two working days and ten working days for list upload. Continued communication is important in case of any problems or the need for further clarification. Bibliographic details are checked against the catalogue and newer editions added or sourced where necessary. To maintain service standards when demand is high, such as at the start of semesters, additional help is available (and gratefully received!) from information librarians and learning resource assistants. Items requiring digitisation are added as non-linked references in the first instance and the digitised material incorporated when available (e.g. once a scanned in-house item has been produced or a copy has been provided from the British Library). All items are provided in compliance with the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) licence.

Lists are created through the selection of the relevant item template (e.g. book, journal, journal article, video / DVD) and inputting the relevant details to form the correct reference. When available, the inclusion of an auto-lookup for the ISBN, ISSN, DOI or URL makes the process straightforward and provides links to a catalogue record, database or web page as appropriate. Alternative procedures come into play when these details are not available. The item references are created in RefWorks and stored in folders under each unit code for easy location. The folder structure is an important consideration for the final reading list format.

Once complete the list is published via Ref-Share and is pulled into the VLE from RefWorks through an RSS feed. The order and positioning of folders influences the final appearance of the list in the unit as each folder is a separate RSS feed containing one or more items. The list title can be specific or general and each list is accompanied by a distinctive eye icon to make it easily distinguishable from the rest of the unit page content. Students simply click into the list and then into the relevant reference to view either the item location or the actual text of the item. Additional notes or section headings can be added to the list during the publishing process (as required by the academic), to provide extra information or guidance. Lists can also be imported between unit pages to save duplication of effort.

This service enhances learning through technology and is a way of both meeting student expectation and managing our library collections. In the current financial climate, where university budgets are tight and student expectations are higher because of increased fees, libraries need to find a way of providing more with less, to satisfy both student and academic needs. Providing interactive access to library resources and online material through linked reading lists is an important step towards achieving this.
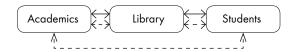
The increasing diversity of our student demographic is in turn increasing the demand for remote access to library content and resources. Providing online links and digitised material through reading lists helps to provide required material to the student whether they are on or off campus, which must assist in meeting student expectation. Matching services to the needs of that evolving student demographic is especially relevant now that customer service excellence is a fundamental library standard at Solent. Providing reading lists through the library has benefits for academics, students and librarians. Academics are able to help students access the material they want them to use and their lists are automatically updated with newer editions when checked by library staff. Librarians are more aware of which materials are included in the lists and can therefore keep collections appropriate to need and up to date with newer editions, e-versions and any alternative title recommendations. Students can easily access online documents and print material through links to actual items or records with location details and therefore become more familiar with the library catalogue and the e-journal system.

Too much spoon-feeding? Not really, perhaps more of a library 'sat nav' for the search journey. References still need to be checked for accuracy by students, with online viewed dates or database names added and not all references click straight through to the item, so some navigation of systems and exploration of resources is still required. However, as student expectations continue to rise to the level of instant and immediate access, the provision of mediated reading lists is a manage-

able and necessary step that assists the learning process.

The addition of new reading list items to stock involves all library staff, with unit codes added to orders by librarians for acquisitions staff to note, library assistants processing new additions and reading list staff updating the online lists to indicate new stock availability. This general awareness helps with student enquiries about reading list items at help desks.

Mediation by the library also assists with copyright matters. By only allowing digitisation of reading list material to be carried out by the library, we ensure that provision and reporting of scanned material complies with CLA licence requirements. Checking and uploading lists enables an item's copyright compliance to be assessed, whilst also increasing awareness of this need amongst academics. Working together through reading lists helps build relationships and improves communication between all parties – the library, the academics and the students – thus bridging the gap by providing easy access to materials along with clear feedback routes:

This ensures that any further communication is straightforward.

So where next?

Solent reading lists work and, according to our student union representatives, our students love them! However, nothing is perfect and there are certain things we would like to improve on, including the creation of more management data and joined-up internal processes. Our ultimate goal for integration is for our systems to have consistent, easily retrievable information, so that students are guaranteed accurate information however they approach it and librarians can find out which items are on lists for easier stock management. This could include:

- an indication on the catalogue of which books are on lists
- automatic reading list updates for additions or new versions
- automatic updates for reclassification of items on lists
- weeding alerts for items on lists

Although we can get statistical data on list usage, we cannot currently get data on which books are being used most, which books are being recommended across lists or how many students across lists need access to the same item. Being able to do this would further help with collection and stock development.

And in a perfect world? Perhaps the automatic addition of new arrivals to lists at cataloguing stage or the one-click addition of titles to lists through the catalogue.

Bridging the other gap

Today's information world is vast and complex. By acting as a mediator between academics and students via reading list provision, the library can guide students to relevant recommended material and academics to accessible, legal versions of their chosen content. The academics have the best knowledge of their subject areas, but the complexities of finding appropriate material amongst the plethora of information available can be exhaustingly complicated, especially when not everything may be as it first appears. Although reading lists are traditionally a communication between academics and students, library mediation of this process makes our collections and resources more visible and more accessible to students, it gives back valuable time for study or teaching and provides a gateway to the library catalogue by demystifying the processes needed to obtain relevant resources.

We therefore fully believe that the library is a very necessary mediator in the reading list process and that this, when managed correctly, can greatly assist with collection development and meeting student, librarian and academic expectations.

Acknowledgements