Literature searching for research students: meeting the needs of a diverse student population

Jenny Coombs
Academic Team manager
(Faculty Liaison)
De Montfort University
Jenny.Coombs@dmu.ac.uk

Background

De Montfort University is gradually increasing its research base and currently has around 700 students studying research degrees. Traditionally, PhD training has been face-to-face, with the library providing a mandatory day-long session introducing literature searching and reference management. However, a growing number of students are now mainly based overseas and many UK PhD students will not necessarily be local to the city. An initiative was therefore put in place to convert all face-to-face courses to online to create a virtual graduate school training programme.

Developing a blended learning approach

When developing the library's literature searching online course, we looked at feedback from the previous face-to-face sessions which had been consistently good. Two of the key reasons why students liked the sessions were due to the opportunity to meet with other PhD students, and the opportunity to try out their searches with a subject librarian on hand to offer them advice and support.

With this feedback in mind, we decided against creating a completely online course and instead moved towards a more blended approach. The new course enables all students to complete the first three units online, which cover: an introduction to literature searching and how this fits into the literature review process; how to identify keywords; and how to identify appropriate sources. The advantage of covering some of the basics this way is that students can work at their own pace. One of the challenges of working with PhD students is the very different experiences they can have before starting their PhD. They may have worked their way through the UK higher education system and therefore be broadly familiar with the basics of literature searching, or have very little experience in this area.

At the end of unit 3, the students can choose to attend a face-to-face session where advanced searching (including citation searching) and current awareness is covered. In theory, students should then be broadly at the same level having completed activities to get to grips with the basics of literature searching. This enables the face-to-face session to become more efficient and to be able to deal with specific issues and questions that may arise.

The first activity within the session asks students to talk in groups about the challenges that they have faced or expect to face when undertaking the literature review part of their work. These challenges are then collected on post-its and categorized, and the facilitators of the session can then recap or expand on material that may have been contained within the online part of the course, or move on to more advanced queries. Although the content of the session has been developed in advance, the session can be fluid, allowing concentration on the challenges identified by the students. This activity enables students to talk to their peers and to realise that they share many of the same challenges, whatever discipline they were working in. Hands-on practice occupies a large part of the session with 1:1 support available from the facilitators. If students are based at a distance or prefer the online mode of delivery, they can instead choose to follow the final two units online rather than attend face to face.

Creating a dialogue with students

After completing the first 3 units online, students are asked to produce a summary reflecting on what they have learnt and how they will apply the skills to their own topic and situation. The summary asks them to:

- develop the key concepts of their topic
- identify keywords and synonyms

Literature searching for research students: meeting the needs of a diverse student population

- understand how to combine keywords using Boolean operators
- discuss the types of resources that will be useful to their research
- reflect on the sources that they will use to search for information
- consider constraints or barriers they may experience during the process.

A copy of the reflective form is uploaded within the online course created in Blackboard and the relevant subject librarian then reviews the reflective piece and provides feedback to the students. This may be simply in the form of an email suggesting different keywords or sources that might be useful to them, or inviting the student to come to a 1:1 if they appear to be struggling with the concepts of literature searching. Providing contact in this proactive way enables students to know who their subject librarian is and where they can go for help, and can help to pick up potential problems with a student's work at an early stage. For the subject librarian, reviewing these reflective pieces enables a picture to be built up of the research topics taking place in a discipline area and provides the opportunity to make contact and build a relationship with PhD students.

Analysing feedback

A feedback form has to be completed by students to enable them to complete the course, whether this is by the blended or online only approach. Since introducing the blended course, feedback has been consistently good. Interestingly, most students opt to do the blended learning approach, rather than online only, again citing the opportunity to meet and share practice with their peers as the reason for choosing this format. Those who preferred to carry out the course online only, cited the fact that they lived away from the campus and could complete the course at their own convenience. Most of the students who completed the course online enjoyed the fact that material was short and included videos and screencasts, rather than having lengthy documents to read. However, all information is also produced in a textual format for those preferring a different style of learning.

Future developments

Developments to consider in the future will concentrate around some of the technical issues that have been experienced with Blackboard and continuing to develop more interactive elements within the online material. For those completing the course online only, we are looking at ways that we can try to recreate the peer support environment that is viewed so positively in the face-to-face session, for example: creating virtual post-it note pin boards; introducing discussion boards; using webinars to deliver live and recorded presentations and demonstrations, and utilising Skype or other software to provide 1:1 support with students at a distance.

Conclusion

Creating a blended approach to literature searching support for PhD students appears to meet the differing needs of students. There can be obstacles with technology, the challenge of getting the right tone for an online course aimed at researchers, and the difficulty of recreating the peer support and community element of a face-to-face course. However, a blended approach can help to bring all students to a basic level to then more easily facilitate the teaching of advanced skills. It also still allows for peer to peer support and community building, whilst enabling students at a distance to obtain the same information as their campus based peers. Creating a dialogue with students through the use of the reflective piece of work can also help librarians to build up a picture of research in their discipline areas which can be utilised in the development of appropriate services for researchers.

Sustainability Library project: BA Spatial Design students and library staff

London College of Communication Library, University of the Arts London

Leo Clarey
Academic Support Librarian
Library Service
University of the Arts London
l.clarey@lcc.arts.ac.uk

In January 2014 the first-year students on the BA spatial design course at London College of Communication (LCC) were set a brief to redesign an area of the college library for the 2014–15 academic year. The project was to be a collaboration involving the library team, the academic staff of the spatial design course and the students. The result is a space that highlights the theme of sustainability, and is colourful, comfortable and welcoming.

The specifics of the design brief were to redesign an area of the library's group-working area in its Learning Zone into a Sustainability Library, which would demonstrate eco-awareness and include a 'mobile library' unit (referred to as the MoLib) within it. The intention of the Sustainability Library was to engage students with ideas about sustainability through use of the library's resources, while the MoLib would be used to support a series of talks in various parts of the college focusing on sustainability.

Planning the project

The project was proposed to the BA Spatial Design team by Barbara Salvadori (LCC workshop technician). It was supported by the LCC library team (in the early stages by Matt Hunt, Leila Kassir and Ruth Collingwood, and later by Tania Olsson, Richenda Gwilt and me as the librarian for the spatial design course). Learning Zone team members Derek Churchill and Paul Rogers were also involved in the project.

In order to design the space with a sustainability theme, the students had to research how other students used resources in the library and how space was used for interaction. In early February Valerie Mace and Silvia Grimaldi (the BA spatial design course leaders) invited me to view some of the designs as the students presented them to their cohort in their studio, in order for the library to express a view and have an active input into the project. It was a real pleasure to be involved at this level, and it gave me an insight into how the students form their designs using sketches, plans and models, and how the project occurred at a creative and practical stage in the development of their practice.

The spatial design students subsequently tested their ideas by presenting them to a peer group of students during Green Week, a week in February when the University of the Arts London (UAL) highlights and promotes environmental and sustainability-themed events.

The spatial design academic staff and the members of the library team judged the students' design proposals in the summer term and the winners were announced. The library was looking for a design that would take into consideration the multi-use nature of the space, which is used both as a pop-up space for sessions and talks and as a group-working area for the students. We were also keen to acquire a design that would not require too much management by the library team.

Work in progress – designing the space and building the MoLib

This phase involved the reconfiguration of the space and the construction of the unit, which took place between June and September 2014. The winning students, Joy Williams and Ashleigh Nutton, worked closely with Silvia and Valerie, Barbara and Gregor Garber (LCC workshop technician) to prepare the project for construction through detailed design, adjustments and costings, while also working to specified deadlines and budgets. Joy and Ashleigh then worked with Barbara, Gregor and Rob Bell (visiting spatial design tutor) to construct the area and the unit, while the library team was briefed at regular meetings throughout the summer.

Active involvement of the library team, and our views on all stages of the design – such as the colours for the walls, the use of environmentally-friendly

Sustainability Library project: BA Spatial Design students and library staff

London College of Communication Library, University of the Arts London

paint, the recycled material and flame-resistant seating, and health and safety aspects – were considered at regular meetings.

Work in progress
Photos: Leo Clarey

MoLib in situ

Ambitions for the use of the Sustainability Library space and the Mobile Unit__

The Sustainability Library and MoLib were formally launched on 13 October 2014 at a reception attended by students and staff. Introductions were made by Silvia, Valerie (BA Spatial design course leaders) and by Joy and Barbara, who explained their thinking behind the project, and expressed satisfaction that the project had achieved their aim. Joy explained that the letters S – E – E – D on the chalkboard stand for 'sustainable', 'environmental', 'ecological' and 'durable', and serve to attract students to write their ideas and thoughts about sustainability for viewing on the board. A further presentation, to which I contributed on behalf of the library, was made to UAL academic and support staff during the university's Learning and Teaching Week in January 2015.

Future plans to use the Sustainability Library space for lectures and talks by sustainability experts are still to be finalised. In addition to internal talks, it is proposed to bring in experts from a rich and diverse cross-section of practitioners in the fields of design, education, print and production, including forecasters and activists. These talks will be for all UAL students and staff who have an interest in sustainability. The MoLib will be used as part of the lecture series as a physical representation of the Sustainability Library. Each expert will select references, resources and books to be housed in the mobile library unit. These books will be stored in the MoLib for the duration of the project. As well as enhancing a community of practice, it is hoped that the sustainability-themed talks will result in the library's collection being given a higher profile, while also encouraging a culture of sharing between staff and students in an informal and relaxed way.

Sustainability Library with furnishings; the white wall is for projections, as this is also a pop-up space.

Expansive view of Sustainability Library, including 'SEED' chalkboard
Photos: Paul Rogers

Sustainability Library project: BA Spatial Design students and library staff

London College of Communication Library, University of the Arts London

The Sustainability Library space has demonstrated that students and staff can work collaboratively and with positive results in order to produce an attractive, robust and engaging space, which allows students to use the space in a relaxed and social way.