Information skills for art and design: the InfosmART project at the Glasgow School of Art Library

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InfosmART is a portfolio of online learning modules in information and research skills for the Glasgow School of Art's learning, teaching, and research communities. Through a series of easy-to-use and engaging interactive modules, readers learn how to develop and improve their individual research and information-handling skills. Particular areas of emphasis include the definition of keywords, the search for information in a variety of media, the critical evaluation of sources, and the citation of sources in bibliographies, footnotes and endnotes.

InfosmART developed out of a comprehensive programme of work undertaken by the GSA library. The Glasgow School of Art is a higher education institution, and one of the pre-eminent art schools in the UK, with many of its graduates achieving international acclaim in the arts. It is one of only three 'small specialist institutions' within Scotland,[1] with undergraduate, taught postgraduate, and research programmes delivered across architecture, fine art, design, digital design, and historical and critical studies. The library forms part of learning resources, which also includes e-learning, archives, and collections.[2]

PROJECT AIMS

From the start, the project aims for InfosmART were clear. Experience within the library over a number of years had demonstrated that in general GSA students experience difficulty in searching for information effectively, evaluating it critically,

and then using it legally. This remains true across all levels of study, from undergraduate to PhD level. Feedback from academic staff confirmed that they had observed the same difficulties, and that there existed a real need for information-skills training within the student body.

For many art and design students, information skills and aptitudes do not come as second nature. Whereas other subject disciplines may assume certain core competencies, this cannot be assumed for art and design students, who often employ non-linear modes of thinking and find academic writing problematic. Many GSA students exist and operate within visual arenas, and find text-based worlds alien and intimidating. Institutionally, there are drives to increase our intake of students from non-traditional backgrounds as historically these have been under-represented within the student body. These learners may be compromised still further in academic or research skills.

GSA is also actively striving to develop its research activity and outputs, with a strategic emphasis on increasing its numbers of researchers and on building a research culture and infrastructure to support them. The GSA is committed to increasing the number of postgraduate students to 20% of the student body by 2014, with a further commitment to develop part-time and non-campus-based modes of study.

The external drivers for the project were equally clear. The ability to undertake self-directed research is an increasingly important skill in the knowledge economy. How to search for and evaluate quality information in a crowded information landscape are skills that are sought after by employers, with information skills increasingly seen not as valued extras but as core components of literacy in general. The employability agenda has gained increased visibility within Scottish higher education since its adoption as the 2004–2005 enhancement theme for the sector.[3] Furthermore, a large proportion of GSA graduates are self-employed, where an ability to apply one's own information skills remains a key challenge. InfosmART aims to equip all students with the cross-transferable information skills that are attractive to employers in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Once the need for InfosmART had been recognised, funding was sought through the GSA's

learning and teaching innovation fund, established to encourage innovative pedagogical projects, with a particular emphasis on e-learning and the application of technology to the teaching process. Key to the success of the InfosmART bid was the mapping of its objectives to the wider institution's strategic plan[4] and its learning and teaching enhancement strategies.

Although not currently assessed, InfosmART was future-proofed for formative assessment by mapping its learning outcomes to national unit specifications[5] and subject benchmark statements.[6] This map demonstrates to academic staff that InfosmART content is explicitly tied to the pedagogical frameworks and standards they employ in their teaching. The success of InfosmART is to a large extent dependent on this academic buy-in. To ensure comprehensiveness, learning outcomes were also mapped to established information-literacy frameworks.[7]

Figure 1. Assessing the benefits of journals

InfosmART modules are directed at the entire GSA community across all departments, disciplines, and levels of study. Each module encourages self-directed learning with interactive elements such as question-and-answer and thinking exercises. E-assessment components, although not formally assessed or graded, allow learners to test their own knowledge, benchmark their information skills, and reinforce what they have learnt. Downloadable certificates of learning ensure that students can record their attainments within their personal development portfolios.

Interface and design

InfosmART is integrated into the GSA's 'Blackboard' virtual learning environment, and is universally and flexibly available across the institution on a 24x7 basis. Although each learning object was created using the third-party program 'CourseGenie', integration into Blackboard is seamless and learners remain unaware that InfosmART was created outside the VLE. Using CourseGenie enabled us to incorporate functionalities not supported by Blackboard, including web 2.0 applications such as social bookmarking, blogs, and RSS feeds. The four formal modules are supported by a dedicated blog which reports on new information issues and developments. Learners can subscribe to this blog via e-mail or newsfeed to keep their newly acquired skills up to date.

An attractive, clean and elegant look and feel has been created, and is now carried across all the library's training and support materials to reinforce the brand. Downloadable materials include posters, postcards, bookmarks, tent cards, crib sheets, desk aids, and survival kits. Because our target audience has a sophisticated visual sense, it is imperative for InfosmART to remain highly visual and well designed. Wherever possible, images are used to represent ideas or concepts, whether literally or metaphorically.

Content

InfosmART is structured as a simple non-threatening four-step programme: 'Define – Find – Evaluate – Cite'. Learners can follow the programme through as a whole, or simply navigate directly to the area they require through collapsible and hyperlinked content trees. The InfosmART homepage presents a quick 'first-aid' assessment, where learners can acquire a personal InfosmART prescription, indicating the content they should concentrate on.

Firstly, the 'Define' module introduces the concept of the 'information universe' and explores how to navigate our way through this universe

Figure 2. Welcome and contents page

by moving from a vague understanding that we require information to a clear and focused question or hypothesis. Learners encounter the information supply chain: the journey that information takes from producer to disseminator, to facilitator and consumer. The learner is encouraged to develop strategies for creating a resource mix across a range of media. Different types of information systems, such as catalogues, full-text and bibliographic databases, and search engines are introduced.

In the 'Find' module, learners develop effective search strategies across a wide variety of these information systems. Short demonstration movies were created using Adobe Captivate for all of the catalogues, databases, or imagebanks available through the institution. The ability to view actual clickpaths through a resource, rather than a text description of the activity, is ideal for our visual thinkers, and has also proved popular with international students whose first language is not English. Elsewhere in the module, search engines are explored in depth, including indexing, relevance ranking, relationships between engines, differences between controlled and uncontrolled vocabularies, and subject gateways. A comprehensive case study on Google is included, in which learners develop an ability to define keywords, consider abbreviations, synonyms and alternative spellings, and employ Boolean operators, wild-card and proximity searches.

The 'Evaluate' module instructs the learner in evaluating the information they find for accuracy, relevance, currency, bias and objectivity, authority and provenance, and methodology. A case study on Wikipedia explores the advantages and disadvantages of its particular model and illustrates the anatomy of a typical Wikipedia article.

Finally, the 'Cite' module explores plagiarism, its detection, and its consequences. The learner is instructed in when and how to quote from sources, and is introduced to the running notes, numeric, and author–date styles of referencing. Harvard style is explored in depth, with concrete examples given of footnotes, endnotes, and bibliography entries for all kinds of media or objects.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Benefits to the institution at large are marked: an information-literate student body with an enhanced research ethos; embedding of research skills and activities within the learning experience; enhanced quality of research and published output, with attendant benefits; legal and moral compliance; engagement of non-traditional learners, progressing the equality, diversity and widening-participation agendas; nurture and support of emerging researchers; and strengthening of the research infrastructure.

The benefits of InfosmART to the student body are equally manifest: enhanced critical faculties and judgement; an ability to use and reference information legally; confidence to progress to higher levels of research; cross-transferable information and life skills in preparation for employment; self-directed and reflective learning capabilities; appreciation of the importance of research ethics; and a broadening of research horizons beyond Google.

Above all, we want InfosmART to help the GSA students of the future to be confident in their abilities; independent in their study; ethical in their research; employable in their skills; and reflective in their application of learning.

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