The Twelve Apps of Christmas

How collaboration between librarians and learning technologists brought success to an open online course

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'Andy, I've got an idea for just a little small course I'd like your help with…'

This was how my colleague Chris Rowell approached me in September 2014 and invited me to work with him on what was to become the Twelve Apps of Christmas open online course. The course that we developed and delivered together grew from an internally-focused offering with an anticipated take-up of thirty learners to an international success with over five hundred people taking part from institutions worldwide. It has won awards, other institutions have run their own versions of it, and it has since been used as a case study by the CILIP Information Literacy Group. This is a look at how we developed this open educational resource (OER), and some of the reasons for its success.

Chris and I both work for Regent's University London – Chris as Deputy Learning Technology Manager and me as Deputy Library Manager. Both our teams are part of the Learning Resources department, and we had collaborated before. I had presented workshops to academics on copyright issues in higher education as part of a 'Tricks of the trade' series of lunchtime events which Chris organised; these were then recorded and used to create videos which we streamed on the university's video server under the banner of the 'copyright trilogy'. These proved popular with Regent's academics, with the first of them becoming the most watched video on the server. Chris and I also worked together on an 'introduction to Twitter' workshop for the 2014 staff conference, followed by running the Ten Days of Twitter open course (initially developed by Helen Webster at Newcastle University) to engage our colleagues in using social media.

This shared interest in social media and past record of successful collaboration was why Chris wanted me to be part of his team for the Twelve Apps of Christmas course. From his brief initial outline, I could see the appeal of what he wanted to do with it and how it would be delivered. I also appreciated the opportunity it would give to collaborate with a group of colleagues outside the library team with whom I usually work. The timing was fortunate in that I was able to agree with my manager that it should be an objective for that year's appraisal document. This was important in a cross-department project like this, as it confirmed that I could give it the time and attention needed to make it a success.

The course itself appealed to me because of its content, practicality and packaging. There are a huge number of free-to-use applications ('apps') for mobile devices – Apple estimated over one and a half million apps in their App Store at June 2015, many of which are free-to-use. Many of them have potential practical uses for those working in higher education. Chris intended to showcase a range of relevant mobile apps, with participants in the course both trying them out and beginning a discussion on them. This would highlight the potential benefits of these particular apps in teaching, and also open up a wider discussion on the subject.

The intended audience for the course would be academics, as well as learning technologists and librarians supporting teaching in higher education. As a group, these are people who are often very busy, with limited time for continuous professional development. An issue which has been identified with open online courses is that the time commitment required sometimes proves too heavy for people working full time, leading to students not completing courses. For this reason, our course was designed to have a light time commitment. Each day's content would require no more than ten minutes of work, though there would be additional optional content for anyone wishing to explore the day's topic in more depth. The course would also be modular, allowing any student to skip a day or to work out of order. Our goal was to make the course accessible to busy academics and information professionals by minimising the time needed to follow it and structuring it so that it could be followed flexibly.

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In addition to the structure of the course, its timing was also considered. The later part of the autumn term was chosen, as many institutions will have completed teaching by December but staff will still be present overseeing exams and coursework hand-ins. This is certainly the case at Regent's, and – initially at least – our focus was on our own institution.

This combination of short daily modules and a delivery date throughout December led to the distinctive title, theme and branding we developed for the course. The course became Christmas themed, with the Twelve Apps of Christmas title supported by a visual theme deliberately inspired by an Advent calendar. This Advent calendar concept tied in with the daily reveal of each day's app and related activities. The activities themselves sometimes included a seasonal theme, such as a Padlet Wall in which participants posted their Christmas wish lists. There was also a gratuitous Christmas cracker joke each day, at the end of the daily tasks and activities. Corny as these were, they proved surprisingly popular and were useful in community-building as the course went on.

The project group consisted of Chris, three of his learning technologist colleagues and myself. I was keen to involve the library in projects like this, in areas where our knowledge and skill sets cross over with teams in other departments. I found that my management experience, knowledge of social media and ability to write promotional material were relevant, as was my interest in technology for teaching and learning – several of the applications were ones I had already used in my work as a librarian. My hope was that this project would be successful, opening the door to more collaboration in future.

As an open course, it was created under a Creative Commons licence – specifically, CC BY NC SA – so it would be free for other institutions to take, use and adapt for non-commercial purposes if they acknowledged the source and were willing to share their own versions under the same licence. The first to do so was Dublin Institute of Technology, who ran their own Twelve Apps in parallel with ours and received an International E-Learning Award (Mobile Learning Division) for their efforts.

The team decided which apps to include and drew up a template to ensure a consistent format for each day's content and activities. Each app was introduced, with examples of how it might be used. It would be downloaded by students to carry out the day's activity. Where possible the links to additional materials included an alternative or related app, and each day had its own discussion forum. This approach fed into the three strands Chris was keen to embed in the course: it should include situated learning, whereby students became familiar with the apps on their own devices, and it should be discursive; the discussion generated around the apps – their effectiveness and their limitations, whether there were alternatives people had tried – was in many ways the most important element of the course; the third element was authenticity: ideally we would be showcasing a range of apps which had either been specifically developed for higher education use, such as Turnitin and Blackboard, or were of practical use in that environment.

Much consideration went into the choice of apps for the course. The platform for delivery of the course was to be Blackboard Open Education, the open version of the Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE), which is supported at Regent's. Therefore, the first app was the mobile version of this. This was for the practical purpose of familiarising users with the platform on which the course was delivered, but also promoted the mobile app to participants, particularly to those working at Regent's. Other apps, which were chosen in part for their relevance to Regent's staff, include Dragon Dictation and Turnitin for iPad. Perhaps the most utilitarian of the apps chosen was a QR reader. Most were selected for their potential use in the classroom or benefit to teachers in higher education. Padlet and Poll Everywhere were chosen as

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apps, which allow classroom interaction (through posting to shared 'Wall' online in real time, and creating polls). Prezi for iPad showcased an alternative to PowerPoint for presentations of all kinds. Wunderlist is an app for creating, managing and sharing 'to do' lists. Instapaper saves the text from web pages or online articles and enables them to be read later. Simplemind+ provides mind-mapping, and Myscript Memo converts handwritten text into a shareable digital format. The final day's app was a whimsical choice, as a surprise reward for completing the course – NORAD Tracks Santa.

While preparing the course, we began to publicise it both internally and externally. We used social media (the library Twitter feed and our own Twitter accounts and professional blogs) as well as networking at conferences, to spread the word. Chris's colleague James Leahy produced a promotional video, which we embedded in publicity material where possible.

As the start date drew near, we were pleased to see that we had drawn interest internationally. Around thirty people had signed up, mostly from within our own institution, and we anticipated a few more in the last week or two. As the start date of the course approached, though, numbers of students enrolled began to rise. It soon became apparent that most people had waited until the last few days to enroll. The numbers rose rapidly, going from fewer than a hundred three days before the course started to almost five hundred and fifty on the first day.

While this was gratifying, suggesting that our subject and the structuring of the course had wide appeal, it also gave us a larger task in building and managing the community. This part of managing the course came to consume more time than we had anticipated, and required flexibility among the members of the team. The first app was Blackboard Open education, with the task for the day being for the students to download it and introduce themselves on the forum. This proved a good choice as it was quite a social task, and it began to generate dialogue and a sense of community from the start. Although not every student participated, many did. We quickly developed a policy to reply with a welcoming message to each person's first post. As further people enrolled late, we found ourselves monitoring the first day's forum throughout the duration of the course to greet any of these late joiners.

The second day's app was Padlet, chosen as a classroom-relevant resource and again with a social activity – posting to a shared 'Wall' – to further encourage participants on the course to interact in the early stages. The large numbers of participants meant that we needed to create additional walls to give more people a chance to post. One of these, on favoured apps and websites for the classroom, already saw a serious discussion growing up around the central theme of the course.

As the course progressed, the forums hosted many discussions on particular apps. Participants were willing to identify any issues they encountered – incompatibility with particular devices or operating systems, limitations in the free version of an app – and suggest alternatives they had discovered themselves. There was also much positive discussion about the uses to which the apps could be put in the classroom. In this respect, the discursive element of the course was successful. The discussion was held partly through the forums and partly through social media, particularly Twitter, through the hashtag #RUL12AOC. Social media monitoring and interaction became another necessary part of managing the course.

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The wide international range of participants included several from Australia and New Zealand. This created an issue we had not foreseen – students in different time zones, who were working when it was night in the United Kingdom and Europe. We adapted to this by ensuring that one of the team would monitor the forums and social media at the start of the day in order to catch up on overnight activity and support this group of students. We found that our students in different time zones accepted that they were out of sync with most of their peers, but appreciated this contact with the course facilitators.

We had timed the course to finish on Friday 19 December, the last day of term for us and for many of the participants. We had noticed less input was appearing on the forums as the course continued. To maintain interest, we ran a contest inviting students to contribute their own Christmas cracker jokes. We ended with a less serious app on the final day, knowing that many participants would be finishing work for the year and wanting to minimise any conflict between the course and their other commitments. We did, however, use the final day's forum to gather responses and qualitative feedback about the course. This proved useful, with comments confirming the success of the course and its format. From Chris Boon:

> I've signed up to other similar activities before but they've taken far too much time to do, and unfortunately I just don't have a hour a day to devote to something else as well as 'the day job', but this MOOC has been just right – something small each day, with a short activity, or if you don't have time to actually try the app, some discussion about it from those who have had a go. And it's been a really good way to see the Open Education system in action. A great experience – many thanks to the team at Regents for putting this together!

And from Belinda Green:

> I've tried all sorts of new Apps, and enjoyed the daily joke! I think you got everything spot on – a ten-minute activity every day is just right, and I love the 12 Apps of Christmas theme.

Jill LeBihan's comments indicated that we had developed a successful and transferrable model:

> I think I have learned from you about how to run a set of day-by-day learning activities on Blackboard and how to keep student engagement up. One of our difficulties with our own undergraduate cohorts is to keep them thinking about their studies between taught sessions, and a little ten-minute activity for each day works well. The support via discussion threads, and particularly via Twitter, has supported the activities. I'm going to experiment next term with my own students and see what I can do to keep them motivated between sessions.

When we returned from Christmas vacation, we reviewed the course based on feedback from participants and our own experiences running it. As it had been successful, we decided we would run it again, and we began planning changes we would make. It was decided to start the course a little earlier, on 1 December 2015. It would include a 'Day Zero' on 30 November in which to introduce the Blackboard Open Education platform, allowing a full twelve days of relevant apps to be introduced. We are also planned on gathering and analysing feedback in a more systematic way. Although we received much useful feedback in 2014, we were aware that this was an area in which we could have done more.

We presented a paper on the course to the Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals (CILIP) conference 2015 in Liverpool, and entered the course for the Credo Digital Information Literacy award. We were delighted

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to be informed we had won, and we collected the award at the Librarians Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) 2015 in Newcastle. We were particularly pleased that the judges for this prestigious award recognised the elements that we were ourselves proud of. Jade Kelsall noted that 'the underlying model of the course could be applied in any context. It took a number of different elements of good practice from across the sector and brought them together into something new and fresh'. Michelle Schneider commented on 'how easy you made it for people to engage with the course' and on how it was a fun course to participate in.

The success of the Twelve Apps of Christmas, both as a course and as an example of cross-department collaboration, was a factor in Learning Resources being awarded the prize for most innovative team at the Regent's University London staff conference. The internal and external recognition for the course gave us support in planning for the future. In addition to this year's Twelve Apps, we are developing plans for other open online courses using what is now a proven format – a manageable, modular structure with an engaging theme. We have ideas for courses on academic blogging, and for a more ambitious course to support the digital researcher. Several members of our library team have already been approached to lend their knowledge and skills to these, and I would recommend cross-department projects like this to anyone who is looking to develop their skills and experience. The course is open, and the format is free to adapt. If anyone is interested in running a similar course at their own institution, Chris Rowell and I are happy to be contacted.

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