R@P: developing and promoting the Referencing@ Portsmouth service

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RATIONALE

The library at the University of Portsmouth (UoP) has for some years been providing advice on referencing across the institution, either at enquiry desks or through subject/faculty librarians. In addition, annually updated short guides to Vancouver and Harvard (American Psychological Association variant) were produced by the library, and distributed to new students in their thousands. This sufficed for a time but in the last three or four years the number of referencing enquiries being fielded by library staff has increased tremendously in response to a number of trends common across UK higher education, mainly issues concerning the increased possibilities for intentional and unintentional plagiarism

that the web affords. Enquiries about referencing new (usually web-based) sources of information that were not covered by the traditional referencing conventions – developed in a predominantly paper-based era – were also growing and staff were having to give 'best guess' solutions. Locally, new courses were much more concerned with electronic and visual media than more traditional courses, and law courses were being developed that had their own referencing conventions. The introduction of penalties for poor referencing meant that students were seeking advice from library staff, from academic tutors and from the university's academic skills unit and there was a worry about consistency of advice.

Our first response was to collect our replies to referencing queries as a way of saving staff time and ensuring consistency of both advice and interpretation of the conventions. Originally it was intended that these be mounted as FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) on the library website but it was soon realised that something more consistent, coherent and easily accessible was possible, so a group of interested people was convened and a bid for funding was submitted and accepted by the university's learning and teaching committee. The core team comprised a technical support person and some librarians closely involved with subject support work. In addition in the early days there were some academics, a member of the academic skills unit and a librarian from a local further education college who together acted as a reference group when advice was needed.

A hierarchical approach was adopted to encourage students to think analytically about what they were referencing, and to identify correctly the type of material they are using; a failure to do so had prevented many from using the correct referencing style. The selection tool adopted enables the student to make choices while other options are still visible, so that they can easily backtrack; it is an approach they are likely to be familiar with from commercial sites. A guiding principle in the design was that the number of clicks should be minimised. From the opening 'traffic light' page

(see Figure 1), the student is guided to the selection page (Figure 2) and the destination page
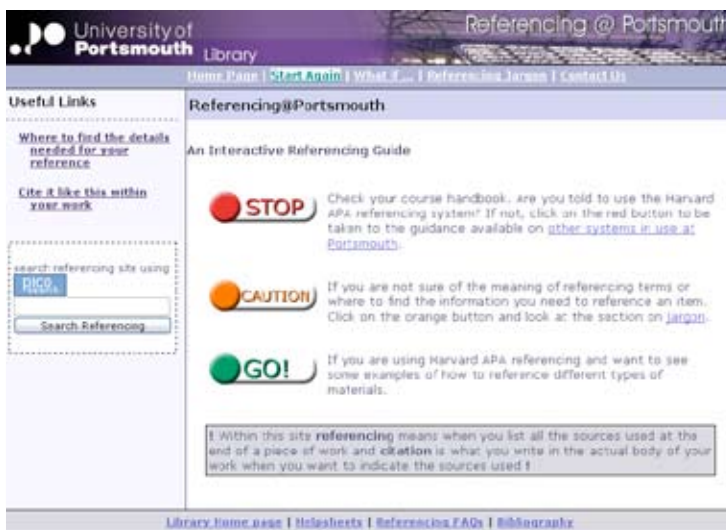

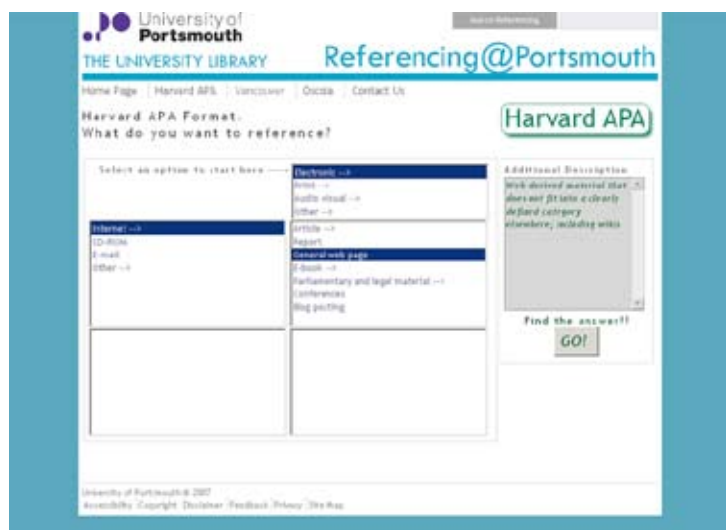Figure 1. The opening 'traffic light' page
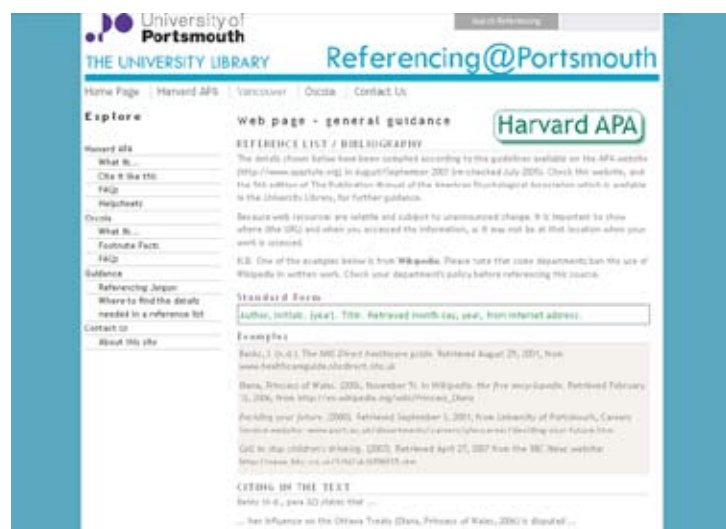

Figure 2. The selection page

Figure 3. The destination page

(Figure 3) is only one click further away. A proprietary search tool was incorporated for those situations where the selection tool was less helpful, or for students who prefer that approach. It

was important to have it on the open web, so that students could access the site whether they were working at home or in the university. Harvard APA style was covered initially, but the traffic lights have been abandoned with a site revision, to accommodate two other referencing styles (see Figure 4).
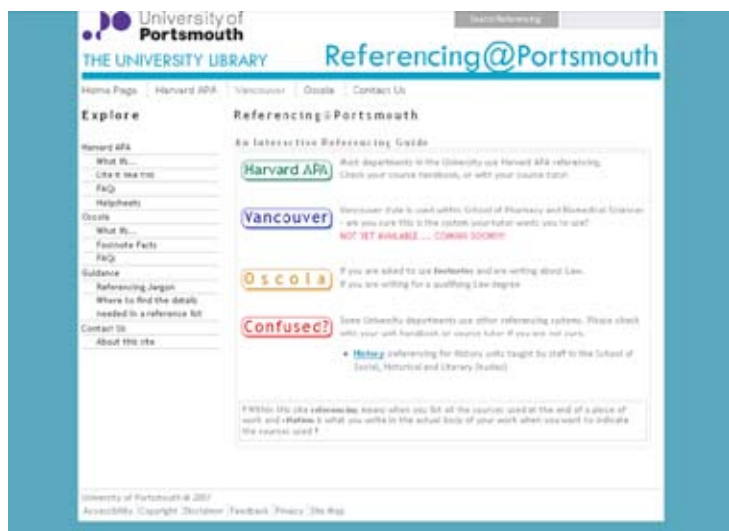

Figure 4. Page showing different reference styles

Common issues are covered in 'FAQ', 'What if' and 'Cite it' in the text pages linked directly from the home page.

PROMOTION OF REFERENCING@PORTSMOUTH

A variety of approaches has been used to promote the site within UoP. Academic staff have been targeted via presentations at internal UoP conferences, as well as via discussion of the site at internal academic committees and other meetings. Subject librarians demonstrate the site to students as part of subject-specific information literacy sessions, with some also providing quick overviews during ten-minute 'guest' slots at the beginning or end of normal lectures. Enquiry desk staff show students how to use the site if students come to the desk with a referencing query. Links to R@P are included on our library website, on the Skills@Portsmouth study skills site, on the university's VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) and on the library's Facebook page. Post-it notes and pens containing the R@P web address have proved extremely popular with students and staff alike.

Once we saw how popular R@P was becoming at Portsmouth, we thought it important to share what we had developed with other librarians because answering referencing queries is a common activity. In 2007 presentations were made to the CILIP CoFHE (Colleges of Further

and Higher Education) spring meeting held at Portsmouth and to local National Health Service librarians, and a conference paper about R@P was presented at LILAC, whilst a poster about it was presented at CILIP Umbrella conference. In July 2008 a presentation will be given at the British Business School Librarians' conference. These presentations have in turn led to more interest in the site, with several other universities requesting permission to use it.

USE OF THE SITE

Feedback told us that the site was proving popular but site statistics indicate just how much use of the site has grown during the time it has been available, for example almost a five-fold increase in use if January 2007 is compared with January 2008. Meanwhile total site access has grown from 78,607 for September 2006 – June 2007, to 157,410 for September 2007– April 2008.

	2007	*2008*
October	3,706	10,829
November	7,938	25,809
December	6,146	20,900
January	7,761	35,562
February	5,030	12,018
March	9,915	18,353
April	16,153	20,744

For each academic year, peaks in use correspond with assignment hand-in dates. Meanwhile student and staff comments, obtained via a survey in spring 2007, show just how useful R@P has become across campus and beyond:

'Very useful, found it invaluable when stuck on how to reference.' (Politics year 1 student)

'Very comprehensive and easy to use!' (Criminal justice distance learner)

'It is a great help. I have recommended it to my fellow students when they have referencing problems.' (Part-time education student)

'I use it to check odd references and also during tutorials … I think it is brilliant, easy to use, simple and clear.' (European studies lecturer)

'I advise students to have this link open in a second window whilst they are working on their essays.' (Public administration lecturer)

One student even told us that the only thing missing from the site was the essay itself!

A subject librarian's point of view

The project has given subject librarians and enquiry desk staff a different approach to how they work with students on referencing, 'working smarter' rather than harder. From comments of the staff who support academic skills, this has been a general benefit across the university. Instead of creating ad hoc replies to difficult student queries, staff are able to take a planned strategic approach which provides agreed answers to problems with new sources in line with each referencing style's basic philosophy. Routine e-mail queries can be answered with a brief message and web reference rather than creating complex parallel examples or giving lengthy explanations of punctuation, capitalisation and so on. Personal enquires can be handled with reference to the website: there is something to show the students, and they see how to use the site for themselves.

We did not count the personal enquiries we took on referencing before we created the site, but anecdotal evidence suggests that these have decreased, and are now confined to students who want someone to see whether they have an overall grasp of the style. However, one subject librarian has recorded the details of her e-mail enquiries. In the two years prior to the introduction of the site, she recorded 303 and 297 Harvard APA enquiries, plus 32 and 70 law enquiries for the OSCOLA (Oxford Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities) style. In the year after the introduction of the site, she answered only 105 Harvard APA enquiries, whilst the law enquiries rose to 124 (these collected prior to the addition of OSCOLA).

Law provides an example of how the site can help students with referencing tricky sources. The APA style manual deals only with US law, but our students are referencing mainly UK and international law. Therefore all the APA style guidance has to be invented in accordance with general APA principles. The law librarian has drawn on the expertise of lecturers in our institute of criminal justice studies for APA referencing and that of law lecturers, as well as from national experts on OSCOLA referencing.

Teaching of referencing has been modified. Instead of concentrating on the nitty-gritty of word order and punctuation, more emphasis can be placed on the underlying principles, such as traceability, recoverability and consistency. Key information literacy concepts for evaluating materials can be stressed: for example, if the student has no clear idea of authorship, the source may be less credible. Students can be encouraged to evaluate the relative merits of a reference to a blog, a government website or an actual act of parliament, and the whole idea of references appropriate to their discipline and purpose can be discussed with them.

The one major problem that remains to be solved is the process of agreeing and disseminating style-appropriate policy across the university. With new sources we need to provide timely guidance, which is not usually best sourced via the formal university committee structure. Our initial authority group was slow to respond to requests for opinions, so now we have adopted the policy of providing the best available guidance after informal e-mail consultation with appropriate individuals, but including the alert that: 'This source is not covered by the APA style manual. Check with your lecturer before using this suggestion which is based on APA style.' A similar system will be adopted for our OSCOLA pages.

Maintenance and sustainability

Maintaining the information pages is much the same as creating them. To make this an easy task for librarians not used to creating web pages, our web designer created a template in Dreamweaver (Javascript and Perl were used to make the dynamic links). For a standard information page the editor only has to fill in predetermined fields. They can therefore concentrate on the punctuation and layout of the referencing style. Updating a page is only a question of opening the off-line copy of the page, making the necessary changes, and uploading it to the web server when it is complete. A small change can be made and go live in a couple of minutes. Even the hierarchy of the selection tool can be easily and swiftly edited, by anyone who has grasped the underlying rationale. The template gives the student user a consistent layout, whatever type of source they are considering.

The first pages to be created focussed on the information sources that had been covered in the booklet which we still offer to students on the Harvard APA style. When these were in place it was possible to make the site live – we couldn't offer less in an active site than we were offering as a printed booklet, or a PDF download. The site has been developed by adding pages on other information sources, partly by trawling the APA

style manual, partly by responding to suggestions from academic colleagues and partly in response to questions raised by students. The 'Contact us' feature, which enables students to post queries to one of the project team, allows us to support them individually by e-mail, but it also alerts us to sources which we have not covered but which students are using. It prompts thinking about how the pages might be clearer, but we also use the site's pages to answer queries, so as to encourage effective use of the site.

From the beginning there was a recognition that the site had to be sustainable through changes of personnel. This meant using standard software products to build pages and so on, but also creation of shared documentation detailing all the processes involved in creating and maintaining the pages of the website. Though there are lead librarians for each of the referencing styles offered (we are now branching out from APA to OSCOLA and Vancouver, which are used by minorities in the university), deputies are or will be allocated to provide backup during leave or other absence.

PROJECT TO SERVICE: THE FUTURE

Recently the service has been enhanced not only by a new look which is in line with the revamped library website but also with the addition of sections covering Vancouver and OSCOLA. This means that from October 2009 all major conventions in use at UoP will be covered. The service is reasonably well embedded within the institution and it was gratifying that a recent review of the university's learning, teaching and assessment strategy mentions the service.

There are other referencing solutions appearing all the time, such as the facility within Word 2007 to create a bibliography, but none of them deal with those new and unusual types of information source. R@P was built using commonly available software and our own staff to create a customised solution to a problem. It requires minimal upkeep and has been put together relatively cheaply but has already significantly reduced staff time in answering referencing queries. As one student wrote:

> *'WOW that website is so helpful! THANKS'*

The site is available at: http://referencing.port.ac.uk