Web-conferencing, screen-sharing and online meeting rooms

Supporting off-campus students in their use of e-resources through online collaborative tools

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Introduction

The University of Sunderland (UoS), in the north east of England, was formerly a polytechnic; it gained university status in 1992 and now has over 22 000 students. A high proportion of students study off campus – during the academic year 2011–12 this figure was 8150. Of those, 5821 study overseas, 1857 at a UK partner college and 472 studied as independent learners. (Off-campus students at UoS study either directly through the university at a distance or through an approved partner who delivers our programmes.)

Library support to all students is provided through two campus libraries in Sunderland and one at our London campus. The services that the University Library Services (ULS) are able to offer to off-campus students are defined by students' mode of study. All UoS students are given full access to the library's electronic resources using a combination of a single sign-on system powered by Open Athens and a proxy server.

Although students can access e-resources, they often do not know how to do so and struggle to determine the best tool to start their research; as a result they report difficulty in finding relevant resources. Liaison librarians within ULS are able to address these issues with on-campus students through skills-for-learning sessions – usually one-shot sessions organised by the member of academic staff leading the module and tailored to the subject. ULS have at times found it difficult to

offer an equitable service to our distance-learning students. Contact is provided primarily via an email enquiry service and help guides (and later asynchronous online tutorials) available through our library website. Until recently ULS did not have the means to deliver skills support online successfully. Advances in educational and social technologies prompted the distance-services librarian to review the service and investigate how ULS could best use technology to enhance distance-learning support.

This article will highlight the experience of ULS staff in developing a synchronous, interactive online workshop to introduce distance-learning students to our e-resources and equip them with the skills they need to search them.

Background

In May 2010 the distance-services librarian was invited to deliver a 45-minute online library session to business students studying at a partner centre in Morocco as part of an arranged video-conferencing session. With two working days' notice, and never having offered this service previously, we were initially unsure of the best software to use. We decided on Skype, and asked our partner in Morocco to ensure a computer with Skype was attached to an overhead projector. The session went better than we could have hoped. Students in Morocco watched the web-conference on a large screen and we were able to talk to them via the video-conferencing facility and navigate them through key parts of our website and e-resources using the screen-sharing tool. A co-ordinator in Morocco facilitated the session by controlling the PC and ensured that student questions were communicated through the chat window.

Success in delivering this last-minute online session prompted the distance-services librarian to explore how web-conferencing tools could be exploited to develop a consistent service to distance-learning students and partner staff. Three years later, following a lot of experimentation and a number of pilot studies, we are developing several online support services that utilise web-conferencing software.

Partner staff development

Following the Skype session in May 2010, the Faculty of Business and Law have requested similar sessions to raise library awareness among our partner academic and library staff. Skype is the

preferred method of the faculty and the partners, largely because they regularly use it to hold meetings and are familiar with it. Our experience is that it works well for library sessions with partner staff, who tend to want a concise overview of the library service from a student perspective as well as details of our services for partner staff. Sessions are usually about 50 minutes and there is a lot of information to cover. This is easily achieved through a combination of video-conferencing and screen-sharing.

WEB-CONFERENCING USING ANYMEETING

Although Skype had proved a useful tool on one-to-one presentations, we wanted to find a tool that would permit several groups of people to video chat and screen share concurrently. Following a comparison of different web-conferencing tools we identified several products that met our initial criteria – it should be free or low cost, easy to use, and should accommodate groups as well as individuals. In 2012 we started experimenting with a free web-conferencing tool called AnyMeeting to deliver online library presentations to overseas students. In contrast to Skype, which allows only ten concurrent users as part of a premium package, AnyMeeting enables 200 concurrent participants in addition to video-conferencing, online chat and the facility to share a PowerPoint presentation or your browser through the screen-sharing tool.

These sessions were open to any overseas students who signed up in advance; an average of twenty attended each. All sessions followed the same format:

- PowerPoint introduction
- screen-sharing: highlighting useful areas of the website
- screen-sharing: demonstration of e-resources, in particular e-books and journals
- PowerPoint: summarising services for distance learners and where to find help
- chat window: questions and answers

Afterwards, students were asked to complete an online evaluation form. The response rate was quite low at 12% but overall, feedback was positive, with thirteen students (out of 15 respondents) reporting that after following the session they were more confident about finding e-books and fourteen reporting that they felt more confident about finding journal articles.

ONLINE ROOMS AND COLLABORATIVE TOOLS

At the start of summer 2012, after reading literature on web-conferencing and e-learning, the distance-services librarian wanted to continue exploring other web-conferencing programmes in order to identify one that would encourage greater interaction between participants and the facilitator. We hoped to introduce an online workshop series for distance learners that would offer more than a standard presentation. It seemed that other institutions that offered similar services used industry-standard programs such as Elluminate or Adobe Connect. At the time UoS did not have access to these programs so we continued experimenting and eventually came across Vyew.

Vyew provides free web-conferencing along with standard features such as chat and screen-sharing, and was chosen because not only does the free version permit ten concurrent participants, it also includes a collaborative white-board which can be used for uploading documents, videos, presentations or for building interactivity into sessions. It comes with editing tools such as pens, highlighters and sticky notes for use on the white-board. In addition it offers both synchronous and asynchronous access. Sessions can be saved and accessed any time afterwards. We decided to upgrade to a paid account so that we could increase the number of concurrent users to forty.

Following the launch of Discover, our new resource discovery tool in August 2012, the distance-services librarian held a series of workshops using Vyew, called 'Discover great resources'. They included a short introductory PowerPoint presentation but centred primarily on screen-sharing to demonstrate how to use Discover, with videos embedded into the white-board and activities such as polls and questions, which students answered using the pen tool or sticky notes.

These workshops were followed up in November 2012 with an online drop-in service, again using Vyew. This was scheduled to help students as they were preparing assignments. The distance-services librarian was available in the online room at advertised times to answer student questions about resources or to offer advice.

Our efforts to use these technologies, although mostly positive, have not been problem free. As with all technology, sometimes things just don't work. We've had a couple on instances where screen-sharing has failed, or audio difficulties meant that some students could not hear the ses-

sion. Sometimes the problem was that the internet connections in some parts of the world where our students are based are not capable of running video-conferencing software. We've learned that you still need a back-up plan, just as you would with an on-campus session when the internet is down. You may still need screenshots and alternative ways to convey information or keep students engaged. It is our experience that students understand when such problems occur. We re-scheduled one session after the first attempt was fraught with technical difficulties. Students were happy to try again.

Overall, we feel the use of Vyew has been successful. Not only is it easy for us to use but also easy for students – and being web-based there has been no additional software to download nor have logins been required.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The distance-services librarian has begun working with colleagues to offer further online skills training using Vyew. Recently we have run a pilot project using problem-based learning within the online Vyew classroom to develop sessions for further education students.[1] We also plan to continue our online workshop programme throughout 2013–14 and are exploring the functionality of our new virtual learning environment (VLE). We're currently investigating the use of Class Live (Blackboard Collaborate, formerly Elluminate) which is integrated into the VLE. This is likely to replace Vyew as our tool for group workshops because it is does not require a separate subscription. However, we think the free version of Vyew will continue to be a useful tool in one-to-one support or as a means of offering asynchronous support.

NOTES

1   C. Stevenson and L. Young, 'A room without walls: using problem based learning in a collaborative real-time virtual space to develop critical research skills in an FE college', Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) 2013, 25–27 March 2013, University of Manchester (unpublished). Available at: http://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/3885