

# Library support to students on blended-learning courses

## Some thoughts on best practice



**Karen E McAulay**  
Performing Arts Librarian/  
Postdoctoral Researcher  
Library & Information Services  
Royal Conservatoire of  
Scotland  
[k.mcaulay@rcs.ac.uk](mailto:k.mcaulay@rcs.ac.uk)

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### Introduction

Many academic librarians learn how to teach on the job and are self-taught, through attendance at short courses or reading a little theory. We wonder whether we are using the most appropriate and current teaching methods to provide a good learning experience for students. To develop my teaching, I studied for a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Arts Education, itself a blended-learning programme. An extended project as part of the course offered me the opportunity to explore ways to supplement class-based tuition with self-help materials such as podcasts, vodcasts and other digital media. Having studied alongside this blended learning cohort, as well as providing their information literacy classes, they were a natural choice for me to engage with for this project.

There were several factors to consider when designing the teaching material:

- A large percentage of the programme was delivered to the ninety-strong cohort by distance learning, so electronic information resources were expected to be used.
- The majority of the class were mature students.
- Whilst teaching the class on earlier occasions, I had observed that a percentage of the students had already tried and failed to use e-resources, giving up rather than seeking help.
- One-to-one instruction remained an option, but it could not be scheduled for the entire cohort due to time constraints and other duties.

As a librarian becoming more involved both with both teaching information literacy skills and occasionally teaching musicology in a quasi-academic capacity, this was a golden opportunity to explore the following questions in order to clarify best practice:

1. Were there common stumbling blocks to learning? And did the project interventions help?
2. Did a student's level of confidence affect how they might approach self-help materials?
3. What did this particular cohort need, to enable them to get maximum benefit from the online resources available?

Reading about best practice in the classroom helped clarify what might be different in the library or information-literacy context, since librarians engaged in one-off teaching sessions face different challenges to teachers regularly engaging with the same class. In this article I share my findings as they may prove useful, particularly to newcomers to the field.

### Best practice

At the outset of the project, examples of best practice were noted in SCONUL Focus issue 67 (SCONUL, 2016) focusing on professional development. Fresh approaches were sourced through the literature and social media, but some, although appealing, were unsuitable for distance learners who seldom meet in class. For example, in 2016, University of South Wales faculty librarian Sue House tweeted from a course led by N. W. D. Bowskill about the social identity approach to induction activities (Bowskill, 2013; McAulay, 2018). By encouraging students to share at the outset what they hoped to gain from a particular orientation activity, the idea is to promote a sense of being part of a group with a common aim. Whilst this aspect of the social identity theory can reasonably be incorporated into physical library induction, and equally into the start of an online seminar, Bowskill's method also entails the use of classroom response systems ('clickers'), which are not currently a regular part of my institutions' teaching apparatus, and which could not be incorporated into an online group session.

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### Technology

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Whilst exploring different technologies and approaches for delivering online instruction, I explored the use of podcasts, since they clearly have value in being easy for time-challenged students to access, and can be replayed as needed, not to mention being easy to produce from the instructor's point of view. The learning potential of podcasts is explored by Starak (2005–2019), whilst Brabazon (2006) discusses the benefits both of podcasting and of vlogs (video logs), which offer the added advantage of the visual element. The latter was obviously required for the project, as I wished to design learning materials showing students where to find and how to use electronic resources, including screenshots of different parts of the process; audio podcasts were unsuitable for this purpose. Time considerations ruled out building an intervention that both imparted information and tested its absorption, despite the potential of learning tools such as quizzes, so interactive applications were not considered.

I explored a range of tools to create the materials:

- YouTube tutorials provided by publishers and suppliers have their place. Professionally produced, they save time and provide effective training. However, these were ruled out for the project, as the course assessment required the material to be of my own design.
- Screencast-o-Matic (2018) enables live video to be incorporated into a presentation. It requires the presenter to feel comfortable with speaking to camera to convey a sense of authority. This tool was not ruled out for future use, but I did not have time to explore how to use it effectively.
- Biteable (2018) animations are simple and effective for very short, punchy presentations, but the templates did not offer the flexibility needed for more complex concepts.
- PowerPoint with audio commentary was my final choice, a format I'm very familiar with.

### Methodology

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The project used a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. I sent a SurveyMonkey questionnaire to the entire cohort to assess confidence in information literacy and library skills, asking them to trial two brief presentations, one introducing e-books and e-journals, and the other referencing ('citation'); and to answer some simple questions so that I could assess what worked well, and where improvements might be made. Respondents were asked to express their willingness to be interviewed later for more in-depth discussion. Eighteen responses were received, and three respondents were willing to be interviewed.

### Results and analysis

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The literature highlights that it is good practice to provide different media and a variety of approaches, to accommodate different individuals' preferred learning methods. The results of the questionnaire supported this, underlining the value of experimentation with different technologies to create a variety of instructional materials.

Students generally felt that they had learned something from each intervention – perhaps even more so from the referencing one, since it was a skill they'd soon need to use. Questionnaire respondents were almost unanimous that both interventions would have helped new students; one observed that it would have been better than the conventional on-site class instruction that they had received. (The class tutor had requested that the students should receive a library tour and instruction in compiling a bibliography from print materials on one of their infrequent visits to campus.)

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Reactions to the trialled interventions were generally positive, but obviously there were nearly as many differing comments as there were respondents. However, there was a fairly strong common thread relating to students' perceived learning styles. Although the theory of learning styles has recently been discredited amongst educationalists (Busch, 2016; Goldhill, 2016; Weale, 2016), older students grew up during the peak popularity of this ideology and may have firm ideas about how they learn best.

As described in my introduction, I posed three questions to which I was seeking answers. The first was to establish whether there were common stumbling blocks to learning, and to find out if the project interventions helped, whilst the second question followed on from this: did a student's level of confidence affect how they might approach self-help materials?

It was clear from the questionnaire responses that students who have newly returned to higher education feel challenged by online resources that they've never encountered before, whether in accessing content, or in learning to manipulate data in bibliographies and bibliographic software. Step-by-step instructions focusing on one area at a time are much appreciated. Mature students fitting their learning into already busy lives appreciate bite-sized offerings that they can start, stop and repeat as needed.

Both the questionnaire and the interviews confirmed that students' confidence in using libraries, and their past experiences, do have a bearing on how they approached unfamiliar media or new processes. Two interviewees had positive feelings about libraries, recalling favourable experiences of using them as a child, or, indeed, establishing a library-visiting habit with their own children. The third interviewee had felt intimidated by libraries even in card-catalogue days, and was clearly anxious and uncertain about online resources, never having encountered them before. (Additionally, albeit not as part of this investigation, I have encountered students who have reached postgraduate education before a diagnosis of, for example, dyslexia, which may have adversely affected their learning and their attitudes to libraries previously.)

My third and final question asked what the cohort needed in order to get maximum benefit from the library's electronic resources and from bibliographic software.

Questionnaire responses requested more multimedia content, openly stating learning preferences, e.g. by watching video; by seeing the speaker (to help concentration); by using animation; by using screencast technology; or, 'make it interactive. I learn by doing'. With today's abundance of commercially-produced, multi-media videos, games, etc., some respondents' expectations set the bar high, requesting that the instructional material should be made 'more entertaining, such as using music or visual elements', or 'animated visual aids'. In designing learning tools, a variety of activities and media undoubtedly affords students better opportunities to learn.

By contrast, other students appreciated the teaching material's clarity, and welcomed the mere fact that the presentations helped raise awareness of what is actually available. Responses sometimes exceeded the questions asked, with one student also requesting a 'help' button on the catalogue and a 24:7 live-chat facility.

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### Lessons learnt

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There were lessons to be learnt both in pedagogical terms, and regarding the use of different technologies.

In terms of contextualising the learning tools, students would have benefited from further clarification as to what they could expect to have learned by the end of each one. Stating at the outset exactly what they would learn helps manage expectations. Moreover, one should not make too many assumptions about what is already known; 'stating the obvious' is sometimes far from obvious to less experienced students.

Respondents also made valid suggestions for future interventions, with a common theme being the demand for detailed instructions on a single process: for example, step-by-step instruction in various aspects of each topic; introductions to each of the bibliographic citation softwares described; a live screencast of using the Mendeley widget; or how to export saved references as a bibliography.

Technologically, it is important to factor in plenty of time for mastering new applications (e.g. Screencast-o-Matic, for capturing presentations on video), in order to gain fluency and confidence. It is also worth keeping an eye on the relevant literature and social media, in order to learn about recent developments that might be particularly useful.

At the same time, it is obviously a good idea to liaise closely with learning technologist colleagues. As an example, I realised too late that collaboration with a learning technologist colleague would have made it possible to render recordings a smaller size by compromising slightly on quality – worth consideration for the benefit of students using mobile phones or slow internet connections.

### Conclusion

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There is value in librarians acquiring knowledge and understanding of pedagogical theories and best practice. It increases credibility with teaching colleagues and maximises the chances that students will benefit from the teaching that we provide as part of their courses.

Today's learners have more sophisticated expectations than the 'chalk and talk' that previous generations accepted as the norm. The project outcomes illustrate that it is demonstrably worth experimenting with different technologies to create a variety of online self-help instructional materials.

### Guidelines for good practice in devising information skills teaching

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Below are guidelines for those either new to teaching or wishing to review their current teaching.

1. Identify where students might experience difficulty in accessing or exploiting resources.
2. Remember that students have varying levels of skill in using online resources, or in learning new techniques.
3. Recognise that students come with different past experiences of libraries, of learning; and perhaps with known or undiagnosed disabilities.
4. Liaise with teaching staff. They can then recommend both the training materials and relevant e-resources, in connection with particular assignments.
5. Consider the course curriculum, prioritising which applications most urgently merit learning provision.

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6. The most suitable venue for live training may be a computer suite rather than a library.
7. Where an online learning tool is to be created, establish the most appropriate format, and consider multimedia.
8. Acquire basic skills in appropriate technologies, e.g. recording a presentation with commentary; using Screencast-o-matic; or saving a learning tool to the cloud and creating a weblink for posting online.
9. Collaborate with educational technologists.
10. Be realistic.
11. Learning tools must be concise and to the point (five to seven minutes at most), coherently scripted and clearly spoken, and must convey a friendly and helpful approach.
12. Consider saving learning tools in differently sized files.
13. Draw upon existing instructional materials, e.g. publisher's YouTube videos.
14. Learning tools should be easily accessible, and easy to find on Moodle, the library portal or both.
15. Keep abreast of both the curriculum and technical developments.
16. Watch out for new ideas in the professional literature, and for opportunities to share experiences.

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