Levelling the playing field
Embedding academic skills for postgraduate students

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Introduction

Academic skills at university level often involve expertise from different professional areas. Whilst the academic librarian (information literacy) and learning development tutor may coordinate their sessions, they often deliver content separately. The model we chose to adopt with one particular cohort was to deliver some aspects collaboratively by team teaching, in addition to facilitating separate sessions; this allowed the students to understand the difference in our expertise as well as the synergy that exists in our roles. The cohesive approach supported students' academic skills development; it also allowed evaluation of the sessions to consider different perspectives, which helped when planning future content.

Normally we prepare sessions in isolation from students' perspectives, as the skills requirement is informed via a dialogue with academic staff. This article outlines the value of a collaborative approach in gaining an initial understanding of competencies at level 7 and in being responsive to needs of the students. The authors involved all stakeholders in this process, as sometimes the needs of the students are interpreted differently by academics than by the students themselves. This approach produced organic and tailored sessions to level the playing field amongst the students.

Background

The University of Northampton prides itself on putting the student at the centre of university life. Faculties hold termly Student–Staff Liaison Committees (SSLC); this is one of many mechanisms used to gain feedback from students. In the previous academic year's SSLC, MSc Counselling students extolled the benefits of the sessions they had received from Library and Learning Services (LLS); the academic librarian and learning development tutor had embedded sessions in the programme and students had really appreciated the support we offered at the start of the course. This was echoed by other postgraduate students and motivated us to standardise our approach for postgraduate programmes in the faculty. Therefore a collaborative approach was designed with the programme tutor to embed academic and information literacy skills in the level 7 programme (MSc Counselling Children and Young People (CCYP)). This design was similar to the Integrated Learner Support system (ILS) of the undergraduate students in delivering skills at the time required and linked to assignments (University of Northampton, 2019a).

Organic and integrated content

In level 7 CCYP, the majority of students are mature learners, usually within a professional service, and are already engaged with service users. These students bring independence, focus and richness of experience to their studies (Chapman, 2017, p.116). Although they are worldly-wise, they can be afraid of the academic content of the course on account of the time that has passed between their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Therefore part of our role is to demystify the expectations of level 7 academic content and establish the role of 'allies' to students (Farmer, 2019); in this way a combined and embedded approach enabled us to foster confidence.

Some academics may assume that students have basic information literacy skills (Shannon and Shannon, 2016, p.458). There can also be an expectation that postgraduate students have mastered the fundamental skills of an undergraduate and are therefore fluent in digital literacy and academic writing. However, perhaps on account of changes in the study environment, some skills may never have been refined or used. To ensure that students feel they have the tools with which to perform at level 7, it is our role to encourage, scaffold and improve their abilities and confidence. We perceive that information literacy skills are a core set of skills that help students with academic study and

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to go on to professional success (CILIP, 2018; ACRL, 2016; SCONUL, 2016). Therefore we designed the sessions to help students develop their existing skills, by actively engaging and helping them to make balanced judgements about the information sources they use, and build informed arguments in their assignments.

To avoid making assumptions about the students' skills and pitching sessions at the wrong level, we opened a discussion with the students to encourage them to share their own good practice and to ask questions about the challenges or concerns they faced in academic study. Supporting the development of these academic skills paved a way for the content to be viewed as essential, and further supported our credibility in delivering the sessions. In addition, all sessions offered subject-specific examples, as this was viewed as fundamental to supporting the development of academic skills. As Gunn et al. (2011, p.5) argue, learning is more effective when academic skills are integral to the students' discipline. This method facilitated skills development and introduced strategies for the students to become effective independent learners: these were the desired goals of the students at the start of the programme. The sessions were created to level the playing field in academic skills and encourage the students to reflect on their own practices.

Session overview

Session 1 Academic librarian	**How to find research literature (two groups)** To assess the ability of the group, open questions were used; it was evident that there was a huge variety of skills and confidence levels. The open discussion at the start of the session allowed me to respond to student queries throughout and allay any concerns. In the workshop students explored keywords around their topic, planned their search and learned practical tips and techniques for navigating key databases.
Session 2 Academic librarian and Learning development tutor	**Managing sources and avoiding plagiarism (one large group)** As a starter activity we used an online quiz for students to vote for their desired session content (Mentimeter, [n.d.]). We then adapted the content in response to student feedback. Based on the experience of previous support sessions and anecdotal feedback from the tutor, we were aware that time management was important. Therefore we highlighted smarter working techniques and discussed the amount of time it can take to find relevant literature. We shared examples from our own experience of managing and synthesising academic research.
Session 3 Learning development tutor	**Writing: Personal reflexivity (reflection) (two groups)** The final session was targeted towards the upcoming reflexive assignment. Dialogue with the programme leader and consideration of the assessment guidelines informed the planning. The session adopted active blended learning techniques (ABL) (University of Northampton, 2019b) with a series of structured tasks. Each task began with students reflecting on their own experiences. This fostered growing confidence; paired and group talk enabled experiences to be shared and skills to be built. Elements of reflexivity such as perspective were explored before applying this to academic writing. We promoted the importance of maintaining a balance between writing reflexively and academically, ensuring that students understood how this related to their specific assignment.

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What worked well

- The collaborative approach enabled cohesion between the members of the team, each expert in their field; this demonstrated to the students the links between different aspects of academic writing.

- Relating the session directly to their assignment built our credibility with the group and encouraged the students to engage.

- After reflecting on previous sessions exploring mindful reflection, we chose to adapt the activities used with other groups to better suit the needs of these learners.

- Building relationships between the members of the team and the students encouraged them to see us as allies whom they could contact for further support.

- Reflecting on the first two sessions led to a more active approach in the final session. This worked well, and next academic year we shall ensure all sessions use this level of ABL.

Thoughts for next time

- It was challenging working with a large group, as interaction from the students was reduced. Smaller group dynamics encouraged more relaxed and open discussion in the first and third sessions. Therefore we plan to maintain the smaller groups for all three sessions in the next academic year.

- The interaction between us and the students was unintentionally limited because there was some reluctance from students to engage in the Mentimeter [n.d.] in session 2. The group found the technology off-putting – it was the wrong pitch for these students. In the light of this, we shall explore different technologies to enable us to collect queries before the session. This will give the students a chance to reflect on their skills before the session and will allow more time for us to design targeted, active content.

- Allowing students time to reflect and identify issues before the session should help them acknowledge where their skills need to be developed and how the content will help them address their needs. This should encourage them to commit to developing their skills further and adopting the strategies we are sharing with them.

Conclusion

This series of workshops demonstrates how we have adapted to the changing needs of the student group and has helped to level the playing field for them. We should like to explore further the support we can offer collaboratively by evaluating the effectiveness of the sessions and drawing on concrete evidence. The more formal evaluation will provide us with opportunities to reflect on and share our experience of supporting postgraduate students as they develop their academic and information literacy skills.

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