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Collaboration on a grand scale: facilitating the transition of first year students into higher education.

This article describes the development and delivery of a new research and study skills module delivered to all students in an undergraduate degree programme in Dublin City University. It discusses the benefits and challenges of successful collaboration between academics, librarians and other key support staff.

Introduction

In the Summer of 2007 we were approached by our School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies (SALIS) to develop a module on study and research skills for all first year students taking the Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies programme. SALIS staff felt that there was a demonstrated need for this module. Incoming first year students were missing fundamental research, information seeking and basic IT skills. Two other university partners were invited to contribute; The Teaching & Learning Unit, and The Computer Services Department.

The collaborative part

As this module was a collaborative project with other units, we were eager to place our sessions in the context of the material that was delivered by our colleagues. This proved easier said than done! Unfortunately, it was difficult to ascertain in advance what exactly each of the other three providers would be covering. We knew that SALIS would be providing instruction for students as to how to negotiate university life and that preparation for and assessment of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) would also be covered. Our colleague in Teaching and Learning was to introduce reflective learning and would be asking the students to keep a reflective journal. However, this was all of the advance information we had to work with.

Whilst the library had been delivering embedded sessions to students that were context appropriate and had an inbuilt assessment with marks contributing to programme grades, this was the first time I had been asked to co plan a module that had input from both academic and non academic colleagues. Initially we had a series of round table discussions about what content to include; as time became scarce, we collaborated via email.

Our face to face meetings concerned the logistics of scheduling the sessions. Some components of the module required sessions on a particular date - for example the ECDL exam which was organised by our computer services department. The remaining time slots were allocated evenly to the other units. Unfortunately, when the planning of the module moved to email, we lost a valuable discussion opportunity. It was difficult to ascertain what content our colleagues would cover and therefore we progressed the planning of the library sessions with a certain sense of 'tunnel vision'.

Planning the Programme

In total, the library provided five contact hours to each student. We planned the sessions paying close attention to the module aims which included:

- Introducing students to technologies and resources that would underpin their work at university
- Enabling students to gather, interpret and present information
- Introducing students to academic writing skills (writing, reviewing, editing, referencing)
- Enabling students to reflect on their work practice and progress

The library was well placed to facilitate first year students' transition into and advancement within, their university career.

Our three level information literacy framework had been in operation for a number of years and this module provided scope for us to deliver and expand on level one objectives of this structure. Level two objectives include accessing resources outside our institution, advanced web searching, compiling a bibliography and are typically delivered to second and third year students. Level three objectives include understanding the literature review process, developing a deeper knowledge of subject specific resources, managing and organising citation using bibliographic management software. This level is usually delivered to final year or postgraduate students.

Delivery of sessions

Whilst we were able to expand on the level one objectives of this framework, we made sure that our session learning outcomes were closely aligned to the overall aims of the module and that this was communicated to all students from the start. This was important as the students were much more likely to learn well if they knew exactly what learning outcomes they would achieve, from session one.

Conscious that the majority of our students were coming to us directly from secondary education, we wanted to carry out some diagnostic assessment, which entailed a short ten question worksheet in session one (see appendix 1). This proved a useful ice breaker and enabled us to get an idea of where they were coming from in terms of information searching skills. It was also vital in informing our planning for the remaining sessions. We also used this session to introduce them to an academic library and broke them into groups for hands on sessions.

The remaining sessions covered use of the catalogue, planning a search strategy and citing and referencing. We were keen to ensure a strong element of interaction and reflection by the students and encouraged them to provide alternative solutions to queries. Breaking them into groups and getting them to evaluate the 'how' and 'why' of their peers' approach to finding and evaluating information was extremely effective in getting the message across.

Lessons Learnt

Throughout the library sessions, we were determined to provide ongoing formative assessment so students could improve their learning and we could diagnose their strengths and weaknesses. I think we could have facilitated the former more effectively, had we provided timely feedback both at the time of the assessment and via our Virtual Learning Environment – Moodle

After each 'teacher' had delivered their sessions, the content was posted on our VLE. I believe that had this content been available offline to all teachers at the planning stages, we could have delivered a much more cohesive module to the students.

When this module had been completed, the students provided feedback as to how they felt it had gone. We received a huge amount of support for our contribution, with just some suggestions for improvement. Some students felt the library content could have been condensed from five to four hours. Others would have valued more time dedicated to citing, referencing and plagiarism.

Advanced information concerning the number of incoming students registered for the programme would also have been hugely beneficial. Last year, these numbers could only be confirmed one week prior to the commencement of the programme. This meant organisation of resources and any required planning for staff support was limited.

I also believe that it would have been hugely beneficial to those of us working on the module this coming year if there had been a closing meeting attended by all four partners last year, especially as it had been the first year of the module, to share ideas around what worked and what didn't.

Conclusion

After completing the first year of this module, we in the library have come to realise that there were definite potential synergies around content preparation. I am happy to say that planning for the second year of this first year module has begun early. The remaining departments have changed personnel and I am in the fortunate position of being the only person with experience of what worked and what didn't last year. Each department involved will also now have an opportunity to formally assess their component – a factor which will inevitably increase the number of students attending a session first thing on a Monday morning!

It is becoming increasingly important to liaise with colleagues from units across the university - both academic and support staff - to ensure that delivery of information literacy sessions is both content and context appropriate. Nurturing this liaison relationship is even more of a challenge when there are three to four partners involved. However, I strongly believe that if a module such as this is afforded enough time and dedication at the planning stages, the rewards for both students and teacher can be substantial. Although sometimes frustrated over the planning and sharing of content with colleagues, it has been an exciting, rewarding and very worthwhile experience.

References

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Appendix 1 overleaf

Appendix 1

Student ID number: _____

1. All books in the Library are arranged on the shelves by:

    Title   ☐

    Author   ☐

    Subject   ☐

    Publisher   ☐

2. Choose the best source for each information need below. *(Use each source only once.)*

	Newspaper	Dictionary	Encylopedia	Book	Scholarly Journal
Up-to-date report on Sudan					
The latest research into parkinson's disease					
Background or overview of a topic					
In-depth analysis of the Irish Civil War in 1922					
Definition of "Plagiarism"					

3. Which of the following would you <u>NOT</u> find using the Library's Catalogue?

    Videos/ DVDs held in the Library   ☐

    Newspapers held in the Library   ☐

    Magazine or Journal articles   ☐

    Theses held in the Library   ☐

4. Which is the best way to find a book <u>about</u> Oscar Wilde using the Library Catalogue?

    Search by Author   ☐

    Search by Title   ☐

    Search by Publisher   ☐

    Search by Call Number   ☐

5. Which of the following is a characteristic of a scholarly journal?

    Contains lots of advertisements   ☐

    The vocabulary used is non technical (for a general audience)   ☐

Articles are written by the journal's own staff ☐

All articles are peer-reviewed ☐

6. A book you are reading contains the following footnote:

Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking racism: Towards a structural interpretation. American Sociological Review, 62, 465-480.

This citation refers to:

A journal ☐

A website ☐

A book ☐

A journal article ☐

7. Choose which option orders the topic from its more general to its most narrow:

Housing in 1930s, Housing in Ireland in the 1930s, Housing ☐

Housing in Ireland the 1930's, Housing in the 1930's, Housing ☐

Housing, Housing in Ireland, Housing in Ireland in the 1930s ☐

8. Which of the following is NOT an appropriate factor for evaluating a source of information?

How high it ranks in Google ☐

Date of publication ☐

Objectivity ☐

Author's background and credentials ☐

9. Deliberately failing to give credit to your sources of information in your assignments is called:

Abstracting ☐

Partial citation ☐

Copyright ☐

Plagiarism ☐

10. Which one of the following do you NOT need to cite?

A chart from a textbook ☐

A theory or opinion of your own ☐

A theory or opinion of someone else ☐

A piece of information from a website ☐