
Bringing it all together: working in partnership across our university



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INTRODUCTION

Our university is a multi-sited institution with students studying in the UK and overseas in a wide variety of disciplines and modes. The Anglia Ruskin corporate plan 2009–2011 commits us, amongst other things, to gaining recognition for ‘successful innovation in the way in which services are provided’ and to ‘educating an equal number of students off-site and on-site’.¹

This article tells of two library projects within our university. The first is intended to offer library-skills support to on-site students in an innovative and flexible manner. The second is intended to offer support to our growing numbers of off-site learners. The two projects have been developed separately but have recently been brought together as we work to offer equivalent library support to all students across and beyond our sites. Both projects have involved library staff in working across sites and in forging new relationships with colleagues outside the library.

ACCESSIBLE AND FLEXIBLE

‘Lunchtime in the library’ began life as a programme of drop-in, informal, generic library-skills sessions offered in the library at lunchtimes.

Topics ranged from making sense of reading lists and using the digital library to help with Harvard referencing. The programme received wide support from academic staff and positive feedback from student participants. From its first beginnings at our Cambridge site library, ‘Lunchtime in the library’ grew and spread to our other major site at Chelmsford.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Meanwhile, conversations at Chelmsford had begun with colleagues in our student support services department. Staff there were struggling to meet demand from students for study-skills support and finding that one-to-one sessions could no longer meet that demand. A proposal was made to extend the ‘Lunchtime in the library’ programme beyond library skills to include general study skills such as essay-writing, academic reading and revision for exams. A joint programme of events began in academic year 2007/08 with shared publicity on the university library website.² This programme again proved popular and was welcomed by academic staff and the student union.

In spring 2008 the university library embarked on a senior-staff re-structure that would enhance our cross-site working capabilities. Two new sites had also joined our university – nurse-education sites at Fulbourn (Cambridge) and Peterborough. With these sites had come two new libraries with staff who were keen to join in the ‘Lunchtime in the library’ programme. Cross-site working therefore became an even greater imperative. Student support services in Cambridge had also become aware, from the Chelmsford experience, of the benefits of working within an advertised programme of events to meet the needs of greater numbers of students. They too expressed interest in joining the project. It was clear that a co-ordinator was needed to draw all the participants together and a faculty liaison librarian was asked to take on the task.

CHALLENGES

One challenge for the library was how to ensure that all four library sites were offering similar, equivalent library-skills sessions whilst still leaving flexibility in the programme for professional librarians to respond to individual students’ needs. A further challenge was to address the needs of our off-site users for comparable generic library-skills support. The objectives already referred to in the corporate plan meant that we

could expect our number of off-site learners to grow. We knew that we needed to develop our online support, hitherto consisting mainly of static guides and help sheets, and offer a more flexible and interactive approach.

AN ONLINE TUTORIAL

As far back as 2006, a working group had been formed to look at the possibility of developing an online information-skills tutorial. It began with a scoping exercise to look at what other university libraries were already doing, and in early 2007 a small group set about mapping out how some of the content in our existing guides, including material that had been put together for 'Lunchtime in the library' at Cambridge, could be adapted for online use.

We realised that in order to achieve our objective we would need expertise not necessarily available in the library, particularly in web design and in the broader context of online learning, and colleagues in 'Inspire', the university's learning and teaching unit, agreed to work with us. However, it rapidly became clear that the amounts of work and time that would be involved in devising our own tutorial were too great, bearing in mind existing workloads, and we decided to go back to our original scoping exercise and look for an institution which might be willing to let us use and adapt its existing material.

Towards the end of 2007 an approach was made to Queensland University of Technology in Australia for permission to use and adapt its tutorial 'Pilot: your information navigator'.³ We were aware that other institutions, including Leeds Metropolitan University, had already done so. QUT kindly gave us permission in the spirit of information commons and a basic project plan was drawn up.

Phase 1

It was decided that the project should consist of two phases, with the first to be completed by September 2008. This consisted principally of removing QUT-specific material and examples and replacing them with our own, while leaving the overall content and look of the tutorial unchanged. Due to this timescale, some elements present in the original had to be removed from phase 1 for technical reasons, including a general search facility and a quiz. The editorial work involved in adapting 'Pilot' was shared out among a team of six library staff based at three sites. This initially caused some workflow problems, particularly when members began making the agreed changes

to the tutorial using Adobe Contribute software. Cross-site working underlined the need for a clear structure with the faculty liaison librarian in charge of the project maintaining overall control and publishing the final version. Frequent meetings of the editorial group were held, both face to face and by videoconference, and a central log of problems and progress was maintained. A further three staff joined the project during the summer of 2008 to create some interactive elements for 'Pilot' using Adobe Captivate. This led to further challenges in trying to maintain overall consistency in style, but all staff appreciated the opportunity to work with colleagues across the sites and to learn new skills.

Prior to launch, other members of library staff not hitherto involved in the project worked through the tutorial to check for errors and 'Pilot' was ready slightly behind schedule on 6 October 2008.⁴ The tutorial has been available for use by students and staff for over six months and, although anecdotal evidence suggests that it has been well received and is being used, we have not yet succeeded in gathering proper evaluative feedback from users.

Phase 2

We are now turning our attention to phase 2 of the 'Pilot' project and discussing the way forward. As well as reinstating some elements such as a quiz (which will give us some of the feedback we need) and improving the navigation throughout, there are exciting possibilities of developing what is largely generic content into a range of subject areas. Other aspirations include improving interactivity and re-branding in Anglia Ruskin style.

MOVING FORWARD

To return to the challenges mentioned earlier in our article, 'Pilot' has helped us to move forward with on-site, cross-site and off-site library-skills support 24x7. From September 2008 we have been able to use 'Pilot' as a background framework for our 'Lunchtime in the library' sessions. Basing our lesson plans on parts of the online tutorial has helped us to achieve a degree of uniformity in sessions across our diverse library sites. Librarians with varying degrees of experience in teaching students have been able to use elements of 'Pilot' in the sessions, and to engage students in some of the activities within the tutorial. Not only that, students can also be encouraged to return to the tutorial in their own time after the session, and re-read and re-do various sections. In our referencing

sessions particularly we have found 'Pilot' to be a useful additional teaching tool.

For our off-site users we feel that we are now developing a resource which offers them equivalent and comparable library-skills support to their on-site colleagues. Further subject-specific support materials within 'Pilot' will enhance the tutorial in the future. To achieve these improvements we will work with colleagues across our library and university again to draw in the skills and ideas needed to create a truly interactive resource.

CONCLUSION

As we reflect on these two projects and their progress so far, we can identify benefits beyond the obvious ones of increased, flexible support for our users. Both projects have required library staff to work together across sites to achieve objectives. This has been an important building block in the process of drawing four diverse sites into one university library service. Beyond the library the projects have involved us in joint working with a variety of colleagues around our university and outside. These contacts broaden our horizons and enable us to better understand the challenges faced by others in our university and in the sector. We know too that we cannot promote our library services in isolation but only in partnership with others. Our university library will play a key role in bringing people and services together for the benefit of all our students and staff.

REFERENCES

- 1 See www.anglia.ac.uk/corporateplan09
- 2 <http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/helpdesk/train.htm>
- 3 <http://pilot.library.qut.edu.au/>
- 4 See <http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/pilot/>