

Developing literacies and building a learning community at UTS Library

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Abstract

In 2010, the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) Library began a major review of online information literacy and learning support. The review was conducted in response to changes in the academic environment. The goal of the project was to develop the digital literacies of our community in this new learning environment and to firm our collaborative relationships with the units that provide assistance to students on campus. The end result was the creation of the Study Skills portal, which saw us combine our information literacy tutorials, redevelop our academic writing modules and introduce new modules on graphics and social media.

Introduction

In 2010, the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) Library began a review of online information literacy and learning support. The review was conducted in response to changes in the academic environment toward a more collaborative and social approach, with a growing emphasis on mobile learning. The review also developed because the library now has a more expansive approach to defining information literacy. We no longer focus on information literacy as a set of skills to be mastered. In recent years, we have seen that the information gathering and creating behaviour of our clients is changing on the back of Web 2.0 and other technologies (Luo, 2010). As a result, our concept of information literacy has evolved as a way of thinking that includes the ability to find, evaluate, share and create information across multiple platforms.

In practical terms, this means we have stopped expecting students to do it our way and have started working out ways to support them in their research and creation: doing it more their way. We have been developing this more expansive view of information literacy for several years now. By expansive we mean that information literacy is much more than just what we deliver to our clients via the library website. In recent years, we have recognised that the information worlds of our clients have changed and so have their behaviours. We began by re-examining how they were finding information, where they were finding it and what format it was in. Then we started to think about how we could help them do better at finding, evaluating and using information outside the library context. From this new perspective, information literacy is not just about teaching clients how to use a database or the catalogue. It is about developing skills in searching the internet effectively and helping them read, write and interact across a range of platforms such as digital, media, visual or mobile (Ipri, 2010). Digital literacy and transliteracy are buzzwords that have emerged in the last few years in library circles, as a way of expressing a new conception of information literacy. Although the definition of information literacy (Bundy, 2004) has not changed, the way we apply it must reflect the way our clients are engaging with information. We need to start considering it as a way of thinking, rather than a set of measurable tasks (Lloyd, 2010; Limberg, et. al., 2008; Talja, 2005).

On a practical level, what did we do to reflect this shift? The first step was to extend our face-to-face program to include hands on workshops such as *Google Skills*, *Collaborative Tools*, *Finding Images* and *Mobile Searching*. We now include Google Scholar and Google Books instruction in many classes.

We then extended our creation of screencasts to cover these new areas and put them on YouTube, so they can be embedded in our website, online learning management system (Blackboard) and accessible on a mobile device. Incidentally, we had been trying for some time to turn our information literacy screencasts into learning pathways that build skills incrementally, without much success, until we started using Embedr (Appendix A) in 2011 to create playlists of videos.

We considered other ways we could develop digital literacies and began running competitions that encourage students to utilise skills in video creation, digital storytelling and data mashups. Winning entries are put on our YouTube channel and promoted via social media, which we have used to engage students and create a sense of community by sharing links to online support, photos, videos, study tips and

more. We have since added applications such as Prezi, mind42, Diigo, academia.edu, Twitter for research and Tictocs (Appendix A) into our classes. We also teach skills such as using RSS feeds and searching Google & Google Scholar more effectively. When it came time to review our online learning support, it was natural to include content that reflected our new approach to information literacy.

Reviewing existing support

The goal of the project was to further develop digital literacies that support the learning, teaching and research needs of our community in the new learning environment we find ourselves in. The review looked at two existing multi-module interactive websites. The first, Catalyst, was a basic information literacy module that demonstrated keyword selection and Boolean logic. The second website, BELL (Being an Effective Lifelong Learner), covered referencing, writing, presenting, being ethical, group work, project management, and career development. BELL was originally a cross-campus collaboration including Counselling, Careers, English language support and the Maths Study Centre as well as the library. We had built the BELL modules in 2005 and Catalyst around five years before that. It was definitely time to update.

Our online help was quite disjointed, scattered across the library website, making it difficult to browse what we offer our clients. It was also quite out of date and boring, compared to the kind of websites our clients spend much of their time on, such as Facebook and YouTube. To deal with the fragmented nature of our online assistance, we decided to pull all the strands together into one place on the library website (BELL, Catalyst and Online tutorials) and gave the page the name *Study Skills*. We incorporated new modules on *Graphic Tools* and *Social Media* and started the redesign of the *Academic Writing* module. We then added information that had not been included in the library website previously, for example information on giving presentations, managing stress and time management. We wanted to create a “one stop shop,” to make it easy for students to browse and access an array of online assistance, covering everything from their first days at university to their career options on leaving, not just information about the library.

Many students are increasingly time-poor, preferring to access the library online rather than visit in person. We have around 30,000 EFTSL (Equivalent Full Time Student Load) students. In a year, we reach perhaps 50% of them in either face-to-face classes or lecture demonstrations. The online environment has gradually become more interactive and more visual in nature since the first blossoming of the internet as we know it in the mid 1990s.

In the past year, there has been an injection of funding at UTS into the First Year Experience, student engagement, widening participation, communication skills and creating a “sticky campus”. Graduate attributes is another issue being discussed and tackled across the university. The library has been involved in a number of these projects, which have in turn informed our own strategies in these areas.

The government’s widening participation strategy has seen an influx of funds for projects to support wider participation of students from lower socio-economic status in tertiary education. The library is involved in several of these with partners in the university, including the Indigenous unit. There is also going to be a lifting of the cap

on enrolments, which will potentially see a large influx of new students. We need to be able to assist a growing and increasingly diverse group of clients who come with different levels of skill and knowledge. We need to be able to cater for them all with top quality, visually interesting, focused and interactive learning modules available 24/7 and via mobile devices.

First year presents many challenges for new students. There is a steep learning curve, which can lead to stress and anxiety (Kimmins & Stagg, 2009). Library anxiety is well known to librarians (Mellon 1986); we encounter it regularly. “Students feeling inadequate about their ability to navigate the library website and understand how to find what’s on their reading lists” (McDonald & McDonald, 2010).

The library’s First Year Experience project is part of a whole-of-university approach to helping first year students make the transition from high school to university and to help ease the tension and anxiety that is a part of that experience. Retention is a key element in the strategy; the library can help students stay at university in so many ways. Providing good online assistance is a must. We also help students feel more engaged and part of a supportive academic community by holding our annual Fun Day and running competitions regularly, via our social media sites and online help.

What we wanted to develop

English language competency and communication skills

Written and spoken communication skills have been recognised as a stumbling block for student retention at UTS. To support the strengthening of these skills in our students, the library started a Reading Club in 2010, using Widening Participation funds. Students gather every fortnight to discuss a journal article chosen by the librarian. They discuss academic writing and develop critical thinking as well as listening and communications skills. An Indigenous Reading Club was also launched at the end of 2011. The library was involved in a related project to improve these skills alongside the academic language support unit, the ELSSA (English Language Study Skills Assistance) Centre. As a result, the library purchased more books on English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and began a rewrite of the Academic Writing module of BELL, in collaboration with ELSSA Centre staff. While this did not eventuate as we had planned, we have redesigned the module, using the best links we could find on academic support sites at other universities. We also created a facet in the library catalogue for Academic Skills.

More visual online tutorials

The online environment has gradually become more interactive and visual in nature since the emergence of Web 2.0. It has made sense strategically for many libraries to use interactive screencasts to reach their clients. We have been making screencasts for over five years now, and last year we made our first vodcasts. We had been using Captivate (Appendix A) for a long time and last year decided to start experimenting with other screencast software. We settled on Camtasia (Appendix A), because staff find it easy to use with the capability to create mobile-friendly tutorials.

We have found ways to include simple games such as treasure hunts in our information literacy instruction and are continually on the lookout to expand gaming. We started using Raptivity (Appendix A) in 2011, having purchased it particularly for the gaming templates, which we have incorporated into Study Skills.

Different literacies

It has been shown that first year students prefer to use Google rather than library resources and have inflated perceptions about their level of information literacy skills (Wilkes & Gurney 2009). Our clients are using more technologies and online tools for their assignments and research than ever before. We support this by incorporating the use of applications such as Prezi into our tutorials. We run classes aimed at improving searching in Google & Google Scholar. *Finding Images* classes are designed to help clients locate images that are freely available for reuse on the internet as well as via the various image databases to which the library subscribes. There is an emphasis on the ethical reuse of images.

We have been running *Mobile Searching* classes since 2010. We started running them to increase awareness of our mobile website and increase usage of our mobile services. Library staff run the workshops and help clients connect to the free uni wifi network, search our mobile library catalogue, get a location map of the item they are after, search mobile databases and save PDFs for reading offline later. In our workshops we also talk about apps they can use to assist with managing information, such as Dropbox, Diigo, and Stanza (Appendix A). As more and more of our clients are using mobile devices to support their learning, teaching and research, it is important that we understand the technology and how our clients are using it, so we can start to develop new mobile services. We have developed a page of *Graphic Tools* in Study Skills to support this shift in literacy instruction. The library runs competitions to encourage students to use different media. This started with our Lib:Flicks competition in 2009. These videos now have over 2000 views in YouTube. Social media, mobile spaces and gaming are expected to influence the future of education and for this reason it is essential for us to experiment in these spaces (Johnson, 2010).

Evaluation

Now that so much information is consumed via Youtube, Google and other collaborative, social platforms, it is vital for everyone to develop the skills to evaluate and re-use information. We know from feedback from academic staff that students' evaluation skills leave something to be desired. Staff complain that students often show little ability to determine what is an authoritative source on the internet (Williams, 2010; Carpan, 2010). We have been working for two years now to strengthen our evaluation tools and incorporate them into information literacy classes, supported by online tutorials.

The process

The key elements in the process were: the redesign of BELL, which included assessing what was still useful and what was out of date and needed replacing; the replacement of Catalyst; collaborating with student support units across the university and a review of what other university libraries were doing in this area both in Australia and overseas.

BELL (Being an Effective Lifelong Learner)

The Information Services department is made up of three teams, which are jointly responsible for the learning support modules BELL and Catalyst. We had been trying to redesign BELL for some time with various issues preventing progress. Staff had reviewed the content, determined what was still relevant and made recommendations, but there had been no further action for a year or two. We decided to make it a priority plan for 2011-12, as the content just kept looking more out-of-date with each passing semester. We established a cross-team working party and discussed content, using the information gathered in the preceding years and from Google Analytics. We used Google Analytics extensively to inform our decisions. From Google Analytics we found that the referencing pages were by far and away the most heavily used. The other pages were not used a great deal, although the content mostly was still considered relevant. A few were links to other pages on the university website.

We then surveyed what other libraries were doing in Australia and around the world, particularly in the UK. We discussed the design and content of numerous sites, finding many of them very wordy and at times hard to navigate. We have made a conscious effort to move away from lists of links wherever possible. Lists are not inviting to the eye and we are trying to make our content as visually interesting as possible. As an aside, we are trying to reduce the wordiness on our webpages; librarians love words! The sites that appealed to us were visually interesting and easy to navigate. We found that many universities house their learning support modules (group work, presentations, academic writing) under the umbrella of a specialised academic learning centre. Information literacy is usually on the library website. We brought them all together in one place.

As a result of our survey of other academic websites, we identified some gaps in our program and added new modules including *Graphic Tools*, to make assignments and presentations more visual and *Social Media*, to help select social media appropriate for assignments and for everyday use. Both of these are intended to increase digital and visual literacy. We also added *Coping with Uni* covering time management and dealing with stress.

Catalyst

We looked carefully at what was covered by Catalyst, and found the language very library-centric and quite formal. This was a basic information literacy site covering how to search, and to unpack a topic with a very simple evaluation module. While the skills were still important, we decided to rethink how we delivered the training, creating a video about unpacking an essay question, developing a mindmap example and using Embedr to create playlists of online tutorials or “learning pathways” as they are traditionally known. We called this module *Doing Research* and added mind-mapping as well as extending *Evaluation*. We experimented with free flowchart and mindmapping apps to create learning pathways throughout, and settled on Popplet (Appendix A). We were going to have difficulties embedding our Popplets into the library website, so we asked our IT department to develop script to emulate what Popplet does.

We created a template for Study Skills (figure 1). What we have is very simple and made with no extra funding. We considered applying to the university for teaching

and learning funds; however, we did not, because of lack of time. We also felt the simple layout would help us to concentrate on making it engaging and easy to use.

Study Skills

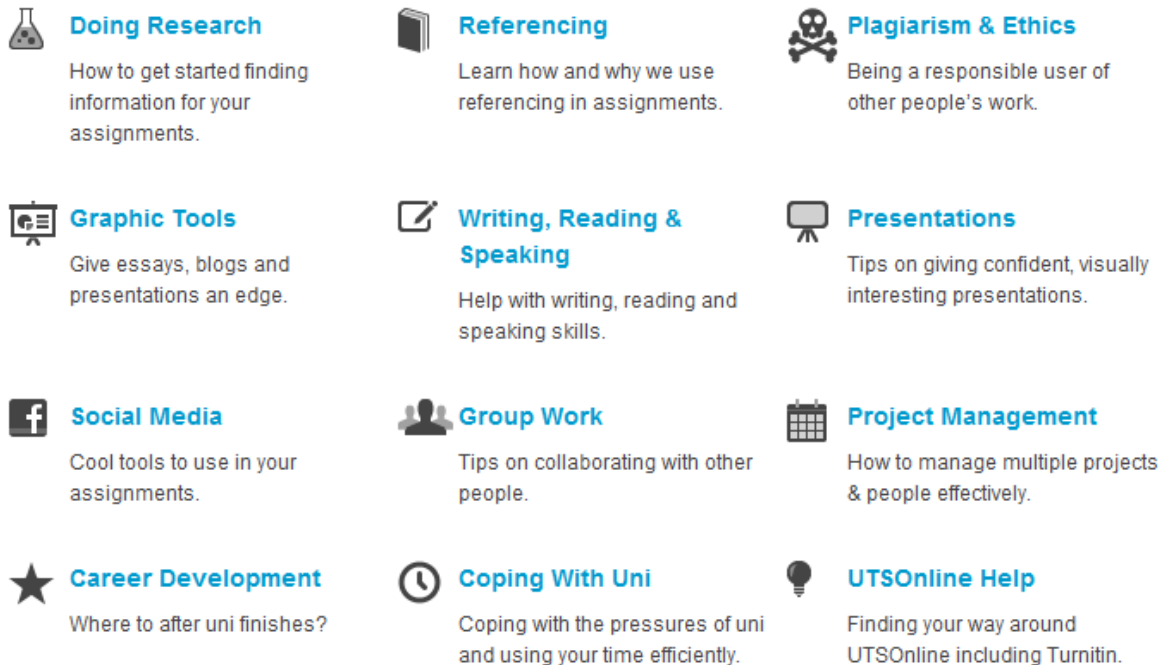


Figure 1: Screen shot from UTS Website

Building a community

As we were designing Study Skills, we discussed the changes we were making with various interested staff around the university. By working with them, we round out our understanding of students' needs and also identify areas where we can expand or contract what we offer. The contraction is important, as our programs need to be sustainable; we cannot continue to expand indefinitely. The feedback we get from other staff is "gold" for us and has opened up a rich seam of collaboration.

We spoke with the Counselling unit who we discovered look after students under academic caution and who were interested in what we were doing with the referencing module in BELL. Through this collaboration, for the first time we will be offering workshops to students under academic caution.

U:PASS is another student support initiative, which offers peer-assisted study classes for subjects with a high fail rate. A few librarians were invited to meet the student leaders, and we then approached a lecturer to run voluntary classes to support a major assignment.

Referencing emerged as a hot topic in 2011, with a significant increase in the number of inquiries received via our service points. We met with the learning support coordinator from the Business Faculty, who gave feedback regarding our referencing pages that also crossed over into academic writing. We spoke with ELSSA Centre staff, who deliver academic and professional language development programs. They

too were very interested in the referencing aspects of BELL and we had a very fruitful discussion about academic language skills.

On each visit, we took the new Study Skills template and received feedback that was very positive. We were aware of the boundaries that were being crossed as we moved into space normally occupied by discrete departments. This was discussed and we were encouraged to keep going. A major overhaul of English language support across the university is planned for 2012 and we see this as an opportunity to step up our support too.

We are currently planning our new “Library of the Future,” to be located in a building where the library will be part of a learning hub that includes various student support units. This has provided us with the perfect opportunity to network and establish closer ties, so that we can all coordinate our efforts to improve student outcomes and support one another. This collaboration is proving to be very exciting and productive. The academic environment is often referred to as “siloed”, faculties do not know what is happening in other faculties. We have discovered that the support units are also siloed. The library is in a great position to help create connections between faculties and between support units, building a learning community.

Conclusion

So, where to from here and what have we learnt? We have plans to formalise the relationships we have been building in the past year by holding regular meetings (perhaps once a semester) with managers of the various support units to discuss how we can collaborate and work together more closely on a strategic level.

We will continue to build relationships with staff on the ground around the university, to stay abreast of where we might be able to have a positive impact on the study and life of our clients.

One of the big “takeaways” has been how fruitful it is when you just sit down and talk to people in student support roles, how similar our issues sometimes are and how easy it is for the library to insert itself into the various support activities that happen outside the library. The surprise is that we have not done more in the past; we get so focussed on our own issues.

The invigoration of our online assistance in the form of Study Skills has shown us how much the area has changed over time. To understand our clients and their information seeking and creating behaviours, we in the library profession need to be engaged with our communities on many levels and to continually update our information literacy support, both online and face-to-face.

To best serve our clients' interests, we also need to be in touch with trends in technology and experiment with them ourselves. We will continue to see information literacy as a multi-layered network of literacies, rather than one that involves just library resources. Building a “learning community,” as a productive network of relationships around the university, with the common goal of enhancing the learning experience of our students, is becoming integral to the future of information literacy at UTS.

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Appendix A

Academia.edu <http://academia.edu/>

Camtasia <http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.html>

Captivate <http://www.adobe.com/products/captivate.html>

Diigo <http://www.diigo.com/>

Dropbox <http://www.dropbox.com/>

Embedr <http://embedr.com/>

Mind 42 <http://mind42.com/>

Popplet <http://www.popplet.com/>

Prezi <http://prezi.com/>

Raptivity <http://www.raptivity.com/>

Stanza <http://itunes.apple.com/au/app/stanza/id284956128?mt=8>

Tictocs <http://www.tictocs.ac.uk/>