SMILE Project

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Accessing information and evaluation of material is essential in today's digital society. Employers are concerned that graduates leaving university do not have adequate employability skills (Braid 2007). University lecturers are also concerned that students are coming to university with poor learning skills (Shepherd 2006). Discussions in Higher Education (HE) are focusing on who should be developing student learning and employability skills, with the consensus being that it should be the responsibility of both employers and universities (Kosviner 2007). With modularisation, it can be difficult for study and employability skills to be embedded in subject-focused modules. These skills and competencies are frequently mentioned in the module specifications, but there is often little time set aside to teach the skills. This project was an attempt to combine the skills into an "information journey" and develop a module that could be delivered in a variety of ways. It was funded by JISC (Joint Information Services Committee) as one of 20 projects (collectively RePRODUCE) to "develop, run and quality assure technology enhanced courses using reused and repurposed learning materials" (JISC, 2009). The project was a consortium of Loughborough University, Imperial College London and University of Worcester (the lead institution).

SMILE (Study Methods and Information Literacy Exemplars) created an online-learning resource on Information Literacy designed to be used independently and as part of a blended learning taught unit (UMSC1500) at the University of Worcester. SMILE utilized existing materials from Loughborough, Imperial and Worcester, repurposed and reworked, and new materials created specifically for the project.

The teaching team consisted of members of the Information Learning Services Research and Development and E-Learning Teams at University of Worcester. They worked with the Project Directors to develop the module outline, which included:
- o proposed content
- o learning outcomes
- o methods of delivery (face-to-face in lectures or labs, handouts and online)
- o assessment.

Both InfoTrail@Lboro, the online Loughborough University Information Skills guide, and Imperial College London's Olivia, (Online Virtual Information Assistant) had been available to students at the respective institutions for some time. Both packages had been evaluated by students and staff and the feedback was used to help identify the resources which were suitable for SMILE.

According to Boden (2009)
> "OLIVIA was groundbreaking, as it was the first full IL course to be developed online using a VLE. I wanted the students to recognise the course as something that supported them with their learning and was transferable not only from module to module but also gave them skills which they could use in everyday life. I therefore branded the programme and designed it in a retro style and writing it in HTML so students found it familiar and easy to navigate.
> Evaluation forms for students were handed out after every teaching session and at the end of the programme. Feedback on the course was very positive –Students whose first language is not English found the programme particularly helpful"

Stubbings (2009) reported that
> "The need at Loughborough for an online tutorial came from:
>> students think they know how to find information
>> lecturers were frequently telling library staff that they felt the reality was different in fact:
>> students struggle to use the resources provided by the Library
>> are unable to evaluate what they find
>> unsure how to ethically use information
>
> and therefore students do not produce as high standard of work as perhaps they are able"

The existing materials and resources used for the University of Worcester module were reviewed for currency and relevance and those suitable for SMILE (such as the online Vark Learning Styles questionnaire Fleming and Bonwell 2006) were identified. Other materials, such as PowerPoint presentations were retained and where necessary updated for use in the taught sessions, but not included in the SMILE content as they were not felt to meet the criteria for inclusion, in that they were designed for use in the face-to-face sessions.

Web based resources, such as YouTube videos, web sites, cartoons and materials from other Universities were identified using standard web searching techniques. They were evaluated for reliability (for example authorship), availability (for example copyright issues as discussed below), currency, and accuracy. A further criterion, which could be called student appeal, was also used.

The evaluation criteria were also influenced by the research Stubbings (2003) had undertaken which concluded that
> "the following aspects were deemed to be essential as evaluation criteria by the Library:
> • Structure of the package (is it modular, are pathways clearly indicated, do you know where you are at all times in the package and is it easy to use?)
> • Interactivity (quizzes and live searches included)
> • Content (induction, literature searching techniques and internet searching for example)
> • Who is it aimed at (UG, PG and what skills are required to complete it?)
> • Relationship between generic and subject specific skills
> • Assessment – formal or informal
> • Overall impression of the package (look and feel)"

The resources had to engage the students in learning, and entice them to explore the issues further. For this reason the aim was to always provide the option to drill down to more in-depth information on the topics, facilitating use by students of varying abilities and requirements.

The major part of the repurposing was the amending of the content from Loughborough University and Imperial College London to ensure a more general approach, accessible to students of varying skills sets and abilities. It was also important to ensure continuity of style and language as much as possible throughout the content. A series of linked templates was created in html, to ensure the materials maintained their style from whichever source they had been repurposed. It could be argued that linking to web sites created for one audience and introducing them in a more structured way to a different audience is also repurposing

The use of SMILE was restricted to those students who had registered for UMSC1500. These were a mix of first year undergraduates, students on International Foundation Degree courses and some undergraduates from second or third years who needed help with the skills. It was delivered using a blended approach including:

- face-to-face sessions
- online tasks utilising Moodle software
- lectures,
- practical tasks,
- discussions (student and tutor led),
- individual and group study
- tutorials,
- three of the online SMILE units were completed in class time
  - Learning styles,
  - Evaluation
  - Finding information sources.
- online sessions in class time
- SMILE resources used in taught sessions to demonstrate points, and also during breakout sessions.

The module aims to give learners an understanding of the different types of information available, how to search effectively and evaluate the quality of the information they retrieve and an understanding of plagiarism and the issues surrounding the ethical use of information. The module also helps them to understand the principles of academic study and writing thus enabling them not only to find information and evaluate it effectively but also to communicate their findings. This process empowers students to become independent learners who are confident in their abilities and who will be able to transfer these skills into the work place.

The preferred method of learning was identified, in that it was found that students appreciated face-to-face teaching supported by a package they could use at point of need, and as support beyond the taught module. This was supported by the results of Focus Group sessions, for example in response to the question:
  "How have you used SMILE, for example to support assessments, for work in class, for other parts of your course? Can you tell us some examples?"
The students responded:
  "Only used the resources as they were asked to during the course, but all said that they would go back to the materials to refresh their memory and re-enforce what they had learnt. One student began the course very late and found SMILE very valuable to catch up and understand the course content that had already been covered by the other students. They all felt it supported their learning well, particularly the parts on evaluation and plagiarism."
  Wrathall (2008).
The motivation to use online materials was also identified from examining the logs and reports produced in Moodle. Students mainly used Moodle as a repository to obtain handouts and PowerPoint presentations of the lectures, the units that were most heavily visited were those used in class and later online units were not used as much as the earlier ones – this could be because they were not used in class time.

Student achievement and feedback indicates that the module as a whole was perceived as well designed and delivered. Student comments included:
- Made learning easier
- Feel you are progressing
- Well put together

- Well designed
- Very happy with it
- Good intro to University
- Directed learning gave me chance to manage my time

The project has illustrated that it is possible to find and re-use externally created resources relating to the development of information literacy and academic writing skills. It will hopefully provide practitioner librarians and academics with a greater understanding of how:

- online material is useful as a support to face to face teaching allowing students to cover it at their own pace, it can be used as a reminder and to go back to at time of need
- online material / activities in class need to have a variety of levels for those who complete them quickly and easily – using materials from a variety of sources facilitated this.

The project blog can be found at http://smileproject.wordpress.com/
The materials will be available form JORUM and http://courses.informationliteracy.org.uk/.
The project Twitter account is http://twitter.com/SmilyLibrarian.

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