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# The value and impact of cross professional collaborations in developing student information and academic literacy skills at Sheffield Hallam University, UK.

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## **Abstract**

The paper is jointly written by an academic and librarian and discusses the value and impact of two examples of cross professional collaboration at Sheffield Hallam University. The collaborations addressed information and academic literacy skills development of 640 students across four years and involved a librarian, an academic, an academic skills tutor and an e-learning expert. The paper includes analysis on the value and impact of cross-professional collaborations in developing student information literacy (IL) and academic literacy skills. It concludes with discussion of lessons learned and best practice recommendations.

## **Developing information literacy skills for 2nd year students of international business (1st collaboration)**

In 2008 deep concern about student use of poor information sources prompted the module leader of two international business second year modules to review the need to support students in the development of their IL skills. The module leader's holistic approach to the development of students and desire to develop their IL skills for both academic and employment purposes, led her to approach the business librarian for guidance and support, and a vibrant and robust collaboration was started. This first collaboration developed over three years with two intakes of students a year. The aim was to collaborate on the teaching learning and assessment strategy of the module to embed IL into the module.

## **Literature review**

During the collaboration, the authors reviewed the literature in the following areas in order to inform their evidence based approach and incorporate best practice in the higher education (HE) sector:

- a) web searching skills of HE students
- b) information literacy teaching in Business faculties

- c) information literacy as a graduate attribute / employability requirement
- d) effectiveness of collaborative approaches to teaching information literacy.

The literature review findings relating to a), b) and c) are discussed in detail in a previous article by the authors (Lahlafi, Rushton, & Stretton, 2012). In terms of web searching skills of HE students, the literature review supported the academic's findings that her students (a diverse group, from China, the UK, and other European countries) relied heavily on Google / Wikipedia for their assignment research. A recent report (Turnitin, 2012) underlined that this problem is not unique to UK higher education. It looked at 28 million student papers worldwide to determine which sources HE students use in their written work. It highlighted the fact that only just over half of Internet sources in student writing come from legitimate educational resources. It concluded that students in higher education need further instruction on proper research habits. This aligns with the literature search findings that despite being of the "net generation" (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, pp. 1-2), students struggle to use the internet effectively for academic research purposes, "Research seems to be far more difficult to conduct in the digital age (...) students reported being challenged, confused, and frustrated by the research process, despite the convenience, relative ease or ubiquity of the internet, (Head & Eisenberg, 2009, p. 13). The emergence and role of IL as a required graduate attribute for the digital age's "information-centric workplace" (Ali & Katz, 2010, p. 1) is explored by recent articles in the literature, for example: De Saulles (2007), Lloyd (2011), Sokoloff (2012).

The literature review findings related to the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to teaching of IL found that this is generally very positive, adds value and that embedding generic skills such as information and academic literacy within the module is far more effective than the one-shot, one-off sessions often offered to HE students (Masiss, 2012; Mavodza, 2011; McInnes Bowers, et al, 2009; Shumaker, 2010; Sun, Chen, Tseng, & Tsai, 2011; Tucci, 2011;). Research by Hall, Nix and Baker (2012, p. 222) found that students also prefer generic skills to be delivered within the module rather than via an add-on workshop, "[students] much prefer skills set in a module context and related to study or work." Collaborative work within business faculties is highlighted, "If we are to develop business leaders who are critical and independent thinkers, it is crucial that academic faculty and librarians work together to introduce today's business students to the structure and content of their information environment throughout their academic program so that they will be well prepared to gather the data they need to make effective business decisions upon graduation." (Lombard & Miree, 2003, p. 19). Librarians are encouraged to embark upon cross-professional collaboration within their institution, with IL seen as, "a component of broader academic literacies. To encompass these, librarians need to step outside of their traditional areas and work with colleagues from other disciplines," (Beard & Dale, 2010, p. 486).

### **Development, implementation and impact of innovative reflective and active learning initiatives.**

The development and implementation of innovative reflective and active learning initiatives to address IL skills is discussed in detail by the authors in a previous Higher Education Academy case study (Rushton, Lahlafi, & Stretton, 2011). Elements used included:

- a) jointly delivered lecture "How good is the web? Critically analysing, selecting and using business information" based on active learning
- b) follow-up formative reflective assessment tasks
- c) consolidation through a jointly delivered IL skills workshop.

Typical student written reflections showed that the lecture and follow-up encouraged recognition by these second year students that their web searching skills were not as good as they had previously thought, for example: "I have learnt that my research technique before was really quite lazy. Before doing this research task I would have probably just conducted an internet search, picked five websites and made the information that I found fit what I was trying to say. I will now be more vigilant and try much harder when it comes to my coursework." To analyse the impact of the collaboration, the authors carried out student surveys at the start and end of the module, and analysed student reference lists for their final report. A detailed analysis of the surveys and subsequent analysis was presented at the WCLTA conference in October 2012 and will be published shortly in *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Overall, findings showed positive impact, with:

- A move away from Google as the starting point for research
- Improvement in understanding of the range & number of resources needed to complete assignments
- Increased understanding of and usage of peer-reviewed journals
- Increased use of international market research databases & international newspapers.

### **Developing information & academic literacy skills of Malaysian students (2<sup>nd</sup> collaboration)**

The success of the first collaboration inspired the authors to broaden the collaboration in 2013 to support a group of international students in the development of IL and academic reading / writing skills. The collaboration concentrated on a group of 91 Malaysian final year degree students who study at Sheffield Hallam University from June to September. It focussed on a module "Business in emerging markets" which the author is module leader for. The previous year, as well seeing students struggle with their IL the module leader had also noted students struggling with reading and critically evaluating peer-review journal article. Therefore, the collaboration was broadened to bring in the expertise of an academic skills tutor.

### **Development, implementation and impact of active learning initiatives for a learning workshop delivered collaboratively by academic, librarian and academic skills tutor.**

The authors developed a range of formative activities in a learning workshop, around finding and reading peer reviewed journal articles in preparation for their assessment, a mini seminar based on 4 peer-reviewed articles. The following elements were used in the workshop:

- Interactive exploration of sourcing and using peer-reviewed journals using a 4 step search strategy incorporating mind mapping to develop keywords
- Use of mobile technology to engage students and get student feedback and assess confidence levels at the start and end of the workshop in finding and using peer-reviewed journal articles. 2 web based applications Padlet (wall) <http://padlet.com/> and Polleverywhere (online poll) <http://www.polleverywhere.com/> were used.
- Interactive activities to explore peer-reviewed journal articles, including effective scan reading.

Analysis of the impact of the collaboration is ongoing, as at time of writing the students are just completing the module. Initial student feedback confirms that confidence levels in finding and reading peer-reviewed journal articles were much higher at the end of the class and shows an appreciation of the techniques taught in the session: " The session fine-tuned my research skills and help me to save more time in getting a genuine report that I wanted instead of going 3 hours without getting anything, " "I have learnt about scanning and skimming through the academic journal within a short time to find out if the article is useful for my assignment topic. It is a very efficient way of searching for academic journals which I wish that I have know this

earlier." However, further analysis by the authors on whether the increased confidence levels at the end of the workshop actually translated to improved use of peer-reviewed journal articles as part of the module assessment is still to take place.

### **Analysis on the value and impact of cross-professional collaborations in developing student information and academic literacy skills**

The impact of the collaborations on student learning was consistent with the value of academic and librarian collaboration in teaching IL found in the literature review. The collaborative approach added value to module LTA strategy, resulting in student information and academic skills progression. It fostered better understanding of the importance of research skills not only at university but also in the workplace, as evidenced by written student feedback e.g. "These skills should help me not only in other modules at university, but they can also be used collectively in the working world as well".

From a librarian's perspective there are numerous benefits in the two cross-professional collaborations undertaken:

- validated role as a librarian in the classroom - this was also the case for the academic skills tutor
- led to true embedding within the modules helping students see the importance of information and academic literacy skills in terms of their academic studies and lifelong learning
- linked in to module assessments to make students take skills development more seriously
- used reflection to give students time to think about their research skills development
- increased use of information resource subscriptions at Sheffield Hallam University.

From an academic's perspective, the collaborations have been invaluable. In particular working with experts from across the university allowed development of modules that are subject focused and at the same time equip students with skills they need to be effective learners.

- validated module leader's perception of the need to take an holistic approach to student development
- brought in professional expertise from elsewhere in the university to embed information and academic literacy
- introduced new perspectives and ideas to the modules
- engaged students and improved the use of academic sources and their critical writing
- enabled students to reflect on their academic practice.

### **Lessons learned and best practice**

The authors would highly recommend cross-professional collaboration. However, partners in collaboration need to be aware:

- Working collaboratively means allowing each partner to give their input and effectively share the session to meet the joint objectives

- True embedding of IL in a module means taking the time to understand and value each other's discipline and objectives in teaching and supporting students. It is more time consuming than the usual "one chance" or "on-demand" library sessions
- Start the process early and be prepared to be flexible as it takes a lot of time to develop new material, learning activities and understand how to use technology in the classroom. Time is needed to reflect on your own perception and student feedback in order to continuously develop effective learning activities and environments. Time can be saved in another way though as it helps in reducing the number of student emails asking the same question e.g. the 500 student emails asking "is this a peer reviewed journal, can I use this?"
- There may be some peer resistance from academic colleagues who are uncomfortable with embedding skills - perceiving it takes away subject content, or are not confident teaching outside their subject knowledge.

From their experience of cross-professional collaboration, the authors conclude with best practice guidelines for librarians seeking to develop effective collaborations with academic colleagues:

- Identify potential IL "champions" - use all liaison and networking opportunities to identify colleagues from across the university to work with.
- Be open to new ideas and new technologies - working collaboratively provides mutual support for innovation.
- Seek senior management support in developing collaborations as you need time for collaborative work with faculty staff.
- Disseminate your initiatives within your own university which can help raise your profile.
- Disseminate more widely in both academic and library arenas (journal articles, case study, conferences).

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