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Enhancing Graduate Skills for a Knowledge-based Economy: Collaborating with Information Specialists

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Introduction

This chapter reflects on the main features of collaboration between a module leader and information specialists at Sheffield Hallam University to embed graduate attribute research skills into a Year Two (Level 5) module. It discusses the growing importance of information literacy skills within a knowledge-based economy, and how student research skills were developed using a range of assessed and non-assessed module activities.

Keywords: Information Literacy, Research Skills, Business Students, Active Collaboration, Sheffield Business School, International Business, Globalisation, Graduate Impact, Employability

Rationale and Context

Sheffield Hallam University's (SHU) graduate attributes refer to SHU graduates being equipped for 'learning and working in the Digital Age' (Sheffield Hallam University, 2010). However, although students today are often considered to be

of the "Net Generation" (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005, p 1-2) and IT literate, tutors at SHU have found that students' ability to use the internet as an effective research tool is overwhelmingly poor. JISC has identified that:

"The internet is the first port of call for information: sites such as Google and Wikipedia are typically referred to before academically approved resources".

(JISC, 2009: 24)

This correlates with the experience of module tutors teaching the undergraduate Year Two (Level 5) modules, *Managing in a Global Context* (full-time degree/HND) and *Globalisation and Business* (part-time degree) who have found students to have poor information literacy skills, being over reliant on Google and Wikipedia as reference sources.

As far back as 1993, Drucker spoke of the importance of information literacy skills in the workplace for the survival of business:

"In today's organisation, you have to take responsibility for information because it is your main tool. But most don't know how to use it."

(Harris, 1993: 120)

A more recent survey of UK SMEs (De Saulles, 2007), mirrors Drucker's comments that although employees are technologically skilled, they lack information literacy skills, and reported that although SMEs regard the internet as the single most important source for commercially valuable information, £3.7 million annually (a conservative estimate) is spent on time wasted looking for information that they cannot find.

There is growing evidence of the importance of information literacy skills to employers. Cheuk (2008, p137) concludes that businesses require employees who are "confident and competent in interacting with information to deliver maximum business value". Ali and Katz's (2010, p1) research into the ICT skills needed by US employers makes the link between the integration of information

literacy skills into the business school curriculum and the needs of the workplace, "essential to provide the business school's graduates with an education fit for the emerging information-centric workplace."

At module review in 2007/08, recognising the need to improve academic and employability skills and create graduates with impact in a knowledge-based economy, the tutors agreed to proactively address information literacy / research skills within the two Year Two (Level 5) modules, and approached LIS (Learning and Information Services) staff to discuss how we could build on the basic level skills LIS staff had taught these students in Year One (Level 4).

Objectives

The main objectives of the collaboration were:

- To further develop students' basic information literacy skills to become independent and discerning users of information in their studies, placement and graduate employment
- To enhance students' research skills in order to further develop their understanding of international business concepts and theories and thereby produce better assignments
- To promote effective use of high-cost electronic databases provided by the university
- To better equip students to cope with the level of research required in their final year and enable them to achieve more highly with this work

Description

The emphasis of the information literacy skills development was on critically analysing, selecting and using business information on the web. It aimed to

tackle the 'techno-savvy overconfidence' (Brown et al, 2003: 386) some students display, which they confuse with effective research skills.

Over three years, the collaboration has developed, evolved and embedded a set of assessed and non-assessed learning activities into the modules. These included:

- development of a web-based research assessment
- assessed reflection on their research skills
- joint delivery of interactive lectures
- practical computer-based workshops

Students were able to progress their practical online research skills, applicable to lifelong learners in a knowledge-based economy. They said, *"Using the databases more, not going straight to Google"* and *"I had previously avoided using a journal before, possibly due to their size, complexity and the language style used. So this assignment is just what I needed to really move this research method forward and fully widen my approach."*

The assessment for the module consisted of three assignments and was designed to enable students to develop specific transferable skills while increasing their subject knowledge. This description gives further detail of how we implemented embedded activities and assessment into the module to improve students' research skills.

The assessment activities and assessment criteria were developed together to achieve the module objectives. The assessment criteria for all pieces of work were the same to ensure that students could see their research skills developing. (See appendix for research skills assessment criteria). This would allow feedback-'feedforward' (Rushton et al, 2010) from formative assessment into the summative assessment.

The three assignments are interlinked (see Appendix 1 for details of assignments and assessment criteria). The summative assignment is a five thousand word

report, and successful outcome is dependent on the capability to research effectively. This links from the first formative assignment, which was developed to enable students to assess and enhance their current level of research skills while using a wide range of different sources.

In the first assignment the students were required to research the topic of globalisation using five different sources (see Appendix 1). This topic was deliberately broad so that students would have to carefully consider how to refine the topic. Students then evaluated these sources against the following criteria:

- Accuracy
- Authority
- Objectivity
- Currency
- Coverage

The second part of this assignment was to write a reflective piece on their own research skills, and the use of the internet/online information as a research source.

To assist the students to develop the skills needed for their first assignment, the introductory session to the module was jointly delivered by LIS staff and the Module Leader. At the beginning of this session students were briefed on their first assignment, which then gave context and validity to the remainder of the session delivered by the Information Specialist.

The emphasis of the session was on creating an interactive experience for students, using a number of activities including demonstrations, discussion, group work and audiovisual material in order to involve the class and build on their prior knowledge. They were involved in paired and group work focused on identifying the sources they already used, looking at new and alternative business sources, reviewing the pros and cons of newspapers, peer reviewed journals and Wikipedia. There was some particularly lively debate around the

pros and cons of Wikipedia. Demonstrations were given to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of web resources, and a website evaluation checklist was provided to support an activity where students evaluated Google findings for a search on 'GATT'. Feedback showed that the students regarded this as a worthwhile session.

"I thought the session was really useful - not really used academic journal articles in depth, but I know how to now!"

and

"Very informative presentation which I found very useful and feel it will help in future work."

This was followed by further joint input into the second and third assignments (see appendix 1 for details of assignments). A two hour interactive workshop gave students guidance on accessing relevant databases and other web sources. To ensure relevance and focus to the activities, students were required to research an emerging market and produce a poster for sharing with the class. As a result of student feedback, this was modified to an emerging market relevant to the industry sector of their assignment.

Student feedback indicated they wanted more time in a supportive environment to explore the internet as a research tool and develop their skills. So in the following year this was developed into three computer laboratory sessions, one information skills session where students found information which they then developed into a poster in the next two sessions. Further recent initiatives have included researching of copyright-free images and students producing digital posters rather than print posters.

Evaluation and Discussion

As the collaboration has progressed, tutors have found that, compared with previous years, the breadth and depth of the sources used was very much

improved in the students' final piece of work, the five thousand word report. LIS staff have also observed students' research skills progressing, for example, broadening use of sources by registering to use databases they had not previously accessed.

Although no quantitative data has been collected, there is qualitative data to support the evidence of the effectiveness and appropriateness of this approach to enhance students' research skills, *"Thank you for a very useful session. Before you started I didn't know what a peer reviewed journal was."* In their self-reflection students commented that they valued this learning opportunity and would have appreciated it in their first year (level four). Some recognised that the quality of their work over previous semesters would have been much better if this specific input and support had been earlier.

Others commented that they had not understood the weaknesses of Wikipedia and Google and not heard of Google Scholar –

"finding new sources of information such as Business Source Premier that I had not previously used and which I may therefore use in the future".

It was clear to students that this was a skill that would be transferable across their subject programme,

"I learnt how to make the most from using LitSearch which will help in any module coursework",

in employment or placement.

"I thought the session was good and very informative. In the past I have needed to do a lot of research on packaging and have had to rely on Google!"

Student feedback and reflection showed that students saw the value of, and engaged with the activities, especially being given hands-on experience in a supportive environment, *"actively researching with help and understanding*

available". This was facilitated by embedding the learning about research within the module and then linking that learning to assessed assignments.

Main Learning Points

From our experience, consideration needs to be given to the following:

A happy collaboration - how?

Collaboration with colleagues across the university allows for use of different skills and expertise. This collaborative approach has had to meet the needs of both LIS staff and academics, in terms of time, workloads, commitment and transferability. There has to be shared belief in the value of the project outcomes.

In any new initiative the module leader has to secure commitment from the module team. There are issues involved in this holistic pedagogic approach; in particular, the squeezing of precious time from module content can be contentious. There were initial concerns from the module tutors that focusing on research skills detracted from the module content –

"I believe more work on explicit connectivity between research skills and module content would be well worthwhile".

The joint sessions need to be managed carefully as students have found it confusing when the sessions led by LIS staff were not sufficiently contextualised by academic tutors:

"I got confused about what we was (sic) doing today compared to the assignment."

Time management

Although initially this concept was developed in revalidation (when it is to be expected that module leaders devote time to develop modules) extra time was, and still is, required for designing and tailoring innovative and collaborative

approaches to teaching. Materials and session activities need to be developed and improved over time in response to student feedback and our own reflection.

Student Engagement

Some students were reluctant to engage in the process; they considered themselves excellent researchers as they had not previously received explicit feedback on their research skills.

"Identifying sources of information for I already know about these, ie. Euromonitor, Business Source Premier. I used these last year and already know how to use them."

This meant they had to be convinced of the value of the research sessions especially when they could not see how the research activity linked into their assignment. They struggled to see that the activity was a different way of exploring a topic, rather than a standard case study approach. Therefore, after the first year of this project, the integration between the research activity and the assessment was made more explicit. It was very important to ensure students understand the purpose of the activities is to enhance their academic and employability skills.

Conclusion

The key to success for this project was the commitment of staff involved. The information specialists saw evidence of students developing information literacy skills and maximising the use of high-cost quality online resources provided by SHU. The module leader saw benefits from students enhancing their research skills and thus producing better assignments, eventually leading to higher degree classifications, increasingly demanded by employers, '78% of employers now insist on minimum 2.1 degree', (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2010). The research skills gained by students will allow them to achieve higher degree

classifications and therefore be more attractive to employers looking for high calibre graduates.

As discussed in the rationale underpinning this collaboration, there is demand from UK employers for information literacy skills in the graduates they employ. The business world is becoming increasingly aware that the ability to use information technology does not equate to effective research skills. Therefore, in the recruitment process, candidates who offer higher-level research skills will have a cost effective impact in the knowledge-driven workplace. The student feedback indicates that students are aware they have improved their skills and see that this will be useful across modules, in placements, and in the world of work:

"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".

"These skills developed will be beneficial to both this module and every other research tasks I undertake in university and my professional life."

Ali and Katz (2010, p17) have identified the problem that 'employers seek ICT-literate workers, yet business schools might not be teaching these skills,' and we believe that through our collaboration we have gone some way to addressing this issue within the modules Managing in a Global Context and Globalisation and Business. Our collaboration has assisted students to gain the research skills which will enable them to become graduates with impact.

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