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e-Partnerships: Library information acquisition in the comfort of students' digital homes

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e-Partnerships: Library information acquisition in the comfort of students' digital homes

Abstract: This paper presents a case study of how a university lecturer and a faculty librarian built upon their shared concerns about first-year students' lack of information literacy. It describes in some detail their underlying beliefs, which led to this experimental intervention design and the strategic e-partnership. Embedded library podcasts were used to push library information to students. The potential and actual impact of this e-partnership on personalised support for a diverse student body is explored and an argument is presented for e-partnerships among university staff in an effort to better assist first-year higher education students.

Introduction

Educational partnerships are in vogue at present and can lead to useful innovations (Selinger, 2009). However, Cardini (2009) points out that the concept of a partnership is a "complex, ideological and contradictory social phenomena" that calls for careful explanation of the intent of the cooperation between various parties (p. 394). This paper takes up the offer to evaluate the potential and actual impact of an e-partnership model between a teacher education (TE) lecturer and a librarian.

Strategic collaboration between academic staff and faculty librarians has the potential to assist the leveraging of timed intervention that supports first-year students at point of need in their learning journey. Library support is a key component that has great potential to enable students' academic development and enhance their learning experience.

This paper discusses the intent and outcome of a strategic e-partnership at an Australian university, which saw the development and implementation of a library information push approach. Pre-packaged library pod/vodcasts were embedded into a unit's learning management system (LMS). The aim of the collaboration was to enable students to become more information literate and the defining feature of the e-partnership was the placement of library support information within students' reach and digital home. The importance of the early acquisition of foundational library skills as an essential component for academic success was sought to be made explicit to students by the introduction of the strategic partnership between faculty and library and the visible placement of library material in the unit's LMS.

First year experience in Australian universities

A landmark national study into the first year experience in Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) highlighted students' increasing use of ICT to access course materials and the decreasing number of hours students spend on campus. The authors noted: "The last decade has seen full-time students progressively spending fewer days on average on campus and reduced hours in class each week … ICTs have played a significant role in changing the face of teaching, learning and interaction in the first year" (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p.v).

Changed student behaviour and circumstances need to be taken into account when devising new support strategies. The increased offering of 'blended learning experience' (Milne, 2006) lends itself to cross-disciplinary e-partnerships, using similar podcasting technologies, which are familiar to students and regularly used during their coursework assignments through the unit's learning management system (LMS).

Podcasting information

Tynan and Colbran (2006) investigated the effectiveness of podcasting in Australian universities and found that it increased student engagement, resulting in their spending more time reading primary materials. In addition, they reported that the students seemed to have growing expectations of the availability of podcasts. Many universities have now embedded audio podcasts and video enhanced podcasts (or vodcasts) into the course environment with positive results (Northcote,

Marshall, Dobozy, Swan & Mildenhall, 2007; Scott, 2008; Bacer, 2009). Unfortunately, much support information, such as vital library information is 'out-of-reach' for many students. University websites are, although information rich, hard to navigate and too often inaccessible for first-year students. Helpful library podcasts are typically placed on a library website rather than embedded in the LMS (Lippincott, 2005, p.2).

The approach taken in this e-partnership initiative was to push essential library information to students. Hence, there was no need for students to leave the comfort of their 'digital home' to access support materials prepared by library staff.

The Problem: First-year students' lack of information literacy skills

When starting out on research for the first academic assignment, first-year students new to university-level academic study are faced with a complex information landscape. The ubiquity of search engines, most prominently 'Google' and the ease of its search function, poses a unique set of challenges for students. Many students may be tempted to think that answers to any academic question posed are readily available at the click of a mouse. Unsurprisingly, current research has found that great many students in higher education seem to display a deficiency in basic information literacy (Atlay & Harris, 2000; Branch, 2004; Grant & Berg, 2004; Schulte, 2008; Swanson, 2005). Locating and evaluating the quality of academic information available on the WWW and through university libraries requires foundational knowledge and skills. The absence of these competencies leads many students to rely to a great extent on using Google and Wikipedia as convenient sources of information for their assignments. Predictably, some researchers have found a disconnect between first-year students' NET confidence and their abilities to use the WWW for social and/or study purposes. Simply put, there needs to be a recognition among university staff that first-year students' "information-seeking behaviour is [often] unsophisticated" ... This generation's lack of understanding of how the Web works coupled with high levels of confidence, means they often fail to realise they don't know and assume that if they can't find it on the Web then it doesn't exist." (Combes, 2008, p. 15)

How should academic and library staff respond? There is a need for a theoretical grounding, a benchmark to assist university staff understand the value of increased information literacy skills in first-year university students.

Information literacy competency framework

The Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIIL) framework identifies a number of core competencies that fall under the umbrella of 'information literacy skills'. The ANZIIL framework has become a benchmark standard for Australian librarians, defining the development of transferable generic skills in students (Bundy, 2004). The six ANZIIL competencies, can loosely be defined as follows: (a) a recognition of the need for information; (b) the effective and efficient location of information; (c) an ability to critically evaluate information and reflect on the information seeking process; (d) an ability to effectively manage information collected and/or generated; (e) an ability to apply strategies and information to the generation of new knowledge; (f) an ability and willingness to use information that is ethically and culturally appropriate.

In the particular first-year unit in which the intervention was trialled, first-year students were expected to demonstrate specific information literacy competencies. The assessment benchmark as outlined in the unit handbook indicates that students, in the preparation of their first assignment, should use at least five references. None of these references are allowed to be 'Wikipedia entries'. In addition, it was deemed essential that students demonstrate knowledge of library research skills, such as:

- where to locate information in the physical library and e-library
- how to evaluate information
- how to store information for later use in academic papers
- how to cite academic work used in assignments

The faculty/library e-partnership aimed to provide a new opportunity to students through the experimentation with a novel strategy, namely the placement of library services at the point of students' needs and within their unit's LMS. A significant realisation was that the podcasting of information about university library services has become customary in Australian universities and research findings support their effectiveness, particularly for distance education students (Ralph &

Olsen, 2007; Jowitt, 2008). However, no one has trialled the embedding of the media in the course LMS and therewith bringing the information into the students' digital homes.

e-Partnership in practice: Implementing the library information push approach

Our library podcast project was implemented in February 2009. Besides the customary online and print library resources available to students on the university library website or in the newly-built library building (pull strategy), the library resources were 'pushed to the students' and embedded into their course LMS as short library pod/vodcasts. A selection of generic and subject specific pod/vodcasts relevant to first-year teacher education students was chosen for the pilot intervention. These were:

i. Borrowing from the library (3.30 minutes)
ii. Education databases (4.00 minutes)
iii. Developing a search strategy (5.50 minutes)
iv. Wilson Web – Education database (7.45 minutes)

The 2009 cohort of students consisted of predominantly school leavers who commenced the compulsory educational psychology unit in February (n=345). The students were accessing unit information in Blackboard (the university's Learning Management System) in conjunction with the innovative Learning Activity Management System (LAMS) developed by Macquarie University (see Dalziel, 2003 for an in-depth discussion of LAMS). Both, Blackboard and LAMS were regularly used to deliver media activities throughout the students' coursework. The two library podcasts and two library vodcasts were conveniently accessible through the LAMS plug-in within Blackboard (see Figure 1).

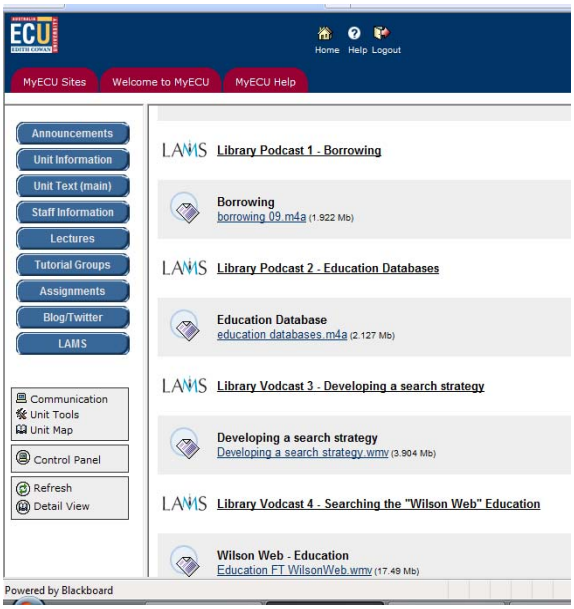

Figure 1: Library pod/vodcasts in LAMS within Blackboard

Other LAMS activities were provided within this unit, so students were familiar with this learning design. A small number of library podcasts/vodcasts were chosen in this intervention model to test the feasibility of the e-partnership and to prevent cognitive overload in students. The library-LAMS sequences were an exact replica of the unit's interactive lecture-LAMS podcast sequences. They consisted of four parts:

(a) the initial pod/vodcast to be viewed,
(b) followed by voting or a ballot,
(c) discussion forum and
(d) survey activity.

The sequences were deliberately kept simple and uniform to increase students' experience and fluency with the new learning medium.

Library Podcast 1*:* ***Borrowing*** **-** the podcast takes the students through the library's system for borrowing items, how to go about it and what are the rules and regulations that a new student needs to know (see Figure 2).

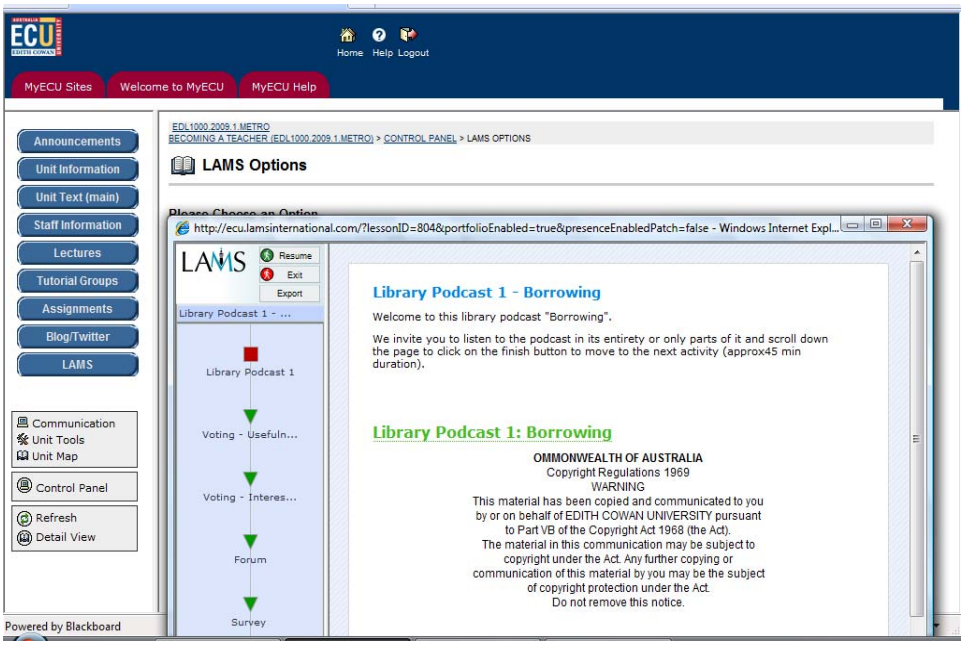

Figure 2: Library Podcast 1 - Borrowing

Library Podcast *2: Education Databases* – the librarian explains the importance of using journal databases to find academic quality journal articles for assignment topics in education (see Figure 3).

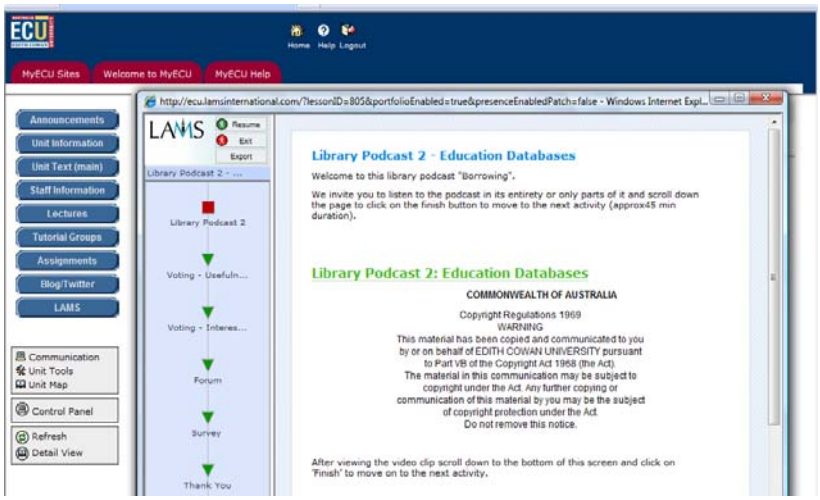

Figure 3: Library Podcast 2 - Education Databases

Library Vodcast 3: *Developing a Search Strategy* – the video podcast takes students through a step-by-step approach to developing a search strategy when doing research for an assignment topic (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Library Vodcasts 3 - Developing a search strategy

Library Vodcast 4*: Searching the Wilson Web Education* – the librarian carefully scaffolds the learning through step-by-step instructions, illustrating how students can conduct a search for an education topic within a specific professional database (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Library Vodcast 4 - Searching the Wilson Web Education

Evaluation of the e-partnership intervention strategy

Students who completed all requirements of the unit and agreed to have their online work monitored were the study participants (n=323). The unit into which the library podcasts were embedded was designed to assist teacher education students to form their beginning understandings about teacher skills and teacher roles. By placing the library information pod/vodcasts in this context, it was assumed that students would show great interest in the support material.

The LAMS monitoring environment enables easy access and extraction of student access data. A conventional educational data mining technique (Heiner, Heffernan & Barnes, 2007) was used to compile a histogram of student access, interest and level of engagement with the library information (see Table 2). Although it may be argued that the monitoring of student access data is only a superficial measure of student engagement with the library media pushed to the students into their digital homes, it is believe that an initial level of 'buy-in' from students is an essential first step that warrants close monitoring.

Pod/Vodcast title	Total number of students commencing four-part LAMS activity	Total number of students completing four-part LAMS activity	Percentage of students utilisation (commencement data) n=323
Podcast 1: Borrowing	69	41	21.36%
Podcast 2: Education Databases	57	36	17.65%
Vodcast 3: Developing a search strategy	50	32	15.48%
Vodcast 4: Searching the Wilson Web - Education	45	27	13.93%

Table 1: Histogram of podcast/vodcast utilisation

Forum discussion

Although only a very few students posted comments, the forum entries show engagement and interest on the part of some students. The forum activity for *Podcast 1: Borrowing* asked students to discuss the frequency of library visits, what they have borrowed and if they encountered any problems. In total, 21 postings were made by 11 students. One student noted that "I had never really been to a library until I started uni and I find it great for researching and also for studying. I love the peace and quiet." (first-year student, 2009 cohort). Most of the comments posted were positive, emphasising the value of 'quiet study spaces'. Nevertheless, there were also some critical postings, noting that: "for the amount of students that use [the library for study purposes] there needs to be more places that can accommodate the numbers" (first-year student, 2009 cohort).

The forum activity for *Podcast 2: Education Databases* invited students to discuss what item they have searched for, whether they use the education database regularly and if they encountered any problems. In total, 14 postings were recorded by 12 students. Many simply noted that they had been unaware of the library support services in general and the availability of professional databases in particular. Typically, students noted that: "No, I haven't used the education database yet, as I wasn't sure how to use it. I hope to use it in the future" (first-year student, 2009 cohort).

The forum activities for the two *Vodcasts 3: Developing* a search strategy and *4: Searching the Wilson Web – Education* invited students to share with each other what aspects of the vodcast were seen as particularly helpful. The former attracted five postings, whereas the latter only attracted three entries. Despite the low number of entries, they were informative, noting the value of embedded library literacy skills workshops within students' digital homes. One student remarked as follows: The vodcast helped us create better search strategies which will help us find more quality information and will save us time" (first-year student, 2009 cohort).

Each of the four pod/vodcast series asked students to identify improvements that could be made to better assist their studies. Significantly, a number of students posted suggestions, but they concerned two issues that seem to be of some concern to these students: (a) the number of computers available in the library through the e-lab, and (b) the limited study space for the amount of students who frequent the library.

Two students participated in all the forum activities and made valuable contributions to the learning of their peers by sharing their ideas on the usefulness of the pod/vodcasts during their assignment work. Their contributions are important and help the evaluation of the e-partnership. The collaboration between faculty and library as outlined above may provide a non-intrusive way to gently increase students' library literacy knowledge and skills and thus, may assist first-year students and students in their second and third year of study gain an appreciation of library literacy.

Implication of findings for learning and teaching

The evaluation showed that first-year students' interest in the library pod/vodcasts was limited. Moreover, as the semester passed and the pressure on students increased, there was a notable decrease in access and hence interest in more specific library services (vodcasts 3 & 4). The library borrowing module (podcast 1) was the most frequented. These results confirm the findings from an earlier study (Jowitt, 2008). The poorly frequented vodcasts 3 & 4, and the general nature of the comments posted by students, seem to signal a general lack of understanding and appreciation of the library databases and the role they play in students' study and assignment work.

The present account of a strategic e-partnership and the implementation of a small-scale intervention program confirms the need for more strategic collaboration between academic and library staff. Moreover, the unique 'information push approach' outlined in this paper may have the potential to be used in a number of different ways, opening up the possibility for other e-partnerships. This paper has demonstrated that the embedding of library pod/vodcasts within the digital home of time-poor Net generation students, who may not yet be aware of their lack of information literacy knowledge and skills, is possible. Although the strategy was not as successful as envisioned, we argue that there is a perceived need to continue with the experimentation of strategic e-partnerships aiming to be more effective in reaching students at their point of need.

Conclusion

This paper has described the strategic e-partnership formed out of a perceived need to better support first-year higher education students and increase their awareness of the importance of foundational library literacy knowledge and skills. Although the level of student engagement with the media was generally low and appeared to drop off as the content became more complex and specific, the e-partnership seems to have merit. It is a low-cost strategy that is able to push information to students, through strategic collaboration. What is needed, however, is a better understanding of why students did not see a need to access the material. Based on the evaluation of the pilot, this model will be extended and adapted to include multi-site trials. If all students are to benefit from e-partnerships as described in this paper, the collaboration needs to be extended and coordinated at a faculty level to enable the formation of multiple multi-disciplinary e-partnerships, built as permanent and sustainable structural support systems, accessible by students in the comfort of their digital homes.

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