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Pushing library information to first-year students: An exploratory study of faculty/library collaboration

Eva Dobozy and Julia Gross

The authors contend that better information literacy and library skills development practice is needed for students entering university. This paper presents a case study of how a teacher education (TE) lecturer and a faculty librarian collaborated in an Australian university to provide information literacy practice. A mutual interest in technology-enhanced learning and teaching through podcasting media was the catalyst for the collaboration. A semester-long trial was conducted in which library pod/vodcasts were provided to first-year teacher education students. This paper explores this student learning and proposes a prototype for further media-related collaboration between academic and library staff.

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It is widely acknowledged that educational collaboration can lead to useful innovations (Selinger, 2009). However, Cardini (2009) points out that collaborative endeavours are “complex, ideological and contradictory social phenomena” that call for careful explanations of the intent of the cooperation between the various parties (p. 394). Hence, this paper focuses on the potential of a strategic model of a better aligned in-house support system to assist first-year students. This pilot study is used as an illustrative example of a technology-enhanced learning and teaching support program.

The paper discusses the intent and impact of a strategic one-on-one partnership between a lecturer and faculty librarian. The aim of the partnership was the development, implementation and testing of a semester-long trial of embedded library podcasts in a first year unit’s learning management system (BlackBoard) in a teacher education course. In the first year education studies unit, the researchers worked in close partnership with the aim to improve academic support for students new to university study. By providing ‘just-in-time’ library pod/vodcasts, it was anticipated that students would feel less like ‘academic tourists’, developing a more scholarly mindset. This would allow them to feel as ‘academically belonging’ to the university (Sternglass 1997, p. 130).

The multi-media library component was made available to students in addition to traditional face-to-face library workshops. The intent of strategically embedding the library podcasts in the unit’s BlackBoard site was twofold: (a) to place library support materials where students would conveniently find them at the point of need and (b) to emphasise to these students that acquiring library and information literacy skills is

seen as an essential component of academic success in post-secondary education (Scott, 2008).

First year experience in Australian universities

Students in their first semester at university face challenges pertaining to campus size, learning environment and discipline-specific paradigms and requirements. Often students struggle to understand academic expectations at the higher education (HE) level, with concerns over completing first assignments, making sense of the stated requirements for assignments etc, which can, and often do, induce stress and anxiety (Stallmann, 2008). However, students can obtain support and assistance to help them adapt to HE learning and teaching. The strategic partnership model described here is one approach that has the potential to assist learners, many of whom are first-generation university students, succeed in a higher learning environment.

In devising student support strategies the researchers targeted students' learning environments and learning habits. A longitudinal national study into the first year experience in Australian universities has reported students' increasing use of ICT (including lecture podcasts) to access course materials; the pervasiveness of BlackBoard, WebCT and Moodle; and students' perception of ICT more generally in education (James, Krause, & Jennings 2010). However, as the authors of this study believed, student engagement with learning technologies is an area that warrants further research and institutional investigation (James et al 2010, p. 46).

Podcasting information

Podcasting involves making audio or video recorded files available for download (McGarr, 2009). Many universities have now embedded audio podcasts and video enhanced podcasts (or vodcasts) into the course environment with positive results (Masad, Masad, Blank, & Enjeti, 2010; Scott, 2008; Scutter, Stupans, Sawyer & King, 2010). This is in response to research that suggests that technology-enhanced collaboration between staff from different departments within a university can help to facilitate student access to vital information (Michel, Hurst & Revelle, 2009).

The problem: lack of information literacy skills

For their first academic assignment, all students new to university-level study are faced with a complex information landscape. On the one hand, the ubiquity of search engines, most prominently 'Google' and the ease of its search function, means that information on any academic question is available at the click of a mouse. Yet many first-year students lack information literacy and critical thinking skills to sift and sort

the material that is readily available, and to locate that which is not available on 'Google' but instead provided in domain specific databases (Schulte, 2008; Swanson, 2005; Thomlinson, 2008; Waters & Brooks, 2010). As Combes (2008) contends:

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." (p. 15)

The first-year students in this study were expected to demonstrate specific information literacy competencies. For example, in their first assignment students were required to use at least five references, none of which were to be from Wikipedia. In addition, they were asked to demonstrate the following library research skills:

- 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 and
- how to cite academic work used in assignments.

The library pod/vodcast intervention

A brief review of the current literature showed that other universities (Curtin University of Technology, Queensland University of Technology, University of Technology Sydney and others) have experimented with the podcasting of library information (Ralph & Olsen, 2007; Jowitt, 2008). But most of these library podcasts are placed on a library website rather than being embedded in a learning management system.

It was proposed to adopt the Learning Activity Management System (LAMS), which had been used by Macquarie University Library to embed library information skills into a second year level teacher education unit (Wright & Cooper, 2007). LAMS was offered as a simple plug-in (see Figure 1) to BlackBoard. LAMS activities can be constructed to include media and problem based learning tasks. LAMS is a preferred learning tool as it is activity-driven, provides a highly interactive learning environment and facilitates the monitoring of student interaction at various levels.

The following generic and subject specific pod/vodcasts relevant to first-year teacher education students were chosen for the pilot program:

- borrowing from the library (3.30 minutes);
- education databases (4.00 minutes);
- developing a search strategy (5.50 minutes) and
- Wilson Web – education database (7.45 minutes)

The 2009 cohort of education students (n=345) were predominantly school leavers. The majority of which, (292 students) agreed to have their online activity monitored. BlackBoard in conjunction with LAMS was used to deliver the students' media activities throughout their 12-week course. In an early lecture titled: *Personalised teaching and learning with Web 2.0 technologies*, students were introduced to the blended learning mode and the BlackBoard environment, which was set up as a 'one-stop-shop' to make information access easy and unproblematic. Hence, the two library podcasts and two library vodcasts were conveniently accessible through the LAMS plug-in within BlackBoard by simply clicking on the link . But this access was not compulsory and did not attract any assessment points. However, it was made explicit that the library, in its physical and virtual form, was a vital learning space.

The four library pod/vodcasts were designed to familiarise students with some basic library skills, some of which were necessary for successful completion of first semester assignments. A written transcript of the information presented in the four modules was provided to cater for students with various learning styles, thus enabling students to 'read' and 'hear' texts simultaneously if they wished. However, in retrospect, the provision of hard copy information may have induced some students to not bother with the online material.

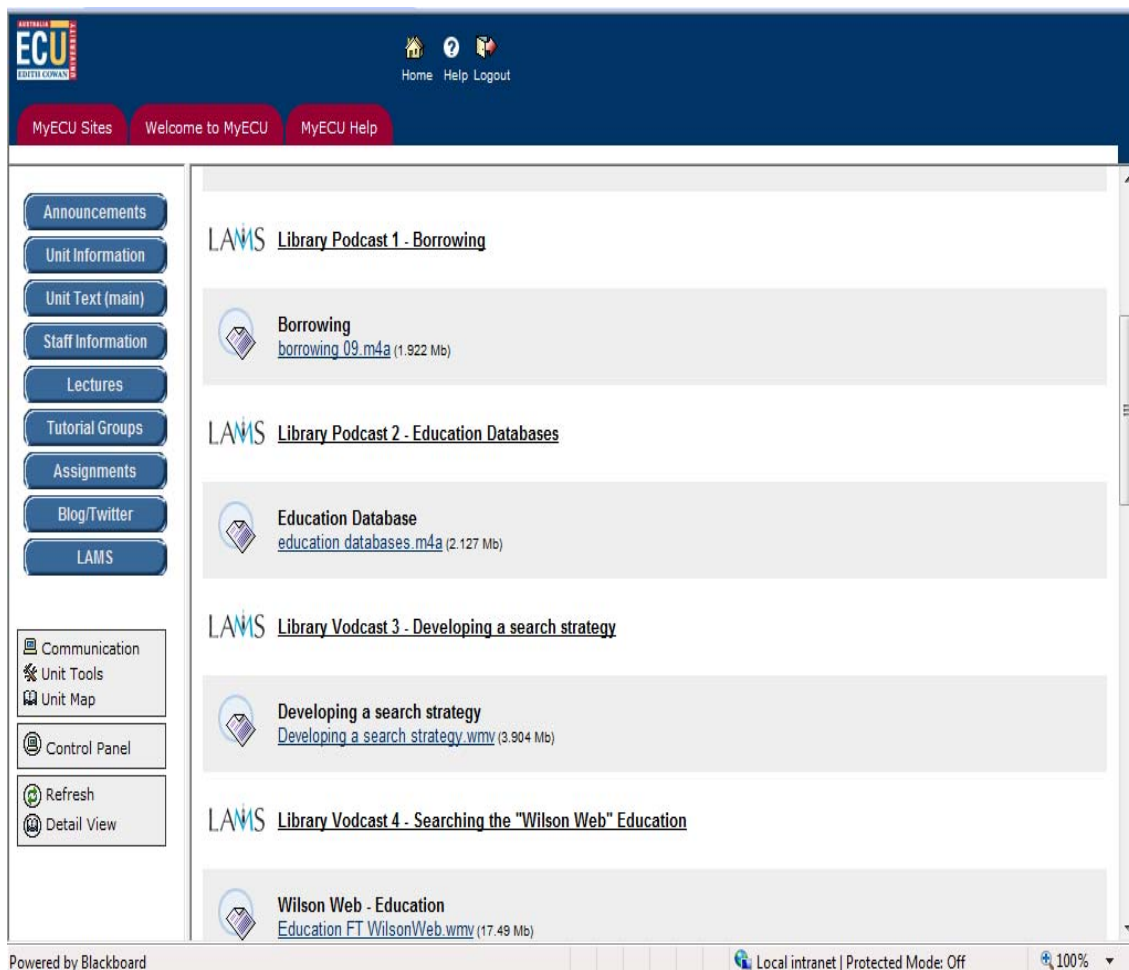
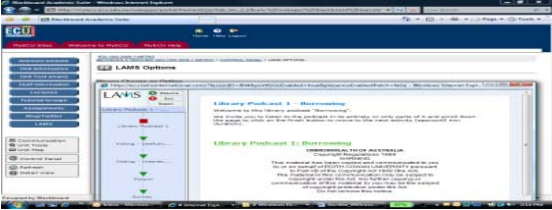
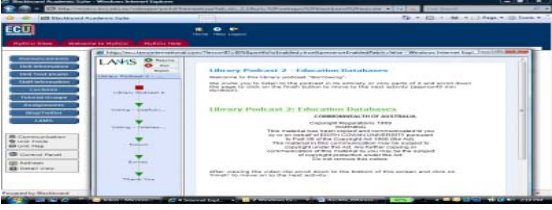



Figure 2: Library pod/vodcasts in LAMS within BlackBoard

The table below summarises the nature and purpose of each of the four basic library skills development modules. The modules were selected and introduced in a specific order, commencing with the less demanding podcast about the university's borrowing system and increasing in complexity to arrive at a vodcast demonstrating the use of a specialised database for high-quality, up-to-date information retrieval in the field of education.

Table 1: Library podcasts/vodcasts including selected Forum comments

Library Module	Type & Duration	Description
Borrowing (1)	Podcast (3.30 minutes) 	This module introduces students to the library's system for borrowing items: how to access material and rules and regulations of borrowing items from the library.
Education databases (2)	Podcast (4.0 minutes) 	This module is narrated by an experienced librarian, explaining the importance of using journal databases for locating specific academic articles for assignment topics in education.
Search strategy development (3)	Vodcast (5.50 minutes) 	This vodcast provides a step-by-step approach to the development of a search strategy for an assignment, using a specific research example to illustrate the effective use of online resources.

Wilson Web
(4)

Vodcast (7.45 minutes)



In this longer vodcast module, the librarian demonstrates the sequence of search screens in the Wilson Web Education database, illustrating how students can conduct a successful search.

With each library pod/vodcast, the students were asked to follow the normal LAMS sequence: first, students view/listen to the pod/vodcasts; second, they vote on their interest in and perception of the usefulness of the information and thirdly, they complete the forum activity, which was designed to elicit discussion and provide some qualitative evidence of students' interest in the information delivered through this medium.

The researchers took the students' responses to questions posed in the LAMS Forum to be a measure of their understanding of and engagement with the material. Examples of typical comments against each module are provided below (see Table 2).

Results

From the 292 students who agreed to be monitored, the results indicate around 25% or less who did in fact access the library pod/vodcasts. While there was a gradually declining participation rate (from 23.6% for the Borrowing module to 15% for the Wilson Webs module), the completion rate was relatively steady with approximately 2/3 of those who participated completing the modules. Table 2 below indicates participation rates for each module and provides sample comments from those who took part. As noted earlier, the pod/vodcasts were presented in LAMS and embedded in the unit's BlackBoard site to provide students with an interactive platform, which invited peer-to-peer collaboration and discussion of first impressions and the issues arising. However, students showed marginal take-up of the option to receive additional information at the point of need.

Table 2: Podcast/vodcast utilisation

Podcast/ vodcast title	Total students commenced	Total students completed	Sample comments about usefulness
Borrowing (1)	69	41 (59%)	I have borrowed many different books that have assisted me in researching for my assignments, both in the reserve reading section and the main collection. However, I have not borrowed any magazines or newspapers yet.
Education databases (2)	57	36 (63%)	No, I haven't actually used it yet, but now feel after watching the podcast that when I eventually do I will know how to use it.
Developing a search strategy (3)	50	32 (64%)	I particularly liked the consistent use of examples to help us understand the theory behind how to develop an effective search strategy
Searching the Wilson Web – Education (4)	45	27 (60%)	It was very interesting to know that if you use a * next to a word in the search such as observ* that it will include searches for observe, observing, observer, etc

As indicated below, the majority of those who participated found all the modules somewhat or very useful with the basic module on borrowing proving to be the most highly rated.

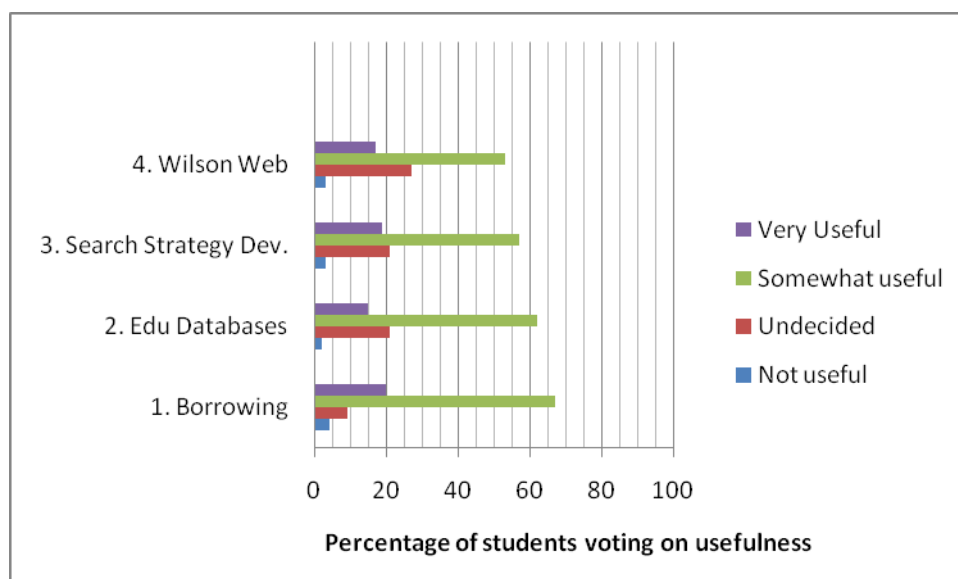


Figure 3: Student views on usefulness of library pod/vodcast modules

Only seven students (less than 5% of students accessing the library modules) posted multiple and regular comments on the forum page. Five students discussed their lack of experience of physical libraries, referring to the past (high school), whereas three made comments about their present circumstances. The following is a further sample of the comments:

- *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 [in the library]. I find the library is a great place to do my study. I especially like the small study rooms that are available [in the new library building]. I find it is the best environment for me to study.*
- *I use the library to find books for my assignments. I don't use the internet to find resources, and I guess I just like using books.*
- *I have used the Metaquest database, which has helped me with my research for assignments.*
- *I do use the databases and find that they take up little time and are very easy to use. I would advise others to use them too.*

Discussion

Students new to university life need to orient themselves to a new learning environment and to teaching and learning practices that demand much autonomy, persistence and self-motivation. The aim of these learning modules was to provide additional support for students new to university culture, particularly in the acquisition of important information literacy skills. However, based upon the results of this study, the strategy had limited success.

The frequency of student access suggests that as the pod/vodcasts information became more specific, there was decreasing interest, and less completion. The library 'borrowing' module received the most attention, which corresponds with results from a study at New Zealand's Universal College of Learning (Jowitt, 2008). However, the students showed less interest in database searches, specifically the Wilson Education Web, which could, potentially, greatly assist them in current and future assignment work. Student comments retrieved through the LAMS Forum indicate a poor understanding of the role library databases play in assignment research. Although only twelve students posted a comment on the forum page, the feedback received highlights the fact that some students had had little exposure to tertiary libraries and the learning resources and services they can offer. Only one student demonstrated above-average levels of knowledge and thus could be

classified as 'library information literate'. She accessed all the modules and provided advice on the usefulness of databases to her peers.

Another key finding of the trial is that few students engaged with the pod/vodcasts. All students were strongly encouraged to access the podcast/vodcast material; however, this activity was deliberately made optional. This can be seen as a larger underlying problem, which is well documented, of students' readiness for self-management and self-regulation (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010).

Based upon the results of this study, simply providing more information through embedded library modules in a given unit of study is not likely to be an effective strategy. Widening strategic collaboration to include more faculty and conducting targeted tutorial activities in conjunction with the provision of embedded library skills development modules would probably be more effective. Larger-scale, mixed method research may help shed light on the complex issues surrounding effective student support and its relationship with student engagement, motivation, autonomy and learning success.

Conclusion

This paper has described a strategic faculty/library collaboration, which resulted in a semester-long trial of introducing library pod/vodcasts into the blended learning environment of a first year teacher education unit. The intention was to accommodate the students' individual study patterns and provide them with choices and directions concerning their authentic and 'just-in-time' learning of library skills. Student access to the media content was monitored through the LAMS sequences within BlackBoard, and this gave some indication of levels of engagement. A series of forum questions were posed in LAMS to spark online discussion and measure the level of awareness of, and engagement with, the library information.

The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), as quoted by Page (2009), lists among the top teaching and learning challenges for 2009, the "development of 21st century literacies (information, digital, and visual) among students and faculty" (p. 13). A series of embedded library modules, such as the ones trialled here, addresses this challenge by pushing literacy support into a regular unit's BlackBoard site (or equivalent), where students will come across them without having to search the library website or exert special effort to find information. This trial revealed reluctance in first-year teacher education students with few students taking up the opportunity to engage with this form of library skills development.

The aims of the collaboration were threefold: (a) to assist first year students by providing library information bytes, (b) to bring library support within the digital home of students, namely the unit BlackBoard site, and (c) to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach and gauge whether it could be applied more broadly across other units and courses. While the first two aims were met, there remain many unanswered

questions in relation to the final aim, such as: What type of content is suited to this approach? Should such interventions (embedded library modules) form a compulsory component of a unit/course? Does this approach suit some levels and disciplines more than others?

This one-semester trial indicated a lack of library awareness in these first year teacher education students, who were still orientating themselves to a new learning environment. The level of student engagement with the library modules was surprisingly low and appeared to drop off in students making use of the media as the content became more specific and demanding. It is possible that unrelated factors, such as problems with BlackBoard access, connection problems, or lack of ICT skills contributed to the generally poor uptake of the support offered. These questions could be addressed in future research. James et al report that while students' time spent online for study and recreation purposes has increased rapidly over the last decade, students' level of engagement with learning technologies within BlackBoard, WebCT, Moodle etc is not encouraging (2010, p.48). It may be that this research provides confirming evidence for this finding with the effectiveness of embedding library media content in a unit's learning management system, as undertaken in this trial, seeming to have been of limited success. Further research is required to gain a better understanding of this phenomena.

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