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Forging New Partnerships: Learning and Teaching Connections Between Academic and Library Staff

Eva Dobozy
Edith Cowan University

Julia Gross
Edith Cowan University

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Forging new partnerships: learning and teaching connections between academic and library staff

Eva Dobozy

Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia
e.dobozy@ecu.edu.au

Julia Gross

Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley, Australia
j.gross@ecu.edu.au

This paper presents a case study of how one teacher education (TE) lecturer and one faculty librarian built upon their shared experiences by forging a partnership to collaborate in a first-year teacher education unit. Technology-enhanced learning and teaching through podcasting media was the catalyst for the partnership. The paper explores the potential and actual impact of this partnership on student learning and suggests a path for further media-related partnerships between academic and library staff.

Keywords: partnerships, library literacy, podcast, first year 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 the partnership between one teacher education (TE) lecturer and one 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 one key component that has great potential to enable students’ academic development and enhance their learning experience.

In this paper, we discuss the intent and outcome of an educational partnership in which we developed and implemented a semester-long trial of embedding library podcasts into a unit’s learning management system (LMS) at ECU in 2009. A defining feature of the partnership was its focus on academic support for students through the provision of ‘just-in-time’ library pod/vodcasts, embedded into a unit’s Blackboard site. The multimedia library component, embedded within the first-year TE unit EDL1000 *Becoming a Teacher*, was made available to students in addition to traditional face-to-face library workshops. The aim of the strategic embedding of the library podcasts in the unit’s Blackboard site was to place library support materials where students would find them, thereby emphasising the importance of acquiring library skills as an essential component for academic success.

Podcasting information

Some first-year units at ECU have experimented with the offering of a 'blended learning experience'. In these cases students receive the face-to-face lectures and tutorials, and in addition, are provided with the opportunity to access course-related information and collaborate when and how they want, through the unit's LMS.

In this study, both staff have extensive experience with podcasting and believed that this medium is well placed to enrich students' learning experience. Furthermore, Tynan and Colbran (2006) investigated the effectiveness of podcasting in Australian universities and found that podcasting 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, which resulted in the provision of podcasting to become an essential component of their course (Tynan & Colbran, 2006). 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).

After agreeing on the technology to be used to 'push the information to students', we embarked on the task of aligning and documenting our understandings of the 'the problem' that led to our strategic partnership and the resulting intervention innovation.

The Problem: Lack of information literacy skills

When starting out on research for the first academic assignment, TE students new to academic 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 students think that answers to any question posed are readily available at the click of a mouse. Yet it has been noted that too many students in TE and elsewhere seem to lack information literacy skills, critical thinking and/or effective note-taking skills (Atlay & Harris, 2000; Branch, 2004; Grant & Berg, 2004; Schulte, 2008; Swanson, 2005). Many students struggle to locate and recognise the quality academic information available through university libraries. Instead, they may rely on using Google and Wikipedia as convenient sources for their assignments.

It cannot be assumed that first year undergraduates, who are now mostly Net Generation students, have strong information literacy and library skills. Anecdotal evidence from academic support staff at ECU seems to suggest that some students lack the skills to manage and cite their readings. This contributes to some of the issues and problems surrounding plagiarism. In addition, more recent research reports that although Net Generation students may be confident in some areas of the Net, their information and computer literacy cannot be assumed and students' "information-seeking behaviour is unsophisticated [and] demonstrates a culture of use that is hard to change" (Combes, 2008, p. 15). She further notes that:

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)

When 'Google' and 'Wikipedia' are perceived as being synonymous to fast and convenient e-research for university assignments, how should academic and library staff respond? The reliance on superficial searches through Google seems to point to a lack of information literacy skills and critical thinking competencies in students. But what are well developed literacy skills? We needed a theoretical grounding, a benchmark to help us define the concept.

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 six ANZIIL competencies that Bundy (2004, p. 11) defined are reproduced and adapted to suit our purposes (see Table 1).

Table 1: Core competencies of an information literate person

Competency	Description
1: Information need	The information literate person recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed.
2: Efficient search for information	The information literate person finds required information effectively and efficiently
3: Critical appraisal of information	The information literate person critically evaluates information and the information seeking process
4: Effective organisation of information	The information literate person manages information collected or generated
5: Synthesis of new information into existing knowledge	The information literate person applies prior and new information to construct new concepts and/or creates new understandings
6: Ethical and culturally appropriate use of information	The information literate person uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information

Implementing an information push approach

Our library podcast project was beginning to take shape as a pilot run was implemented in February 2009. Following the idea that an information literate person recognises the need for information, we intended to track students' access of a number of library information pod/vodcasts, which were made available through their regular unit LMS. This 'information push approach' was envisioned to better support and assist students in the development of information literacy skills. In other words, as well as providing online and print library resources that students could seek out (pull strategy); the information was 'pushed to the students' in form of embedded library podcasts/vodcasts.

The library pod/vodcast intervention

A selection of generic and subject specific pod/vodcasts relevant to first year TE students was chosen for the pilot program. 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 commencing the unit in February (n=345), as predominantly school leavers, were representative of the millennial generation (sometimes also referred to as Net Generation Learners or digital natives). As such they were likely to show some of the characteristics of Net Generation learners such as the heavy reliance on Google which has been noted by Lippincott (2005) and others. The students were accessing their units in Blackboard (the Learning Management System at ECU) in conjunction with the Learning Activity Management System (LAMS) developed by Macquarie University (see Figure 1).

The screenshot displays the Blackboard LAMS interface. At the top, the ECU logo is visible on the left, and navigation links for Home, Help, and Logout are on the right. Below the header, there are links for MyECU Sites, Welcome to MyECU, and MyECU Help. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column contains a vertical menu of buttons: Announcements, Unit Information, Unit Text (main), Staff Information, Lectures, Tutorial Groups, Assignments, Blog/Twitter, and LAMS. Below this menu are sections for Communication (Unit Tools, Unit Map), Control Panel, and Refresh/Detail View options. The right column displays four LAMS items, each with a document icon and a title: 1. 'Library Podcast 1 - Borrowing' with a file named 'borrowing_09.m4a (1.922 Mb)'. 2. 'Library Podcast 2 - Education Databases' with a file named 'education_databases.m4a (2.127 Mb)'. 3. 'Library Vodcast 3 - Developing a search strategy' with a file named 'Developing a search strategy.wmv (3.904 Mb)'. 4. 'Library Vodcast 4 - Searching the "Wilson Web" Education' with a file named 'Wilson Web - Education Education FT WilsonWeb.wmv (17.49 Mb)'. At the bottom left of the interface, it says 'Powered by Blackboard'.

Figure 1: Library pod/vodcasts in LAMS within Blackboard

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).

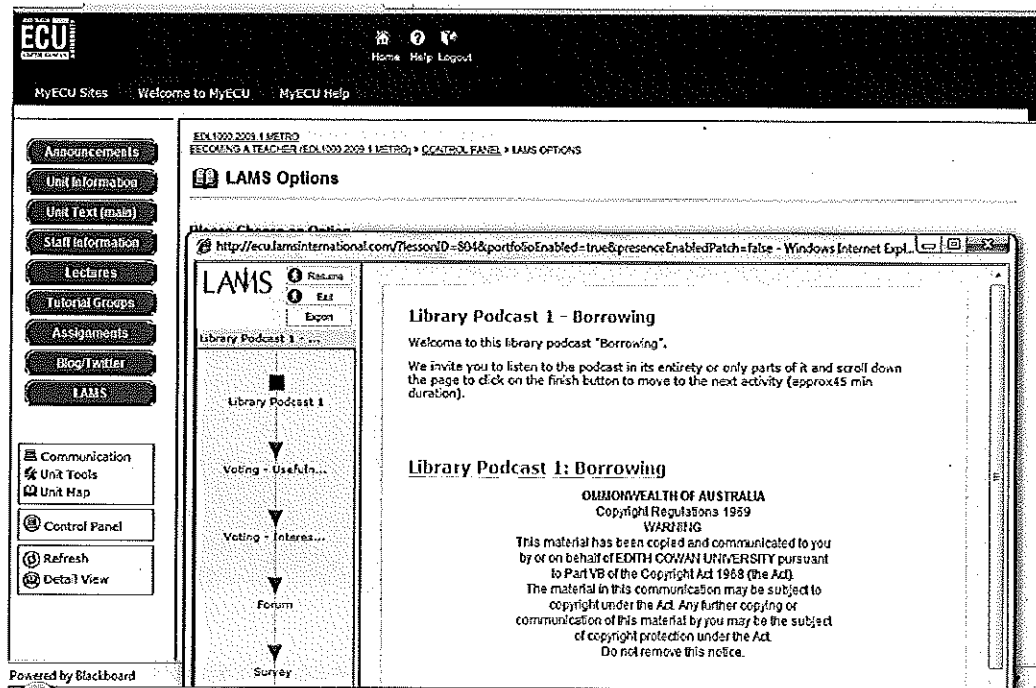


Figure 2: Library Podcast 1 - Borrowing

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).

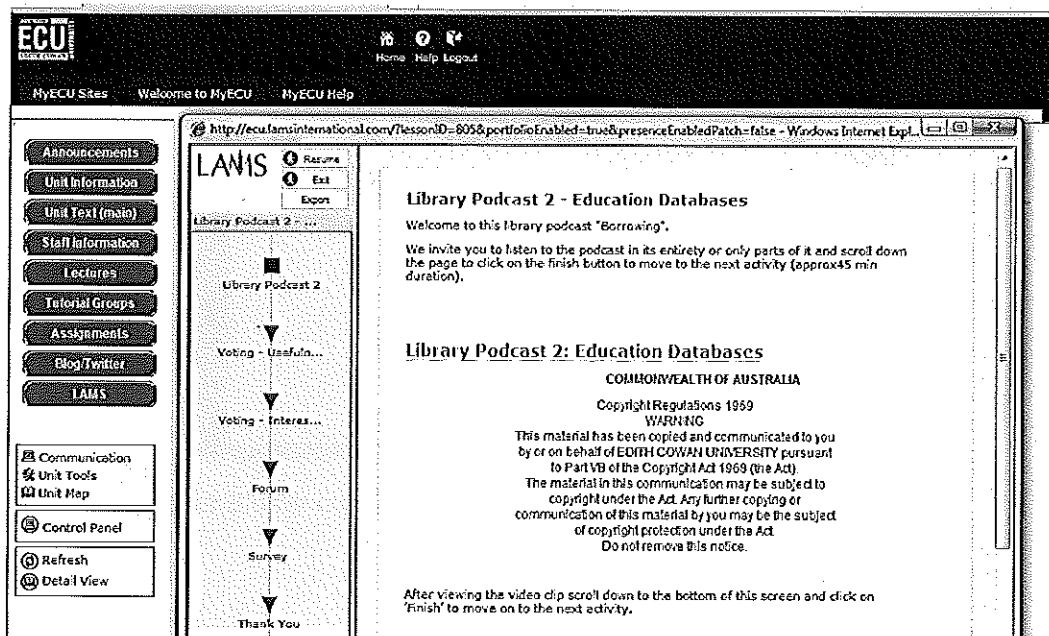


Figure 3: Library Podcast 2 - Education Databases

Library Podcast 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).

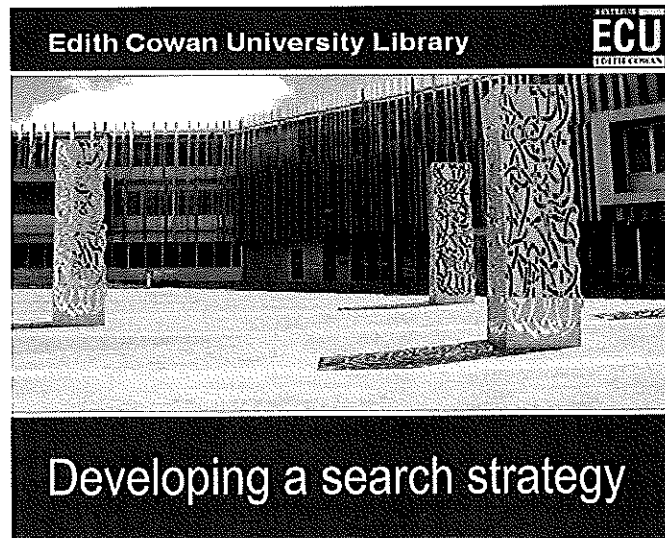


Figure 4: Library Vodcasts 3 - Developing a search strategy

Library Vodcast 4: *Searching the Wilson Web Education* – the librarian walks the students through the sequence of search screens in the Wilson Web Education database, illustrating how students can conduct a search for an education topic (see Figure 5).

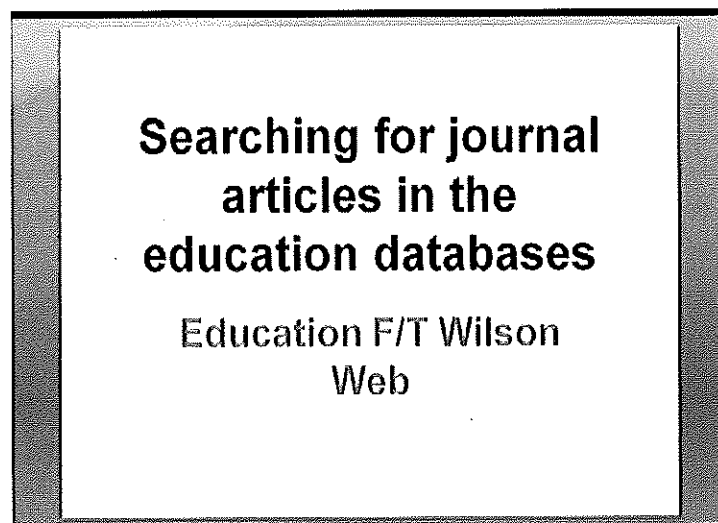


Figure 5: Library Vodcast 4 - Searching the Wilson Web Education

The case study

This first year TE unit served as a case study in this pilot intervention initiative. Students who completed all requirements of the unit and agreed to have their online work monitored were the study participants (n=323). The learning objective of the unit is for students to begin to establish a teacher identity through the introduction of

key themes, various theoretical perspectives, and first-hand professional experiences at university and in schools.

Hypothesis

The effective utilisation of specific library information, such as pod/vodcasts, requires that they are strategically placed. By locating them in context, in conjunction with other learning activities within an academic unit or program, we hypothesised that they would attract interest and provide valuable data about students' library literacy and needs.

Evaluation of access logs

The LAMS monitoring system allowed us to extract the access data using an educational data mining technique (Heiner, Heffernan & Barnes, 2007). The histogram of student access logs measured students' interest and level of engagement with the library information embedded into the unit's LMS for ease of access and at the perceived point of need (see Table 2). Although it may be argued that the tracking of student access data is only a superficial measure of student engagement with the library media 'pushed' to the students, we believe that an initial level of 'buy-in' is an essential first step that warrants close monitoring.

Table 2: Histogram of podcast/vodcast utilisation

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%

Evaluation of forum discussion

Although only a very few students posted comments, the forum entries show engagement and interest on the part of the 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 need 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. Interestingly, a number of students who participated in this forum discussion did not write an entry on the previous podcast forum space. This makes apparent that it cannot be assumed that the same students engage with each other and the learning material. Rather, students seem to be driven by a desire to share their understanding of the value of a particular service or their understanding of the steps involved in utilising the service. For example, students wrote:

- *I do use the databases and find that they take up little time and are very easy to use. I would advise other to use them too.*
- *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.*
- *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.*

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. Nevertheless, they were informative, noting what students felt about the value of the media.

- *I particularly liked the consistent use of examples to help us understand the theory behind how to develop an effective search strategy.*
- *I now feel more confident with my searching strategy and think this will save me time when researching.*
- *The vodcast helped us create better search strategies which will help us find more quality information and will save us time.*
- *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.**

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 that frequent the library.

Two students participated in all the forum activities and made valuable contributions to the learning of their peers and through their engagement; we are able to better understand how the media can be helpful to first year students in the future.

Implication of findings for learning and teaching

The content chosen to embed into the unit's LMS ranged from practical information on library borrowing, to generic information on search strategies, to subject database specific information on Education databases and a step by step 'how to' for the WilsonWeb Education Full Text database. In general, there seemed to be some interest in the library podcasts/vodcasts from students. The trial highlighted the need to enhance library awareness in these first year TE students. First year university students are still orientating themselves to a new learning environment and new modes of teaching and learning. Many seem to be unaware of the role the library can play in their learning. A significant finding of the trial was that there was a notable decrease in interest in more specific library services (Vodcasts 3 & 4). The library borrowing module (podcast 1) was the most successful (see Table 2). Our results confirm the findings from a study conducted by Jowitt (2008) at New Zealand's Universal College of Learning (UCOL) which evaluated their podcast access logs. Jowitt (2008) found that the podcast which provided information borrowing and record of loans was the most frequented. In the ECU trial, students were able to leave a comments on their experience with the strategic 'push tactic' and the usefulness of the information for their assignment work. The relatively poorly frequented Vodcasts 3 & 4 and the general nature of the comments posted by students signal a poor understanding of the library databases and what role they played in study and assignment work.

Where to from here?

This paper has described the strategic partnership between one academic and one librarian. The aim was to test the impact of the embedding of library pod/vodcasts into the blended learning environment of a first year teacher education unit. The library media was provided alongside existing academic unit podcasts and was aligned to the student-centred pedagogy of the unit, which encourages students to take ownership of their learning. Although students were provided with opportunities to partake in face-to-face library workshops, the 'push strategy' employed was aimed to establish a support framework for first-year students, new to university culture at a point of need, when they were undertaking research for their first assignment. The pod/vodcasts were able to be accessed asynchronously through the unit's regular LMS. It was anticipated that this flexible strategy would suit the individual student's study pattern and provided her/him with some choice in timing of their library learning.

This small-scale intervention study confirms the need for more strategic collaboration between academic and library staff. The level of student engagement with the media was generally low and appeared to drop off as the content became more complex and specific. We are convinced that embedded library pod/vodcasts placed strategically in a unit's LMS are an excellent means to support time-poor students at point of need in their assignment work. Hence, we argue that high-level collaboration and the introduction of multi-site trials would be most beneficial to explore support structures that have a wider impact on students. One off trials and low-level experimentation, although valuable in their own right, do not seem to have the impact needed to truly support all students at the point of need. If all students are to benefit from educational

partnerships and the close collaboration between university staff, the collaboration needs to be coordinated at a school, faculty or learning and teaching level in order to build sustainable structures.

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