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Building Online Essay Writing Support Tools

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Abstract

The English Studies Program at the University of Wollongong, with support from staff in the library and Learning Development, has linked together a series of learning support tools for use in their 100-level subjects. These tools — an online research and citation skills assessment task and an essay and quiz writing study guide — harness the world wide web as a means of augmenting and enhancing student learning at an undergraduate level. Each of these tools is flexibly delivered, student centred and curriculum integrated. This project is part of a broader initiative in the English Studies Program to develop an even more secure support infrastructure for undergraduate students as they approach their assessment tasks, and to guarantee concrete follow-up on assignments early in the students' course of study. The early results of our evaluation and the anecdotal evidence we have received indicates the effectiveness of these projects and their value to our students as they develop generic skills. In addition, the administrative benefits of this project make a significant contribution to an efficient teaching environment. This paper provides an overview of these tools, explains the rationale behind their design and argues for the very powerful benefits of integrating and implementing them into undergraduate subjects.

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Building Online Essay Writing Support Tools

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The English Studies Program at the University of Wollongong, with support from staff in the library and Learning Development, has linked together a series of learning support tools for use in their 100-level subjects. These tools — an online research and citation skills assessment task and an essay and quiz writing study guide — harness the world wide web as a means of augmenting and enhancing student learning at an undergraduate level. Each of these tools is flexibly delivered, student centred and curriculum integrated. This project is part of a broader initiative in the English Studies Program to develop an even more secure support infrastructure for undergraduate students as they approach their assessment tasks, and to guarantee concrete follow-up on assignments early in the students' course of study. The early results of our evaluation and the anecdotal evidence we have received indicates the effectiveness of these projects and their value to our students as they develop generic skills. In addition, the administrative benefits of this project make a significant contribution to an efficient teaching environment. This paper provides an overview of these tools, explains the rationale behind their design and argues for the very powerful benefits of integrating and implementing them into undergraduate subjects.

Rationale

For students entering a tertiary institution as first year undergraduates in 2000, computer access is considered a right not a privilege. In fact students at the University of Wollongong are currently protesting the proposed introduction of fees for Internet use. One of their strongest arguments is that access to the Internet and the World Wide Web is a fundamental requirement for study at the University. Indeed, all students are required to activate their email accounts within the first six weeks of enrolment and to complete a compulsory Information Literacies Introductory Program task. Reliance on the web for teaching is growing all the time, at what seems an exponential rate. Every semester, subjects are making use of the web for teaching and learning. In several institutions students are now required to complete their subject enrolments on the web and subject coordinators calculate and submit final marks on the web. Thinking back over the last decade, the changes in the experiences of undergraduate study in terms of technology are enormous.

While it is tempting to enthusiastically embrace these new technologies and explore their potential for developing whiz-bang teaching and impressive, interactive formats for subject material, it is worth considering the significant warnings that have emerged in the literature on technology in higher education. There is a consistent and considered body of research warning against “the belief that technology is a panacea or that computers are

universal change agents” (Privateer, 1999, 62). Indeed, the rapid pace of change that is seeing technological obsolescence shrink further every day, should serve as a constant reminder that the technology should never come first. Indeed, as Miller observes, a reliance on new technologies for teaching does not save money but in fact only adds to the cost of instruction (Miller, 1995, 602). And as anyone who has been involved in the development of flexibly delivered subjects or computer aided learning tools will tell you, the investment of money in these projects is only outweighed by the investment of time. It would and should be sheer madness to invest such valuable time and money into projects whose technological specificity renders them obsolete in the matter of a few years. Indeed, beyond the rationale that technology should not come first, it is vital to remember that sound pedagogical practice must be the driving force behind any adoption of technology for teaching or any adaptation of teaching to accommodate technology.

But those scholars who warn against technological utopianism (Miller, 1995, 601) rarely draw negative conclusions. Instead, this body of research encourages tertiary teachers to recognise that technology is instigating a pedagogical shift. Indeed, much of the case-study research written by teachers who have built technology into their teaching, speaks in terms of ‘epiphanies’ and ‘discovery’ (Alley, 1996, 49) as teachers are forced to reflect upon and reevaluate their teaching practice. These feelings speak for the personal experience of countless teachers who have, whether by choice or circumstance, become rigorously self-reflective of their teaching due to the introduction of computer technology in tertiary education. Almost without exception, the literature indicates the outcome of this reflective teaching is the adoption of teaching philosophies that subscribe to what Barr and Tagg refer to as the ‘learning paradigm’. In contrast to the ‘instruction paradigm’ that they argue has long dominated tertiary education, the learning paradigm is one where the purpose of the teacher, and by inference the institution for which they work, “is not to transfer knowledge but to create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems” (Barr and Tagg, 1995, 15). This paradigmatic shift is embodied in current higher education teaching research that promotes and explores teaching practices that develop students’ lifelong learning skills in higher education, producing graduates with the appropriate skills and motivation to remain flexible, adaptive and open to continued learning throughout their professional lives.

Lifelong learning, as a concept is not new to education, yet its acceptance into the mainstream culture of teaching and the recognition of its role as central to undergraduate education has only become a reality in the last decade. This wider acceptance has been instigated by a number of factors throughout the 1990s. In particular, some important influences have been: the explosion of the information technology industry; the continuing shift to an information society; globalisation, increasing student diversity; and the ongoing demands from the professional sphere to produce flexible and dynamic graduates who can continuously learn, adapt to and participate in a workforce constantly changing as a result of the information age (Candy, 1994, 31-37). As Whitehead (cited in Miller, 1995, 4) argues on this latter point, given the dynamic and ever-changing nature of many professions in the information age, the aim of education should be “mental

cultivation” as opposed to “knowledge accumulation”, preparing graduates with the skills and motivation to continuously learn and change throughout their professional lives.

This acceptance and recognition of the ‘learning paradigm’ and the commitment to developing students’ lifelong learning skills is evident in the recent shifts in institutional policy in the higher education sector. The University of Wollongong’s *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 – 2005* outlines nine attributes of a University of Wollongong graduate that, for the majority, reflect the principles of lifelong learning skills. Of the nine graduate attributes, at least two encompass information literacy and tertiary literacy skills, both of which are seen as key to the development of students’ lifelong learning skills (Ewan, 1997; Candy, 1995) and are the focus of the online tools to be discussed in this paper.

Further, the *Strategic Plan* provides guidelines and strategies for ensuring that students acquire these skills, thus encouraging teaching practices that make the shift away from traditional modes of delivery towards more flexible, problem-based, developmental and student-centered approaches. Both the *Strategic Plan* and the *Information Literacy Policy* clearly indicate that the integration of information and tertiary literacies into subject curriculum is necessary to ensure that students acquire these skills. The validity of this type of curriculum development, involving collaboration between academic staff and learning and teaching developers, has become more visible in Higher Education teaching and learning circles as the most effective and efficient way of providing skills instruction (Merten, Murray & Quinlan, 1995; Skillen et al, 1998; Skillen & Mahoney, 1997).

Thus, the design, development and integration of the Research and Citations Skills Assessment Task, which enhances students’ information literacy skills, and the online Study Guide, which is designed to support and enhance students’ tertiary literacy skills, embody shifts on three levels. At the pedagogical level, they embody a shift towards the ‘learning paradigm’ and the promotion of lifelong learning skills; and at the institutional level, they encourage important innovations in meeting the objectives of teaching policy, and provide models for other academics making the shift themselves. At the practical level, they harness the benefits of computer technology without being driven, compromised or limited by it. For the staff in the English Studies Program, the development of these tools provides the opportunity to explore the capacity of educational technologies to offer interactive and student-centered learning environments that augment face-to-face classes, adding value to the students’ learning experiences.

Description

With support from staff in the library and Learning Development, two first year coordinators in the English Studies Program have linked together a series of learning support tools for use in first year subjects offered through the English Studies Program. These tools — an online Research and Citation Skills Assessment task and an essay Writing Study Guide — focus on three specific skill areas: research, citation and essay writing. They are specifically designed to help students develop their information and tertiary literacy skills and meet fundamental learning objectives required in 100-level

subjects. To do this they address a series of knowledge and skill areas these students consistently find difficult to acquire including the citation of primary and secondary sources, the location of secondary sources and the composition of academic essays. These tools offer a learning environment that is flexibly delivered, curriculum-integrated and student-centered, and one that has the potential to be tailored to the specific needs and methodologies of different disciplines. This is particularly relevant as the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong is moving towards a re-evaluation of its first year offerings through a 'whole degree' approach. Each of the tools makes use of hypertext to provide ease of use, flexible access options, interactivity and automation. But at no point and in no way is technology used for technology's sake. Rather it makes strategic and selective use of the currently available communication technology, with the flexibility to accommodate future developments.

Research and Citations Skills Assessment Task

To the dismay of librarians and tertiary teachers alike, too many students do not discover research tools such as full-text databases or learn the skills of web-based research until the end of their undergraduate degrees or even until early in their postgraduate degrees. This may be caused by or at least exacerbated by the consequences of library anxiety. As the research of Mellon has shown, undergraduate students in their first year of study are more susceptible to library anxiety with between 75 and 85 per cent of undergraduate students describing their initial library research experiences in terms of anxiety (Mellon, cited in Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1998, 372). Her findings indicate that Library anxiety affects students so that "when confronted with the need to gather information in the library for their first research paper, many students become so anxious that they are unable to approach the problem logically or effectively" (Mellon cited in Nissen and Ross, 69). Building upon Mellon's research, Jiao and Onwuegbuzie recommend that the incorporation of library instruction into tertiary subjects appears to be an effective way of reducing library anxiety (3). The challenge that emerges then is to expose as many students as possible to library instruction at an early stage of their undergraduate degrees without adding to the workloads of library or academic teaching staff.¹ In an article for *School Library Journal* Minkel suggests that one of the goals of library skills instruction is to "help children go away thinking that they didn't know that the library had that information"(43). This objective is just as applicable for undergraduate university students.

Development

In 1998, a manually marked, short answer library skills exercise for first year students in English studies was abandoned because the pressures of marking them had become too great for an understaffed, overburdened teaching program. Inspired by the newly acquired WebCT software self-paced, electronically marked, library-skills test was developed by Cath Ellis in association with Paul Sharrad. In first semester 1999, the test

¹ For an example of another effective but more labour intensive library skills instruction model see Nissen and Ross.

was piloted in the major 100 level subject in the English Studies Program at the University of Wollongong and, after some modification, was made available again in the following year.

Description

The Research and Citations Skills Assessment Task focuses specifically on the various resources available to students for research including bibliographic and full-text databases and web-based research. In addition it encourages students to learn the appropriate methods available for citing many of these sources. In its first incarnation, this task also addressed one of the greatest difficulties faced by new students: how to cite primary sources such as electronic texts and film texts. But, due to problems with copyright laws, this aspect of the task has been placed, hopefully only temporarily, in the too-hard basket. The task works from the premise that for many undergraduate students, particularly those who are not very computer or web literate, several of the most useful resources in the library, such as full-text databases, are virtually invisible particularly in comparison to the very visible books on shelves. It also assumes that students are more likely to have positive learning objectives in library instruction if they are searching for things that are relevant to them, again something that resonates with Minkel's work with primary students (43). For that reason, the curriculum integration of library skills is a key component of the task.

The Research and Citation Skills Assessment Task takes the form of a printable worksheet and a multiple-choice quiz that is electronically graded. The test takes the form of a partially-known citation search that uncovers a series of carefully selected secondary resources that are of specific use to students as they prepare to write their essays. As suggested above this encourages students to adopt a positive learning objective when completing the task as it assists them in realising tangible outcomes that are immediately relevant and useful for other assessment tasks. The task requires students to find and then gather the bibliographic data of four secondary sources. To complete these tasks, students need to make use of the online library catalogue, Journal Search, two electronic databases (one citation only and one full text) and the World Wide Web. Having gathered the bibliographic data, they then need to reconfigure it into a citation that conforms to the required style: in the case of English, the New MLA. Together the individual activities offer students a self-paced tour through library resources, many of which are underused by undergraduate students, and particularly by those in their first year of university study. The user-friendly theme continues in the grading environment where students enter the results recorded on their work sheet into a multiple-choice, electronically graded test. At this point, students have immediate access to their results and are free to check incorrect answers and resubmit the quiz until they achieve a pass mark. The quiz environment deliberately avoids any associations with timed, 'do-or-die' examinations and even encourages students to collaborate in the completion of the task.

The assessment task has been developed in conjunction with staff from the University of Wollongong Library, Jacqui Burchill, Craig Littler, Catriona McGurk and more recently Jenny Maley. This collaboration has ensured that students were exposed to accurate, up-

to-date and relevant library research experience and that their activities did not put any unnecessary strain on library resources. As a result of this consultation, students are not required to go outside the normal operating procedures of the library and there is no additional work for library staff. In fact, the kind of assistance that would routinely be available to students from the library information desk is anticipated and built into the worksheets as a series of hints. These hints have the added benefit of potentially reducing library anxiety in students, particularly high-achieving students who have been found to “perceive asking for help as failure” (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1997, 3; see also Kuhlthau, 1996, and Keefer, 1998). Central to these hints are a number of resources that have been developed in the library to assist undergraduate students in their research, including the user friendly and incredibly comprehensive Online Database Tutorial developed by Craig Littler. These hints are augmented with a regular “Going from here” box that encourages students to continue using the particular tool to conduct further research by altering the keywords and/or varying the Boolean connectors. The collaboration also enabled the task to augment usefully the skills learned in the compulsory information literacy exercise (ILIP) which is completed by all new students at the University of Wollongong.

The online Essay Writing Study Guide

The Online Study Guide is the initiative of Gerry Turcotte and has been developed in collaboration with Alisa Percy from Learning Development, a unit of Student Services and the Academic Services Division. Staff at Learning Development work collaboratively with academic staff to integrate resources and activities that promote students’ development of tertiary literacy skills into subject curriculum. The collaboration involves ‘unpacking’ the skills of the discipline, designing developmental assessment criteria that provide explicit feedback to students, and designing resources and/or activities within the subject that give students the opportunity to develop these skills while promoting their independent learning techniques and lifelong learning skills.

The aim of this type of approach is to ensure that all students attain equitable access to the knowledge and skills required within their discipline, particularly those studying ‘off campus’, or at a distance. Thus, the development of online and print-based Study Guides for subjects being delivered flexibly has become an important aspect of this service offered to academic staff.

In 1999, Gerry Turcotte, approached Learning Development to discuss issues with the development of students’ tertiary literacy skills in a first year subject. A pilot program was trailed in the Spring Session of the same year. This pilot program involved the development of an online Study Guide that provided students with models of student essays that had been annotated to highlight the literacy skills evident in good academic writing. Explanations and further examples also supported these models and annotations. This was supplemental to print-based materials and an essay writing lecture that was given in the lunch hour after the subject lecture, focussing on essay writing skills, models of good examples of their previous essay and planning for their following essay. The attendance was average, but by no means bad, and the interest was enthusiastic.

However, it was still not reaching the majority of students, and it was felt that the information should go on the subject website for everyone to access.

The Study Guide had its own icon on the ENGL113 web page where students were expected to access both administrative and content-based information about the subject. However, apart from verbal recommendation there was no infrastructure or guidance for students within the subject to locate and use the Study Guide, and thus, it had little impact on the majority of students within the subject.

Development

The Study Guide was developed in collaboration with the academic staff in the English Studies Program. It has three modules that deal with different aspects of the students' assessment in the subject; each has its own purpose in the feedback and development process. Importantly, the Study Guide does not simply sit alongside the curriculum, but is part of a package integrated into the subject. The package includes an essay writing lecture inside the lecture schedule and student feedback on their essay using an explicit marking criteria which directs them to the relevant sections of their Study Guide. It is believed that this type of integration is essential to provide students with motivation to develop their skills. McKeachie, Pintrich and Lin (1985) found that simply having knowledge about learning strategies did not necessarily result in improved academic performance; students also had to feel motivated to use the strategies. By integrating activities into the curriculum to develop students' awareness of the importance of these skills and by using a marking criteria to show what is valued there is a greater chance that students will be motivated to access the Study Guide and engage in independent learning practices.

Description

The Study Guide is a discipline-specific online learning support tool designed to make explicit the academic requirements of the subject assessment tasks and provide developmental feedback to students on their tertiary literacy skills. It encourages students to develop their skills as independent learners, and is integrated into the subject to heighten the relevance and importance of skills development throughout their study. The Study Guide consists of three modules: A Guide to Essay Writing in the English Studies Program; Essay Examples and Feedback on the Assessment Criteria; and Common Errors. The guide is located on the subject's Website and is easily accessible to all students enrolled in the subject. Moreover, all students are encouraged to make use of the system rather than targeting "problem" students only. In this way the learning support is formative and, rather than being punitive, is instead based around positive and constructive reinforcement.

Module One: A Guide to Essay Writing in the English Studies Program represents the initial stage of development where students are expected to seek and find the necessary information on the essay writing process. This module was adapted from a print based resource (Pass, 1999) already circulating in the department. An effective resource, it

provides students with guidelines on analysing the essay question, developing an argument, using evidence from various sources, presentation requirements, and some basic 'dos and don'ts' of essay writing within the discipline. This module provides generic information on essay writing, but illustrates each stage of the process using a case example from the discipline. By placing the information into such a context, it is intended that the ideas conveyed are made concrete to students.

Module Two: Example Essays and Feedback on the Assessment Criteria represents the second stage of development where students obtain model examples and explanation and examples of their essay feedback. The Example Essays are student essays annotated to indicate the linguistic and structural features which constitute 'good writing' in this discipline. The Feedback on the Assessment Criteria is linked to the essay marking criteria that provides students with explicit feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. This module's structure mirrors the essay marking criteria; thus when students receive feedback from their first essay, they are directed to the aspects of the Study guide relevant to their needs. It also provides links to other online writing, academic literacy and language tools.

Module Three: Common Errors represents the third stage of development where students seek further information on general skills and common errors. This is a bank of common mistakes that also mirrors the major categories of the marking criteria: Analysis, Argument, Research and Expression. Each of these categories has a number of issues that the lecturer is able to refer students to in the marking process. In essence, it is a module where students can access detailed information on issues such as sentence structure, punctuation and citation.

Implementation

In late 1999, Gerry Turcotte and Cath Ellis recognised the potential for their two independent projects to link together to form a suite of online support tools. When completing both the Library Skills Task and when using the Study Guide, students are not only receiving important information about information and tertiary literacy, but they are also developing their lifelong learning skills. When working through the Library Skills Test, students develop an understanding of classification systems to locate items and make use of electronic information resources. By receiving developmental feedback from the explicit marking criteria, and using it to select and access the aspects of the Study Guide that are relevant to them, students are engaging in self-regulated learning, independently accessing information and developing knowledge on tertiary literacy skills. In addition, when completing the Library Skills Task and accessing the Study Guide, students are developing their information and tertiary literacy skills through a medium that relies on and enhances their information literacy skills.

These skills are by no means limited to students studying English. The potential for this suite of tools to be useful to subjects outside the English Studies Program, and even outside the Faculty, was recognised with the award of a Educational Strategic Development Fund Grant in 2000. As a result of this funding these tools are in the

process of adaptation for easy incorporation into first year subjects in other disciplines. To facilitate this adaptation, the tools are being developed into a series of downloadable templates. This encourages other teachers to redeploy, in consultation with Learning Development and Library staff, the sound and effective suite of learning tools into their own subject without having to reinvent the wheel.

Keywords

Life-long Learning
Information literacy
Tertiary literacy
Generic skills
Learning paradigm

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