RESEARCH ONLINE

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) - Papers

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education)

2011

Enhancing the Student Experience for Transitioning Students

Lynda Cooper
University of Wollongong, lcooper@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Cooper, L. 2011, **Enhancing the Student Experience for Transitioning Students**, CCA-Educause Australasia 2011. The Game has changed, CCA-Educause Australasia, Sydney, 4-6 April 2011.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Enhancing the Student Experience for Transitioning Students

Abstract
In 2010, University of Wollongong (UOW) released an award-winning program focussing on the first year experience for students transitioning from high school to the university environment. Part of the transition is the expectation that they will be independent learners, able to find their own resources to complete assignments and that these resources will be from scholarly publications. This can be challenging, as they often have high confidence in their ability to assimilate into tertiary studies based on skills acquired at school. At university however, students are told not to rely solely on the 'Net, but to find quality journal articles that will support their argument in response to their assignment question. Librarians have an important role to play in cutting attrition rates by allaying student fears and assisting students to feel comfortable in an academic environment. At UOW recognition that incoming students need assistance in the first few weeks at the university led to the creation of an online program to acclimatise them to the culture expected at UOW, especially the importance of their Subject Outline, how to use the Library's search interface effectively to retrieve academic resources to support their argument and how to avoid plagiarism by using citing and referencing skills. The program is designed as an online learning tool around specified outcomes and students' knowledge is tested by completion of an online quiz. It is compulsory for all new undergraduate students to do the quiz and successful completion is noted on their academic transcript. A certificate is also available to be added to the student's portfolio. Students and academics have been complimentary of the program in its first year of operation.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details
Cooper, L. 2011, **Enhancing the Student Experience for Transitioning Students**, CCA-Educause Australasia 2011. The Game has changed, CCA-Educause Australasia, Sydney, 4-6 April 2011.

This conference paper is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/asdpapers/251

Enhancing the Student Experience for Transitioning Students

Lynda Cooper

University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia

Abstract

In 2010, University of Wollongong (UOW) released an award-winning program focussing on the first year experience for students transitioning from high school to the university environment. Part of the transition is the expectation that they will be independent learners, able to find their own resources to complete assignments and that these resources will be from scholarly publications. This can be challenging, as they often have high confidence in their ability to assimilate into tertiary studies based on skills acquired at school. At university however, students are told not to rely solely on the 'Net, but to find quality journal articles that will support their argument in response to their assignment question. Librarians have an important role to play in cutting attrition rates by allaying student fears and assisting students to feel comfortable in an academic environment. At UOW recognition that incoming students need assistance in the first few weeks at the university led to the creation of an online program to acclimatise them to the culture expected at UOW, especially the importance of their Subject Outline, how to use the Library's search interface effectively to retrieve academic resources to support their argument and how to avoid plagiarism by using citing and referencing skills. The program is designed as an online learning tool around specified outcomes and students' knowledge is tested by completion of an online quiz. It is compulsory for all new undergraduate students to do the quiz and successful completion is noted on their academic transcript. A certificate is also available to be added to the student's portfolio. Students and academics have been complimentary of the program in its first year of operation.

Introduction

In 2009, the Information Skills team of librarians from the University of Wollongong (UOW) began researching better ways to support new undergraduate students starting tertiary studies in an information rich environment. About 80% of new undergraduates at UOW begin their studies either straight from school or after a gap year and the team realised that these *digital natives* came with different skills which needed to be recognised by the Library. It was felt that an interactive online program would appeal to the majority of these incoming students as a way of introducing them to resources. The project was linked to one of the University's strategic priorities, to improve the student experience, and at the start of the 2010 academic year the UOW Library launched *StartSmart – essential academic information skills*. *StartSmart* (**http://www.UOW.edu.au/student/services/fye/resources/startsmart/UOW070056.html**) contains four Guides and a compulsory quiz and is based on clear learning outcomes. The program provides a sound foundation for students to build academic information skills as well as cultivating an understanding of academic expectations. The team was rewarded for developing this program by winning the 2010 Vice Chancellors Award for Outstanding Service for General Staff.

Background

For over a decade, the UOW Library has had a compulsory program to initiate student learning of the information skills required at tertiary level. It was recognised that the program needed to be reinvigorated to match changing learning behaviours of new undergraduates. A literature review was undertaken, showing a gap in the Australian environment of the awareness the information skills students have when entering University. The project's first step was the creation of an online survey to assess new students' skills and confidence levels. Initial findings indicated a discrepancy between students' confidence levels and their ability to put their skills into practice. To better understand the level of information skills expected of school students, teacher librarians from the local Wollongong area and Sutherland Shire were consulted. This provided not only an opportunity for information sharing, but also the ability to map information requirements to fulfil HSC assignments against those for a range of university subjects in different discipline areas. The teacher librarians explained that they had little access to or funding for databases, so concentrated on teaching web searching techniques. Schools do run an "All your own work" program which promotes use of quotes which need to be acknowledged, but suggests students summarise their research findings as their own work. Tertiary studies require acknowledgement of the work of others as evidence to support arguments made; this has perhaps contributed to a lack of understanding for new students about use of information sourced for assignments. Schools rarely require in-text referencing for summarised or paraphrased information and this proved another difficult concept for new students to grasp. This gap became more apparent from responses made in focus groups run half way through 2010, when evaluating the effectiveness of the program. Students reported these areas as most complex to understand. They found the *StartSmart* program to be helpful in outlining approaches to ensure that they referenced correctly to avoid plagiarising, especially when this was unintentional.

The Information Skills team devoted the second half of 2009 to designing and building an interactive online program. An expert in learning outcomes and assessment was retained to assist the team in creating a program designed on pedagogically sound principles. Guides were constructed using multimedia and learning activities to reinforce learning and provide interactivity. Collaboration with academics, students, staff from Learning Development, web designers, graphic designers and animators was pivotal to creating a product that enhanced the student experience. Rigour in quiz questions was considered very important and was increased in the development of this product.

The Program

The program was designed to introduce only the essential skills thought necessary for new students to find their feet in the first few weeks in UOW's academic environment. The four guides, *Academic Culture*, *Finding Books*, *Finding Journal Articles* and *Academic Integrity* were identified as being the important aspects, based on research and feedback from students and academic staff. Guide 1, *Academic Culture*, includes advice given in podcasts, from academics and from students just completing their first year studies. It focusses on aspects aiding successfully transition into UOW's scholarly disciplines and on the benefits of using the Library's resources efficiently. Guides 2 and 3 introduce students to the use of academic resources, such as books and journal articles. The ability to source and determine which resources to use, provide a foundation for students to use on the road to becoming an *independent learner*, one of UOW's *Graduate Qualities*. Guide 4 includes an amusing student-created video that illustrates their light-hearted but thoughtful take on the issues of plagiarism for students. Examples are provided in how to incorporate the knowledge of others, both in-text and in a reference list, which are part of developing academic writing skills. All four Guides include visual demonstrations and interactive activities to reinforce learning. Activities are presented to mimic question types used in the quiz.

The quiz is compulsory for all new undergraduates but open to anyone with a current UOW username and password and this has resulted in a number of academics and postgraduates choosing to do the quiz too. Some lecturers have been so complimentary of the program that they set the quiz as an initial assessment task and asked students to bring in their Certificates as proof of completion. To ensure rigour, the quiz contains sets of question which generate randomly at login. Answers also shuffle into different order, so there is a great variety in presentation for each person doing the quiz. Prior learning is recognised as students can log straight into the quiz to answer questions. Links to the guides are embedded with each question that take students to the relevant guide for revision if required. Students must achieve a score of 100% to pass the subject and evidence shows that most students need more than one attempt for satisfactory completion and that the average time taken is half an hour.

Future Directions

Some minor revisions to the program have been made, mid 2010, based on feedback from students and from the Academic Registrar's Division on some of the plagiarism content. Feedback was extremely positive overall. An Education lecturer emailed the following, "It inspired me to go to Startsmart and do the quiz myself. I have printed out my certificate so I can show the students in week 1! I just wanted to let you know that I felt that it was easy to follow and did cover a lot of content that students are required to understand." Also anonymously from a student: "Thank you so much! I'll keep the lessons of SmartStart fresh in my mind by frequently using the library's catalog and databases". These comments demonstrate that the program has been positively received by the university community. The Information Skills team are aware of the need to keep the program up to date. 2011 will see the introduction of a new discovery search tool in the Library, so *StartSmart* will need to be revised to reflect this. *StartSmart* will provide an excellent vehicle to showcase the advantages of using this tool to source materials from both the printed and electronic collections through one discovery layer.

Future work is planned to build on the success of this program to provide a structured approach to information and research skills training as students continue their studies. This will involve our partners in other UOW Units to incorporate interactivity to better engage students in learning using innovative tools in the development. The Library is contributing the First Year Experience Working Party, which is investigating ways to embed the Graduate Qualities and the expertise of professional units within the curriculum. Greater concentration will be given to learning that will enhance the transferability of skills. The Library is investigating ways to leverage the new discovery tool, which will provide Google-like searching, to concentrate on teaching students skills as they progress through second and third year courses, such as how to critically evaluate resources found.

Building on and growing learning abilities will result in a positive student experience so that, on graduating, they will leave with a comprehensive skill set enabling them to find and use resources effectively throughout their careers.