
Ask the audience: e-voting at the University of Leeds



Lisa Foggo, Susan Mottram & Sarah Taylor
Faculty Team Librarians, University of Leeds
Tel: 0113 343 5663

E-mail: l.foggo@leeds.ac.uk;

s.j.mottram@leeds.ac.uk;

s.taylor@leeds.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

E-voting was introduced at Leeds University Library in 2005 in an effort to explore innovative methods of teaching information literacy, and, with the advent of student fees, to try and improve the student experience. It is generally recognised (for example by Race and Brown) that students have different learning styles, and that the average attention-span of an adult is anywhere between 6 and 20 minutes¹. It is therefore recommended that there be a change in activity or speaker every 10 minutes, and e-voting seemed a suitable way of introducing this. The anonymity offered was also a factor, as previous experience has shown that trying to involve students in activities where they may answer incorrectly in public does not work. The software also allowed librarians to look at the votes placed and to learn something about the students' knowledge, helping their planning of future training sessions. The library had seen e-voting software and equipment used elsewhere in the university (by the staff departmental development unit) and could see applications for their own teaching. Money was therefore made available by the library and the equipment and software was installed in the largest training room in the library. This is extremely useful as, although the equipment is portable, it is not easy to set up and the wireless transmitters can be awkward. It is preferable to have it installed permanently in a specific location, and

with help from the library systems team not far away.

CASE STUDIES

First as part of Leeds University Library's information literacy programme, two sessions on tips for finding information for essays are delivered. The second session is intended to build on the content of the first, although students can attend just one out of the two. E-voting was employed for the first time in these sessions to check students' understanding of the content.

E-voting icebreakers were used at the start of both sessions to familiarise those attending with the handsets and it was felt that such elements were really important, but can be difficult to write. It is also advisable not to make the questions too easy: a few wrong answers are good for provoking discussion and revisiting areas that students have not understood. The spacing of questions also needs to be planned. For example, a couple of questions at the beginning and then a series of five towards the end is too many all at once. It is probably better to have a break between questions for slides or other activities.

Points to be remembered when planning an e-voting session are that setting-up the equipment is fairly time-consuming, and it is recommended that 30 minutes set-up time is allowed at the beginning of a session and 15 minutes at the end. Actually writing the questions in the personal response system (PRS) software, rather than in PowerPoint (with a PRS plug-in) is easier for the user, and flipping between PowerPoint and PRS during the session poses no problems and helps to break-up the slides.

Secondly, another case study involved Design students at the end of their second year and the session was intended to make them think about the dissertation they would have to write, in particular, the literature review. The group was made up of mainly twenty-year old students and numbered around a hundred. Given the size of group, and previous experiences of talking to them (which have been quite information-intensive), e-voting seemed the perfect way of checking prior knowledge and breaking up the amount of information for the students in an interactive way. The module leader usually speaks for 40 minutes about what is required, and then the librarian talks about searching for journal articles, search techniques and Harvard referencing. The room is usually very warm and the amount and complex-

ity of information is usually quite large. It is also hard to check how much students have understood from the session. Therefore e-voting was used by the librarian to re-engage the students in the session, to give an indication of prior knowledge and make the students realise that –despite their perception that they already know everything they need to about the library– there are resources and techniques they can use and that there is someone who can help them.

ASK THE AUDIENCE: QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

The questions asked in the two case studies described above helped librarians to find out what students have learned from a session, or how much they already knew. Questions asked in the case studies above yielded some surprising results and it is possible to gather this data from the PRS system.

In the case of the Design students, the following questions were asked, with some assumptions of prior knowledge, as they were late in their second year. However, after the question had been asked, the material was covered and correct answers given.

- What colour is an elephant?
- Athens is
 - a) a database for searching journal articles. 21% of the vote
 - b) a way of getting into electronic resources. 74% of the vote (correct answer)
 - c) another name for my computer login. 5% of the vote
 - d) a way of accessing the VLE.
- A friend told me that I should read an article published in the November 2003 issue of *Internet guide* – 'The validity of internet questionnaires' by Jennifer Platt. To check that the library has this in stock, I would search in the catalogue for:
 - a) *Internet guide*. 9% of the vote (correct answer)
 - b) Jennifer Platt. 52% of the vote
 - c) 'The validity of internet questionnaires'. 24% of the vote
 - d) Answers 1, 2, 3 are correct. 15% of the vote
- Here are some statements about *Web of science*. Which is true?
 - a) It contains links to the full text of all articles. 39% of the vote
 - b) It only covers science and textiles. 2% of the vote
 - c) It is a way of searching for useful web sites. 16% of the vote

- d) It is a way of searching for references to journal articles in all disciplines. 43% of the vote (correct answer)
- When using databases, certain statements help you get good results more quickly. Which of the following statements is true?
 - a) Using the Boolean operator AND helps you to widen your search. 33% of the vote
 - b) Using the Boolean operator OR helps you to get more focused search results. 25% of the vote
 - c) Using a truncation character (e.g. *) helps you find alternative word endings. 38% of the vote (correct answer)
 - d) The most useful Boolean operator is OR. 4% of the vote
- Which of the following is correct? When writing a reference for a journal article in your bibliography, using the Harvard system, you:
 - a) Italicise the title of the article. 37% of the vote
 - b) Italicise the title of the journal. 25% of the vote (correct answer)
 - c) Only list the page number(s) which you have referred to in your essay. 13% of the vote
 - d) List your references at the end in the order in which they appear in the essay. 25% of the vote

The results above may be considered surprising, given that these students have been in an academic environment for two years, but similar studies show that the same mistakes are also made by other students at the same level². The responses to the later questions were a particularly good way of making students realise how much they needed the help of a library expert.

Future possibilities

A question bank of potential e-voting questions (e.g. on plagiarism), would be very useful and would help encourage colleagues to use the system. These questions need to be carefully thought out as -unless the questions/use of the voting system is made more challenging for students who have already experienced the method- there is a danger that the novelty will wear off and that students may become bored.

Another idea would be to set students an assignment on a specific topic, for example, comparing results from five websites relating to the topic with five results found using Web of Science. Other students could then vote on which presentation was the best stylistically, conceptually and

in terms of accuracy. This would obviously need the agreement of the course tutor, but it could be a way of easing the marking pressure on lecturers. New technologies always bring new possibilities (as well as some of the problems outlined above) and blue sky thinking is required by those brave enough and willing enough to explore these ideas and test them out. Sharing good practice on wikis and websites such as the information literacy website (<http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk/>) will surely increase confidence that such methods do work and increase the potential for new and innovative ideas.

REFERENCES

- 1 P. Race and S. Brown, *Making learning outcomes student-centred* Newcastle Upon Tyne: Marcet, 1999
- 2 A. Harrison and A. Newton, 'Learning to learn: what do undergraduates understand about finding and managing academic information?' *In: Third Learning and Teaching Conference at Leeds: Embracing Excellence in Learning and Teaching*, 6 January 2006, Leeds. Leeds: Leeds University, 2006