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# Guides at the side: developing Informs through community collaboration



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In May 2007, Informs, the information literacy software tool, left its original home at the University of Huddersfield and headed across the Pennines to the University of Manchester and Intute. Well loved by its users, Informs had firmly established itself as a key resource for information literacy practitioners; however, the internet landscape had changed rapidly in the seven years since the software was first introduced. Informs was in need of a facelift.

An input of funding from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has given Intute the opportunity to work with the Informs community to decide on the future direction of the resource. This is what we have achieved so far, and what we are planning for the future.<sup>1</sup>

## **THE STORY SO FAR**

The story of Informs began with the JISC-funded INHALE and INFORMS projects at the University of Huddersfield.<sup>2</sup> Aiming to develop web-based learning materials that would equip students with transferable information literacy skills, INHALE maintained a focus on working with live websites and the development of a searchable set of materials that the academic community could share and re-purpose. The 'Guide at the Side' split-screen design was created and Informs has remained a key resource for information literacy practitioners in academic libraries across Britain ever since.

After its move to Intute, Informs' popularity continued to grow, and it is now used by over

200 higher and further education institutions. We realised very quickly how many dedicated users we had inherited: users who had invested a lot of time and effort in their portfolios of tutorials and who were committed to the Informs concept. Here are just a few of the comments that we received:

‘Without Informs, our approach to information literacy would be scuppered. Student feedback on Informs used within our skills module tells us that their understanding and use of e-resources has improved as a result of our Informs tutorials. More importantly, they are telling us that their marks are also improving!’

‘I love using informs as this is great to introduce distance learners to databases who would normally miss out on classes. Students in classes always comment on how they enjoy using it to learn by doing rather than being shown.’

‘I can’t imagine how long it would have taken me to develop my online tutorials without it!’

However, these same users were equally keen to see the tool develop. We received comments which suggested that the design and the interface had become a little clunky over the years; ‘great idea, but underdeveloped’ was a theme that ran through much of the feedback. A number of users contacted us to suggest improvements and wish-lists of enhancements had been collated in many of the registered institutions. It was clear that Informs needed refreshing and updating to make it more appealing and relevant to today’s internet users.

#### **DEVELOPING INFORMS THROUGH COLLABORATION**

As work progressed on the essential administration and technical tasks associated with moving the software and the database of tutorials across to Manchester, we asked ourselves how we should begin to improve Informs for the future. We had already seen that the users were enthusiastic and dedicated to the concepts of shared content and cooperation so, as Informs was very much a community shared resource, the answer was simple. We agreed that the Informs users themselves would provide advice and guidance for the enhancement work.

One of our first tasks was to agree and prioritise a set of requirements. The first step to achieving this was to set up an advisory forum which was made up of experienced users from a range of

registered institutions. The advisory forum helped us to brainstorm a vision for the future of Informs, keeping an open mind and considering all possibilities and opportunities. The ideas generated ranged from technical enhancements, such as the integration of Web 2.0 functionality and the embedding of multimedia files, to improving the administration processes such as help, searching, browsing and statistics. We had far too many ideas to develop within the scope and duration of the initial transition project, so the potential developments were prioritised by the forum and then ranked by the wider Informs community via an online survey. The users asked us to look at the following enhancements:

- 1 Develop the self-test/quiz facility
- 2 Improve formatting in the editing interface
- 3 Introduce an image database
- 4 Develop a help facility
- 5 Improve the search facility
- 6 Develop a more user-friendly statistics interface
- 7 Introduce tagging within portfolios to improve the organisation of units
- 8 Introduce a ‘What’s New’ feature (e.g. e-mail updates, RSS, website)
- 9 Develop bulk editing of images
- 10 Introduce a rating facility for units.

By the time the initial project came to an end, we had introduced a range of developments, including enhancements to the formatting and quiz options; online help materials; improvements to the tutorial search, browse and statistics functions; and improved the access to and searching of the image database. However, we knew that there was more to do. We received a strong message from the user community who wanted to see Informs achieve its full potential in terms of growth, technical development and the development of a community of practice. In discussion with the advisory forum, we considered the future sustainability of the service, and submitted a proposal to the JISC for an additional phase of work.

#### **LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE**

We were delighted when funding for a second phase of the Informs project was granted in April 2008. During phase two, we will ensure we harness the enthusiasm, knowledge and expertise of Informs contributors to drive the developments. The new project has three main strands, all of which will take place in the context of ongoing user consultation: accessibility, functionality and community. A thorough assessment of the accessibility

of the tool is under way, and a range of changes will be implemented. Enhancements to functionality, identified by the advisory forum and the user survey, will be explored, and the introduction of a development server will allow us to elicit feedback and conduct user testing before the implementation of any changes. Some of the functionality that we will be investigating includes tagging and rating systems to improve the organisation and peer review of tutorials; customisation to give users greater control over the look and feel of the units; and RSS feeds to keep users up to date with new additions to the database.

We also hope to explore the vision of an Informs community of practice by running a series of seminars and introducing social networking tools. With the advisory forum, we agreed that the future of Informs would see a move towards users providing advice and guidance and sharing examples of good practice. Community events, organised and facilitated by users, have already begun this process. An exchange-of-experience day run by North West Academic Libraries (NoWAL) and facilitated by Lindsey Martin at Edge Hill University gave Informs users the opportunity to get together and share experiences and best practice, and to discuss their use of Informs in practice. A meeting of the North West Information Skills (NWIS) group similarly offered users a forum for discussion and cooperation, and we hope to extend this model to involve users across the UK.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

We think that Informs has an exciting future. With continued investment from JISC, and ongoing development in collaboration with the community, we hope that its popularity will continue to grow.

If you would like to discuss Informs with us, or if you have any comments, please get in touch with any of the project team. You can find us at:  
<http://www.informs.intute.ac.uk/contact.html>.

## **REFERENCES**

- 1 For more information about Informs at Intute, see [http://www.informs.intute.ac.uk/informs\\_perl/login2.pl](http://www.informs.intute.ac.uk/informs_perl/login2.pl)
- 2 For more information on the INHALE (Information for Nursing and Health in a Learning Environment) and the original INFORMS (Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences) projects, see: <http://inhale.hud.ac.uk/inhale/> and <http://inhale.hud.ac.uk/index.html>.