
Open access education sources

David Alcock
Jordanhill Campus Librarian,
University of Strathclyde,
Glasgow
Tel 0141 950 3302
E-mail: d.alcock@strath.ac.uk

In recent years, working at the University of Strathclyde's Jordanhill [Education] campus, I have been lucky enough to be involved in two European Union-funded projects. The first, masterminded by my academic colleagues at Jordanhill, was aimed at establishing a community education course in Kazakhstan, and the second (a Portuguese-led project in which Strathclyde was a very junior partner) aimed to assist with developing higher education (HE) infrastructure in East Timor. Both provided unforgettable experiences – two highlights: walking one Saturday morning along the coast out of Dili to the enormous statue of Cristo Rei above Cape Fatucama, and the view on my first dawn in Almaty of the snow-capped Tien Shan mountains towering behind the city. From a work point of view, the course of events did not always proceed as planned or envisaged, but hopefully a positive legacy endures in both cases.

The first project included the provision of suitable English-language books and journals, but it seemed unlikely that paid subscriptions could be sustained beyond the life of the project. Yet the proposed course had a significant research element. For the Timorese project, library acquisitions have been entirely dependent on donations (with very mixed results) and there is no immediate likelihood of change.

At the same time, I have been uneasy that in the UK we often find ourselves teaching the use of subscription-based electronic resources which mostly cease to be available to our former students at the point when they arrive in the workplace.

I therefore decided to construct a website for education which would collect together open-access databases, leading to freely available

high-quality full-text articles and documents (for example, Free ERIC; UK Educational Evidence Portal; Open J-Gate; World Data on Education) – a site that might be useful both for users in the UK not currently enrolled in HE and to students and researchers in the developing and transition countries. Having no particular IT flair, I set about identifying a neutral Web 2.0 service which could provide a framework I could simply populate with my own data: using a source with no academic affiliation I saw as giving me complete control over content, whilst also avoiding any suggestion of a Western institution patronising a less fortunate partner.

The solution I came up with was to create a page on Squidoo, a service used by an astonishing variety of enthusiasts peddling hobbies from ancient Greece through paper-folding to Monty Python – some strange bedfellows, then (including Library Elf(!)), and no control over the advertising, but – to my mind – providing a clear and attractive layout for minimal effort. A particular attraction is the ease with which links (with explanatory notes) can be listed within individual sections of the site; the system also gives useful usage statistics, and it's easy for users to provide feedback. Mine is a very straightforward implementation with no frills and minimal graphic material (to be precise, just a miniscule picture of me).

If you have contacts in my target groups – or if you think Squidoo would be useful for your own purposes – see what you think at www.squidoo.com/researchinformation. Any ideas for improvements to the content would be most gratefully received. CILIP's Education Librarians Group's 'Resource guides' numbers 1 and 5 cover some of the same ground, but the slant is rather different; however, the search hints on my Squidoo page may (expanded) shortly form the basis for a further ELG guide.