
Online information skills tutorials: Southampton Solent University reviews its approach



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BACKGROUND

At the start of 2007, the online information skills tutorials provided by Southampton Solent University's library were reviewed to evaluate their relevance regarding content, competencies covered and whether technology was being used effectively to enhance student engagement and accommodate different learning styles.

INFORM-e

Since 2002, the university has offered an online information skills package called INFORM-e. These tutorials were developed by one of the information librarians. They were based on a constructivist approach and a belief that subject-focused content would best engage students.¹ Therefore, the tutorials were developed around a number of key topics (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Example of an INFORM-e tutorial menu

The six tutorials were duplicated and customised with subject-specific examples for each main subject area, resulting in 125 tutorials. Maintaining them became a time-consuming exercise.

Initially, INFORM-e was well publicised to academics and students. Usage statistics suggested that tutorials that were embedded in induction activities received the most use, although the initial figures seemed reasonable across most subjects. However, concerns had been raised regarding the relevance of the tutorials for the range of course-delivery modes on offer, such as blended learning.

REVIEW

At the time of the review, the university was inviting bids for Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) projects. These had to be collaborative in nature across faculties and services, to support student learning and to relate to the university's strategic-development intentions. The review project met these criteria: several departments within the learning and information service (LIS) would collaborate on any new tutorials; improved delivery and content would enhance the students' learning experience; and, by utilising technology, the tutorials could help meet the university's requirement to develop flexible learning opportunities. A bid for funding was successful and a project team was established.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature was reviewed to identify the main issues affecting online information skills tutorials.

As several authors outline – for example Smith and Presser,² Mulherrin et al.,³ Donnelly et al.,⁴ Yi⁵ and Dewald⁶ – there is a consensus regarding the range of skills such tutorials should cover. These included core competencies in relation to searching, locating, evaluating and using information. Tutorials may also cover internet searching skills and accessing electronic resources,⁷ as well as understanding plagiarism and referencing.⁸

The need to support diverse student needs and learning styles through the delivery of online tutorials was identified. This can offer flexible learning options for students regardless of where, or how, they are studying.⁹

There is ambiguity as to whether online tutorials should cover generic skills or be subject-specific. Those advocating customisation argue that

subject- or assignment-tailored tutorials are most relevant to students.¹⁰ Others suggest that generic tutorials can be effective if properly designed and that students will still engage with them even if they're not subject-specific.¹¹ There are also arguments for making tutorials assessed.¹²

There is a clear need to consider pedagogic principles alongside technological developments when creating tutorials.¹³ Adhering to web-design guidelines was also advocated to ensure that tutorials are effective.¹⁴

Another area of consensus between commentators, including Smith and Presser,¹⁵ Zhang¹⁶ and Dewald,¹⁷ is that online tutorials are noted for their ability to facilitate active learning. Several activities that can foster interaction have been highlighted, such as quizzes.

The literature provided an overview of key issues. This was supplemented by a review of several tutorials created by other university libraries to generate practical ideas for approaches to navigation, layout and content.

STUDENT RESEARCH

Feedback from students on INFORM-e was sought to identify what they liked and disliked. Although only 50 students participated, many clear messages emerged. The feedback covered several main issues:

Relevance of the tutorials

- 76% of students who had received training from a librarian felt they would use INFORM-e in future.
- 86% of those who hadn't had training would use it in future.
- 82% would use INFORM-e to help with their next assignment. Those who would not gave several reasons:
 - they already possessed information skills
 - the tutorials were not easy to use or were dated
 - they would seek support from other sources.

Ease of use and navigation

- Some found that INFORM-e provided clear objectives and instructions and was easy to follow; others suggested it was 'initially confusing'.
- 98% found the tutorial content easy to understand although the comments were contradictory:

- 'Clear language used, clear instructions and easy to follow guide.'
- 'The language is clear, but NOT very easy to follow.'
- 90% felt the navigation was effective, though some suggested there were too many links to follow.
- General comments emphasised the need to improve navigation, layout and visual aids.

Effectiveness of activities

- Opinions on INFORM-e's activities were mixed:
 - 'They give you full, practical examples.'
 - '... provides information at right level of detail.'
 - 'It was a little too preschool.'

Features online tutorials should offer

- Videos to cater for visual learners were suggested (though some felt text was sufficient).
- Students had mixed opinions on the value of the activities:
 - 'If we have not learnt to digest simple information in text form without puzzles maybe a degree is beyond us.'
 - '... learn more when it's fun.'
- 48% wanted assessment.
- 74% felt tutorials should both cover general skills *and* be tailored to different courses.

A recurring and significant comment was that students were not aware of the tutorials and recommended that we promote them.

Students were also asked to rank various information skills in order of importance; this highlighted the skills to cover in the development of online tutorials:

- 1 finding quality information
- 2 referencing
- 3 using the library catalogue
- 4 evaluating information
- 5 using search engines
- 6 finding journal articles
- 7 identifying search terms
- 8 browsing the shelves.

Although differences in students' existing information-skills attainment may account for some of the variations in comments, the feedback had a tangible impact on our decision to create new tutorials rather than update and maintain INFORM-e. The Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) funding would therefore be utilised to develop new tutorials, making use of technological developments and offering support to a

range of students with varied learning styles and experiencing various modes of course delivery.

REDESIGN

A new set of tutorials covering information skills (or 'research skills', as 78% of students called them) was proposed. Early decisions included whether to develop the tutorials as another website or embed them in the VLE, making use of Moodle software. The VLE was chosen because it offered several advantages:

- Students were familiar with accessing it for course information and resources.
- The tutorials may be regarded as a university resource rather than a library initiative.
- Moodle was relatively straightforward to use.
- Student usage could be tracked and quizzes used for assessment.
- Lecturers could embed particular tutorials within teaching materials.

CONTENT

The new tutorials focussed on generic core competencies, influenced by the literature and student feedback, and were designed to be relevant to students across all courses, They covered:

- referencing
- devising effective searches
- identifying appropriate information sources
- evaluating sources
- effective internet searching.

This generic approach represented a move away from some theories underpinning INFORM-e; however, the proposal was to enable individual librarians to develop subject-specific tutorials for particular skills they felt should be covered, once the new tutorials were established. Devising the generic tutorials was the project group's first task. The next stage would be to create tutorials on general library resources, such as searching the catalogue and navigating the library's electronic resources.

Devising easy, logical navigation and simple content for the tutorials was a primary concern. Ideally, the tutorials would offer flexible navigation paths or the option to view selected, relevant sections as required. Careful structuring of the tutorials and the menu system achieved this aim. Optional activities were developed, while a quiz at the start and end of certain tutorials allowed students to assess improvements in their understanding upon completion of the tutorial.

A WIDER PROJECT

Shortly after the first tutorials had been developed, TQEF funding was awarded for a broader project investigating online support for general academic skills such as writing and presentation skills: FLAGS (flexible learning academic and graduate skills). As the new information skills tutorials complemented these wider aims, the library project was subsumed into FLAGS.

Staff from the e-development centre (eDC) and the learning technology unit (LTU) joined the project. The LTU's Moodle expertise was of great assistance, particularly in the development of quizzes and games, and eDC became involved in developing a range of videos and images to accompany the tutorials.

SUCCEED@SOLENT IS BORN

The need for a new, overarching name for the project was recognised – one that would create the right branding and image while enticing students to use the tutorials. A large proportion of the TQEF funds was assigned to marketing, so it had to be effective and to create a positive impression: succeed@solent was chosen as the branding for all tutorials.



Figure 2. The 'succeed@solent' homepage [accessed 10 March 2009]

Each subsection of tutorials had its own identity. The new information skills tutorials were rebranded as 'succeed@research'. Within each section, individual tutorials were prefixed with 'How to' – for example, 'How to succeed@referencing'.



Figure 3. The 'How to succeed@referencing' tutorial page [accessed 10 March 2009]

succeed@solent was ready to go live with pilot tutorials for the start of the 2008 academic year.

PROMOTION

Student feedback had highlighted the importance of ongoing promotion, so various approaches were adopted:

- The VLE provides a direct link to succeed@solent to all students when they log in.
- Posters, flyers, news items and a large advertisement on the university portal have been utilised.
- Librarians actively promote succeed@research to students during face-to-face information skills training.
- The library portal carries a direct link to succeed@research.
- A promotion week was held to raise awareness.

Several academics have positively engaged with succeed@solent. Some have incorporated quizzes into lectures; others have requested access for students prior to enrolment as a means of enhancing their basic skills before they start university. This clearly indicates that there was a need for such tutorials, providing support across the range of skills students require for their studies.

The effectiveness of the promotion will be measured by a review of usage statistics in the summer of 2009; current figures suggest that approximately 1,800 students are enrolled on succeed@research, six months after going live.

REVIEW

After the success of the student research for the INFORM-e review, a similar event was held to gather feedback on succeed@solent. This feedback highlighted a few areas to refine but, overall, it indicated that the tutorials are meeting the real needs of students.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that new developments in technology and the delivery of higher education to increasingly diverse student populations will demand an ongoing evaluation of how online information skills tutorials are delivered. Our review of INFORM-e identified underlying principles of web design and essential content that should be adhered to, while highlighting that technology and user needs and expectations move on. Therefore, it is evident that succeed@solent will require ongoing monitoring to ensure it is relevant and effective – or it will need to face a redesign itself in a few years.

For more details on the succeed@solent project please contact Steve Rose, deputy university librarian (learning resources and academic skills), Southampton Solent University (e-mail: steve.rose@solent.ac.uk; tel: 02380 319342).

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