
'How can we help?'

Developing library staff skills to support e-learners at the University of East London



Catherine Walsh
Associate Director,
Library and Learning Services
University of East London
Tel: 020 8223 6460
E-mail: c.walsh@uel.ac.uk

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In early 2008 I had an interesting conversation with our university's e-learning manager about the potential to provide some training for library staff to help them support e-learning within our libraries.

At that stage I was clear that many library staff were already supporting e-learning simply because of the increasing demands for support coming from students. With the opening of the new-technology-rich Docklands library in 2006, enquiries and requests for help from library staff had risen by an astonishing 70%. As well as helping students with information retrieval and the like, staff were doing their best to support a range of networked e-learning services for which they had received little formal training.

Talking to colleagues from our learning and teaching committee, I found that there was a feeling that students could be better supported in their e-learning, particularly with developing their basic IT skills to enable them to access it in the first place. The common assumption that younger students would be better equipped with IT skills than mature students was not backed up by the evidence that library staff were encountering every day, with students trying to log on to the network for the first time and then trying to negotiate a very unfamiliar virtual learning environment.

This is not to say that the university had not taken account of this need – each academic school has its own help desk where students can get support with e-learning. However, outside normal office hours that support is very limited, and with libraries open 24x7 and staffed each day till 9pm many students come to library staff for help as

they log in to the network and attempt to use the VLE for the first time (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Library

E-LEARNING FOR LIBRARY STAFF

I felt that we ought to be providing our library staff with some more structured training about e-learning in order to support our students as effectively as possible, at least at a basic level, so that they can access the VLE and get started. From that point existing online help tools would guide them through their course and more complex queries could be referred to their school's help desk during its normal opening hours.

My first thought was that it would be highly appropriate to use an online learning package for our staff, not least because the experience of e-learning would help us understand students' needs. It would also enable our staff to learn flexibly, at times to suit themselves, and would remain as a resource for consultation and refresher training whenever required. This would also provide a very practical solution for the large number of our staff who work part-time or unsocial hours and who find it difficult to attend face-to-face training sessions. The most obvious vehicle for this training was our own VLE, UEL Plus.

To develop a package like this we would need some time and some money, neither of which were available in large quantities within the existing staff teams or within our service's budget. I decided to make a joint bid for some modest funding with our learning technology advisor, who was keen to work on the project with me. This would allow us to make a start on developing a training tool, working in collaboration with our colleagues in the school for distance and e-learning (now renamed UEL Connect). I had to make a strong case for what might appear to be, on the face of it, a staff-development project. The fund I was bidding for support from is focussed

on learning and teaching, but ultimately it was agreed that introducing a project that would enable library staff to provide support for e-learning would improve the student learning experience significantly, and the bid was successful.

LEARNING ENHANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES (LEO)

A little bit of background about LEO projects at UEL might be helpful at this point!

UEL encourages staff from both academic schools and services to seek to innovate and evaluate areas of learning and teaching practice. LEO project grants – provided with teaching quality enhancement funding (TQEF) from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) – are available for small-scale projects. Proposals have to be approved by the university's learning and teaching committee and the funding available for a single project is up to £10,000 over a maximum of two years.

Our bid was fairly modest but the funding was sufficient to 'buy out' some time for a learning technology advisor to help us develop the tool in our VLE and to employ a facilitator to run and report on the focus groups we organised.

WHY UEL Plus?

There were some reservations about using the VLE as we were very aware that web 2.0 technologies have the potential to provide a more interactive and engaging (and often more familiar) experience for our staff; indeed, many library staff had been early adopters of the technology and were already using it to communicate with academic staff and students and among themselves to plan meetings and projects. However, we were also acutely aware that the majority of our students currently use UEL Plus extensively for their learning and the priority was for library staff to understand this environment in order to better support students' learning in our libraries.

We were very clear from the start that library staff cannot be experts and cannot spend a lot of time tutoring students. Our aims were (a) to increase library staff awareness and knowledge of UEL Plus, and (b) to enable them to provide some initial help for students and guidance to more detailed online 'self-help' tools that already existed.

An initial literature search revealed that, while many library services are developing specialist teams to work on and support VLEs and e-learning,

there has not been much focus on the development needs of front-line staff such as library assistants and library shelvers, and these were the people we particularly wanted to focus on.

FOCUS GROUPS

In May 2008 we organised focus groups with students at each of our campuses. These groups were run by an external facilitator who was also commissioned to produce a final report on student responses. The groups comprised a cross-section of the academic schools and included undergraduate and postgraduate students. Feedback revealed that the students, on the whole, expected library staff to be able to provide basic support with the full range of resources, facilities and activities within the libraries. This included support for using pretty much any of the standard networked services available and particularly with e-learning.

Focus groups held with library staff around the same time demonstrated not only a lack of understanding about how students learn online with UEL Plus but also an acute awareness that this knowledge could only be developed effectively by using the same technologies and becoming familiar with the most common problems:

'I don't know what any of them [the technologies] do. I have had no updates. It is not so much that [we are] not informed but if we aren't using it how can we get to learn it?' (Library assistant, May 2008)

Discussion with our learning technology advisor led us to decide that we should focus on our VLE to develop a model that might be used for other aspects of e-learning. We agreed to deliver the module in bite-sized chunks of learning that could be fitted around day-to-day work, with the chunks no more than 15 minutes long and incorporating the support tools that were already available to students. Learning outcomes for each chunk were identified and a range of activities agreed upon, including an initial diagnostic test of existing knowledge and a final assessment, both using online quizzes.

We used footage of interviews with students to show their perspective on UEL Plus as well as a PowerPoint presentation and downloadable worksheets to guide staff through the VLE. The most important aspect was the support section, which contained FAQs (frequently asked questions) and directions to the existing online help; this section was identified as most useful by staff

who evaluated the module because of its 'quick reference' nature – easily adaptable for display on a help-desk PC desktop.

EVALUATION AND FINDINGS

The VLE-based module 'How can we help?' was made available to all library staff in July 2009 and two introductory workshops were held to explain the purpose of the module and to provide basic information to get library staff started. Members of staff were encouraged to complete all the sections at their own pace and to submit feedback as part of the process. Feedback was elicited via online quizzes embedded in the learning module and staff were also encouraged to e-mail their additional thoughts and comments to the course developers. Feedback was particularly sought about (a) the relevance of the content, and (b) the experience of learning and development online.

In all fifteen members of the library staff accessed and used the module during the evaluation period, with three people spending between 1.5 and 2.5 hours completing the whole module. Most others sampled relevant sections, spending between 15 minutes and an hour on the selected sections.

Generally, feedback from staff demonstrated that they liked the flexibility of using a VLE to learn but would have liked more interactivity and less text-based instruction. Overall the module appeared to have fulfilled its aims, providing comprehensive and relevant information about UEL Plus and delivering an enjoyable, self-paced approach to staff development that was easily accessed by members of the library team. (See Figure 2.)

NEXT STEPS

Whilst web 2.0 tools have proved engaging for library staff in some areas of work, the value of using our VLE to develop a knowledge of e-learning has also been demonstrated by the staff's very positive response to 'How can we help?'. The next stage will be to develop further modules to complement the existing one. Recently the university's academic integrity subcommittee identified a need to provide enhanced support for the Turnitin plagiarism-detection system. Turnitin is already embedded within our VLE and it would be highly appropriate for library staff to provide initial support for it, given our recognised role in helping students develop their referencing skills so as to avoid plagiarism. We are already considering developing an 'add-on' section for the 'How can we help?' module.

A little more ambitiously, we would really like to provide an induction package via e-learning for new members of library staff, although this is obviously a longer-term objective; whether it would be more appropriate to locate this within our VLE or elsewhere is a subject for debate.

SOME FURTHER READING

Boyd, R. (2008), 'Staffing the commons: job analysis in the context of an Information Commons', *Library hi tech*, 26 (2), pp232–43

Sayers, R. (2007), 'The right staff from X to Y: generational change and professional development in future academic libraries', *Library management*, 28 (8/9), pp474–87



Figure 2. Web page