
Creating a media-rich online induction



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AIMS

This article discusses the creation of an online induction, to be embedded into a VLE, aimed at introducing off-campus students to library resources at Teesside University.

BACKGROUND

Teesside University is a post-1992 institution in the north of England with a student population of over 24,000. The authors are both subject librarians at the university, based in library & information services (L&IS), and have responsibility for information literacy, including induction. The university has a threshold standard for student inductions and this states that all new students should have a library induction. The development of a new online masters-level programme in learning technologies gave us an opportunity to review our current information for off-campus students and to use this programme as the initial pilot for an online library induction.

CURRENT PRACTICE

Our current induction practice with on-campus students is a face-to-face induction, usually in a lecture theatre. This lasts around thirty minutes as part of the students' induction programme. We try to make our session memorable because we are one of many talking heads. In recent years we have developed a variety of methods to make

these first impressions count, including a version of the Cephalonia method.¹

Currently the contents of our face-to-face induction consist of:

- a video giving a five-minute introduction to the library, used as a starting point
- a presentation which we try to make image-rich
- a high-quality printed guide aimed at on-campus students
- electronic voting using Qwizdom, with students working in pairs or small groups to answer questions mainly relating to either the video or the printed guide; the quiz includes some fun questions and a prize for the winning team.

One of the most important aspects of the induction is personal contact with students, even though this is in a formal setting. The content of sessions is tailored to the immediate needs of learners so that it is timely and relevant, avoiding information-overload at a stage when students have a lot to assimilate. We include elements that we think are fun but we also have some elements that challenge students. The aim is to break down barriers and overcome stereotypes of libraries and librarians as dull or even frightening! Despite using a variety of media, we believe that there is a coherent structure as the librarian presenting the session brings all the elements together. The induction is designed to be as interactive as possible, so that students interact both with each other and with the learning materials (printed guide and video). The aim is to foster peer support and avoid passive listening.

When we looked at what we currently provide for off-campus students we felt that many of the features that we considered to be important in the on-campus induction were missing from the material. The major problem seemed to be uncertainty about the audience and their needs. Our information was aimed at a whole range of students, from those on placement to those who had never visited the campus. This resulted in heavily text-based web pages that lacked coherence and clarity.

INFLUENCES ON OUR APPROACH

What does the learner need?

We started with a blank piece of paper and thought about what learners need to know and what they need to be able to do. Reflecting on

our on-campus induction and translating this into what an off-campus student would need to know helped to guide our design. The content was also informed by specific questions that off-campus students ask and problems they have encountered.

Developer limitations

Our major concern was time, so we hoped to develop an induction that was reasonably quick to produce and that could easily be adapted for other groups of students.

Through our involvement in the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee)-sponsored UKAN-Skills project at Teesside university,² we had access to a video camera and some software. The software supported web- and video-editing, for example Dreamweaver and Premiere Elements as well as screen capture (Camtasia and Captivate).

Another limitation was our level of expertise. We had experience in html-designed text-based web pages and publishing to the web, and Denise has an MSc in multimedia applications. We also had the confidence to experiment. However, we had no previous expertise in shooting or editing videos beyond home-movie level. This meant that, while there were some aspects of this project that we felt we could deliver to a professional standard, the whole idea of producing high-quality videos was off-putting and made us reluctant to start. We also wondered what the reaction from other colleagues would be. Yet one of the important aspects of our face-to-face induction was breaking down barriers. We thought this personal element was particularly important for a distance student.

A further limitation was considering how tailored we could afford to be. When talking directly to students it is relatively easy to modify the content for them but we were uncertain about how easy it would be to adapt a video for a particular audience. The whole idea of creating reasonably quick videos, rather than professionally produced ones, was that we could re-shoot sections easily and re-edit video clips to make them as tailored as possible.

We were also keen not to duplicate the information already available and then have to keep multiple web pages up to date. We wanted to create a coherent whole, a one-stop shop. Face-to-face induction is an introduction – we don't cover everything, so we didn't want the online induction to duplicate information that was already available.

One of the problems in the past has been that, because we had some expertise in web design, we would be approached by colleagues to develop anything that required those skills. We wanted to make it easy for less-experienced colleagues to create their own additional content to modify it for another group of students.

We had a number of inspirations for the design of our content. In terms of video, we were influenced by the approach of Michael Tomasky, the *Guardian's* US correspondent, who maintains a blog on the *Guardian's* web-site.³ The content of this blog is mostly text-based but it also includes occasional video entries. The videos looked easy to produce and informal, in the authentic setting of Tomasky's office. After looking at his blog, we were struck by how much more engaging the videos were, compared with text alone, for what appeared to be limited additional effort.

Initially when we started to think about the induction we did consider the use of 'Second Life' but for various reasons we decided not to pursue this, at least for this year. However, thinking about 'Second Life' made us realise how important the visual context of information seemed to be. People are building 'pretend' classrooms, universities and libraries in 'Second Life' so that people know what to expect when they visit those virtual spaces. We wondered whether, in the same way that visual representations help users to contextualise information in 'Second Life', we could use a tour of the library to help learners contextualise what we were saying. Video can also give students studying at a distance a 'sense of place'.⁴

A further inspiration was the ethos of web 2.0, with the huge increase in user-generated content on sites such as YouTube. As other creators of YouTube videos have not been experts, we also shouldn't be put off. We also thought that user expectations might be changing, and students would be more tolerant of our efforts.

The sense that developments are always beta means that it is more important to be adaptable than perfect. The findings of the recent 'Higher education in a web 2.0 world' report suggested that, within higher education, we need to become less guarded and more experimental, with future students more likely to criticise us for not trying than for producing less than perfect content.⁵

Our target therefore was to create four elements:

- 1 a video set in an authentic environment which would introduce key staff, as a way of

- breaking down barriers, influenced by our idea of the importance of the visual context
- 2 screen capture (Camtasia) movies linked to problems we know students face (We wanted these movies to be narrated. We had previously experimented with creating screen-capture movies without audio to keep the file size down and to enable them to be easier to produce, but we felt that these movies were too lacking in personality without audio; another way for students to get to know staff would be by hearing their voices.)
- 3 an online quiz to enable interaction with the learning materials, alongside a fun element, to mirror that part of the face-to-face experience
- 4 a web site that packaged all this content together, with an attractive design influenced by web 2.0.

The draft online induction is available at <http://lis.tees.ac.uk/onlineinduction>.

EVALUATION

1 The video

We spent two afternoons of filming and editing to get the first two-minute clip. We found that it was helpful to use a tripod because it made the video steady rather than shaky. We liked the effect of having used different locations. Initially we tried filming in a small, quiet room but we found that the result looked soulless. The video looked more engaging with authentic locations and props. We were concerned about the levels of background noise, but we found that some background noise helped with the atmosphere of the video, although some of our takes were rejected due to too much of it. A separate microphone, as well as the microphone on the video camera, would have been helpful.

Denise found it a real struggle to feel relaxed and never felt comfortable in front of the camera, although we believe that this could improve with practice and that it is important not to be too self-critical.

We encountered various issues around the compatibility of video files and the editing package, including quality and file size. We were faced with a multitude of options for output of the video and we were uncertain which to choose, whether in the size of the output – especially balancing the need for being visible on the screen and the speed of downloading – or in the format (AVI, MOV, MP4). Flash seemed to be the best

smallest file size and had acceptable quality but we couldn't then get it to play from another PC. We finally moved away from Flash so that the video could be uploaded onto the hosting site Vimeo.

2 The screen-capture movies

We used Camtasia, with each movie recorded by a member of staff from the relevant information team. We first met with an academic member of staff who had used Camtasia extensively, to learn from his experience and to identify optimum settings (for example, Flash output and 640 x 480 screen size). Even with this help, we found that the software wasn't particularly intuitive and was prone to bugs, so we spent some time writing up an instruction cribsheet that other colleagues could use.

We discovered that, if we wanted to add a table of contents, it was important to think about the structure of the movie beforehand so that we could pause in the most appropriate places.

The length of the movie was a concern, not just because of the file size, but also because of the interest levels for viewers – our first basic introduction to an online database lasted around 12 minutes.

3 The online quiz

We initially considered using Camtasia for the online quiz, but we found that the software only enabled the creation of a quiz alongside a Camtasia movie. We wanted an independent quiz, so we decided to use Captivate instead.

We found Captivate quick and easy to use, with a range of different question types such as drag and drop and multiple choice. We tried all kinds of possible questions just to see what they were like, although some didn't work well in practice. Captivate allows PowerPoint slides to be incorporated into the quiz as well as question slides, and the final quiz can be embedded into web pages.

The quizzes created using Captivate are not particularly visually appealing with the default settings, but they can be customised. However, they are slow to edit, as it is not possible to change the formatting on all slides at once. Another limitation is that it is not possible to embed video as part of a question on the quiz.

There are quite good options for feedback since the wording can be changed for each attempt. The software allows infinite attempts for each ques-

tion, but that caused problems with displaying helpful feedback, so we chose two attempts per question. A score is provided to the viewer at the end of the quiz.

4 The web page

We designed a page to sit on our web server, and be embedded into our VLE, rather than creating a hosted page on a blog site (for example by blogspot) because it was easier to incorporate our branding, and to embed it into multiple modules in Blackboard. We didn't want to have lots of versions of the induction in different modules.

We aimed for a web 2.0 design for the page. It uses CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) stylesheets to make it easy to change the style quickly, although there are some issues with this, with pages appearing differently in different browsers. Once the grid for the page was created, it would be fairly simple to add new elements and keep up to date, as all the content is in one page, especially if the page is commented well.

It would be possible to save the induction to a memory stick to distribute to international students or to students with slow connections. The page includes a feedback survey from Survey Monkey and 'Share this' code, enabling the sharing of content in social networking and bookmarking sites such as Delicious.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Having created the induction, our next steps are to look for feedback from more people, especially from potential students. We also want to enable our colleagues to replicate what we've done, so we intend to write instructions for areas where we haven't already done so, especially for video-editing. We may organise our list of video clips into a small learning objects repository to enable easier re-editing. We intend to look at other options for the creation of some of the content, especially for the online quiz. We also wish to consider how easily our content could be used on a mobile phone, especially touch phones. Currently Flash isn't supported on the iPod Touch so our Camtasia video and Captivate quiz wouldn't work.

CONCLUSION

We found that our online induction was not 100% perfect. Some aspects worked better than others, but the process has made us realise how text-based our existing approach had been, and we believe that what we've created is more engag-

ing and so this has given us the determination to continue.

We now realise how important video is, and one of the areas we need to continue to develop is our own skills, both behind and in front of the camera.

Since we started the project, the university, the learning resource centre and our job titles have all changed – with this in-house approach, it will be easy for us to edit and re-do content. If we had paid an external company, our money would have been wasted. In retrospect, doing this in-house was the right decision for us.

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