Breaking into Unexplored Territory: A case study of the information literacy initiative at the Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies

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Abstract

It is now universally accepted that today's professionals need to possess skills which will allow them to access, evaluate and use information if they are going to function effectively and efficiently in the workplace. The Caribbean experience differs significantly from countries in the developed world. At the Cave Hill campus of the University of the West Indies an Information Literacy Initiative was launched in the Fall Semester of 2003. The initiative was launched without any addition to library resources and with the majority of the library professionals not having experience in working with new students. The following case study details the process followed and highlights some of the lessons learnt in developing this initiative.

Introduction

At the beginning of the academic year 2002/2003 the main library of the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill (UWI), restructured its orientation programme for first year students to include an information literacy (IL) component. This decision and the experience gained during the first and subsequent year of the programme provided valuable lessons which helped to inform the character of the IL initiative which was eventually implemented. This paper describes the process, discusses some of the challenges and highlights some of the lessons learnt in developing and implementing IL instruction at Cave Hill.

The Institution

The UWI is a regional university which offers both undergraduate and graduate programmes. Three campuses located in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados serve the university and the student population that mostly includes nationals from Belize on the Central American mainland, and nationals from fifteen Anglophone West Indian islands all of which had or have colonial relationships with Britain.[1] Nationals from the non-campus countries[2] attend one of the three campuses or are served through distance education. The Cave Hill campus is the main campus for students from the non-campus countries. Each campus offers programmes in the Arts & Humanities, Natural and Social Sciences, while on each campus there is at least one specialty faculty. At Mona in Jamaica and St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago, full medical degrees are offered, Law is offered at Cave Hill in Barbados, and Veterinary Medicine, Dentistry, Agriculture and Engineering are offered at St. Augustine.

Student Characteristics

The majority of first year students entering The University of the West Indies do so with very little exposure to and knowledge of libraries and information research skills. The absence of libraries in most high schools and the absence of qualified professionals in those, which do exist, mean that most of these students enter Cave Hill having never received any instruction in basic library skills. However, most of them are technologically savvy having been born into an era of rapid technological change. In many ways their comfort level with the technology and the ease with which the technology provides access to information has influenced their attitudes towards the use of libraries for conducting research.

Juxtaposed with these younger first year students are the older, more mature students who in many cases are re-entering the classroom for the first time since graduating from high school. These older, more mature students are not as technologically savvy as their younger counterparts and many of them have had little experience in using libraries and library resources. This is the background against which IL instruction at Cave Hill began its evolution.

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[1] The UWI serves the countries of Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts/Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

[2] These are all the countries in which there is not a physical campus.

The Preliminary Years

Library orientation was made a prerequisite for library membership for all first year students when the IL component was added to the programme. The programme included a one-hour walk through of the library and a one-hour lab session which focused on IL. Students were expected to sign up for scheduled sessions, the majority of which took place during the first two weeks of the semester. By the end of the first year a number of conclusions emerged:

1. Despite making attendance a pre-requisite for library membership the number of students attending the sessions was less than expected;
2. Teaching the IL module outside of a formal class and before students attended any discipline specific classes did not appear to be the most effective delivery method; and
3. Not all first year students were exposed to the same content. There was a need to conduct abridged sessions throughout the semester for students who never attended the sessions offered at the beginning of the semester.

The Pilot Project

While the programme continued to be offered in the same format for a second year, the IL Coordinator worked with the Faculty of Humanities to pilot the IL module in one of the faculty's foundation courses for the beginning of the academic year 2004/2005. The UWI requires all students to successfully complete a number of these foundation courses (which are not offered for credit) in order to graduate. The course chosen for the pilot was English for Academic Purposes (FOUN 1001). This course was a compulsory course for all Humanities students, but an elective for Science and Social Science students. A full-time faculty member delivered the course lectures, but tutorials were led by a number of part-time adjunct faculty who changed from year to year and sometimes semester to semester. During semester one, two one-hour sessions were taught and these sessions were scheduled to begin the week students were given their first research assignment for the course. However, in semester two, tutors requested that the library sessions not be scheduled during regular class times. As a result, students were required to sign up for their library sessions outside of these regularly scheduled class times.

Piloting the module in one of the foundation courses was viewed by the library as a solution to the problem of poor student attendance. However, making the module a part of the foundation course did not alleviate this problem. Of the 775 students registered for the course over both semesters only 210 attended the sessions. Further, the IL Coordinator never had the opportunity to meet with and discuss the purpose and content of the module with tutors prior to teaching. Consequently, the tutors instructed their students to report to the library at the appointed time for their session but did not themselves attend any of the sessions.

Course Integration

The poor level of student attendance was the biggest challenge facing the IL Coordinator. Efforts needed to be made to secure greater 'buy in' by the faculty so that the module could have more of an impact on the students. At the end of the second semester the IL Coordinator met with the Dean of the Faculty and presented a report on the pilot project. The report addressed issues such as student and faculty attendance, the importance of working together, embedding IL assignments into the course and provided some insight into the type of feedback received from students who had completed the assessment of the module. The timing of this meeting proved to be a turning point in the evolution of the IL initiative.

The IL Coordinator learnt that a number of changes were to be made to the way in which the foundation courses would be structured. These changes were to take effect from the beginning of the academic year 2005/2006. The university had taken a decision to offer the courses for credit, full time instructors would be recruited to teach the courses and course work would be the form of assessment. The Instructional Development Unit planned to convene a workshop in August on "Planning Instruction and Assessment" for all newly recruited instructors. The IL Coordinator approached the Instructional Development Specialist and initiated discussions on making a presentation at that workshop. This resulted in the IL Coordinator delivering a presentation entitled "Integrating Information Literacy Competencies into an Instructional Module." The presentation introduced the concept of IL, provided some brief anecdotal evidence of the previous years experience and illustrated how the competencies could be included as learning outcomes in an instruction module. During the workshop the instructors worked on revising the syllabi for their various foundation courses and this provided a unique opportunity for the IL Coordinator to become involved in the process of revision. The result of this collaboration was better integration of the IL module into the course content and greater recognition by the instructors of the importance of teaching these skills to students to enable them to conduct better research. Of significance to these interactions was the decision taken to have an annotated bibliography as one of the outputs for the two courses chosen.

Course Content and Delivery

From the outset, the volume of information content included in the IL module was influenced by the perceived need to be as exhaustive as possible given the characteristics of our student population. In the initial design, ideas for the curriculum were influenced by examples drawn from the literature (MacDonald, Rathemacher and Burkhardt, 2000, Paglia and Donohue, 2003) and an assessment of a number of web tutorials. Over time however and as a result of feedback from assessments completed by students and practical experience much of this content was either revised or excluded altogether. In particular, students commented negatively on their inability to test the skills to which they were being exposed. They felt that the information presented was overwhelming. Some also remarked that the sessions were too long, while for others they were too short. These comments underscored the need to scale down the number of areas covered in the session and the need to devote more time to the basics.

The experience gained from these earlier years proved to be beneficial in the design of the content for the integrated module. The revised IL module which would be taught in the two foundation courses English for Academic Purposes (FOUN1001) and Rhetoric II: Writing for the World of Work (FOUN1008) focused on topic definition; identification of key concepts; synonyms and related terms; the construction of search statements; criteria for evaluating sources; citation styles and annotated bibliographies. EBSCO Host's Academic Search Premier was the database used for demonstration and practice. Students worked individually on their course assignment in FOUN1001, and in groups on a topic assigned by the IL Coordinator in FOUN1008. The experience in semester one, demonstrated that students needed to have more time for practice and for assistance from their Instructor and the IL Coordinator during the sessions. This resulted in some changes to content and delivery in semester two. The section on citation styles and annotated bibliographies was expanded and placed on the WebCt course sites for each course. This change allowed students to have more time to research information on their topics and receive feedback and assistance from both their Instructor and the IL Coordinator.

Lessons Learnt

Programme development

While the library had conducted some bibliographic instruction sessions previously, bibliographic instruction was not a formal institutionalized programme on the campus. As such, there was no infrastructural base on which to build IL capacity, and at the time the initiative was launched none of the librarians had any experience or training in IL instruction or programme development. These factors were just some of the challenges which had to be faced when the library made the commitment to transition from bibliographic instruction to IL instruction.

Even though there are many models of best practices documented in the literature (Walter, 2000) which could have been adopted, each educational context is different. The educational landscape in the Caribbean is impacted by the absence of national and/or regional policies which speak to IL, the unavailability of financial and human resources to 'fast track' IL development, age and gender factors of the student and general population, and the non-acceptance of librarians as teachers within the academic community. In the final analysis, the Cave Hill experience demonstrated that experimentation and trial and error were the best approach to developing a system which was suited to the local context. In a situation where both librarians and faculty are at the beginning of a learning period, the experience reinforced that the best approach to creating a viable programme was to make incremental changes over time. At every stage in the evolution of the programme the incremental changes made resulted in a better product than previously existed and at each stage both librarians and faculty members were gradually building relationships based on collaborative partnerships.

In the absence of a culture of collaboration at Cave Hill, the top down approach of working through advisory boards to first craft a campus-wide programme to guide IL instruction would never have achieved the same level of success. Rather, success was more attainable in the Cave Hill context when as Thompson (1993) suggests "… a

process of seduction with the first steps taken by the librarian …" was used. This approach is one way to create a critical mass of IL advocates who can then be mobilized to help in the development of a campus-wide programme. And, within the Cave Hill context it was necessary to begin by building support through education and exposure from the 'bottom up.'

Course Content and Delivery

Donavan and Zald (2004) believe that since IL and information are closely connected with technology, understanding technology is "a foundational skill for citizens of the information age." Many universities, as can be seen from the number of available web-based tutorials have embraced the technology as the tool for the delivery of IL instruction. However, this was never considered to be a viable option for Cave Hill. Our task was not only to build skills but also to change attitudes in order to be able to successfully build those skills. The early modules were too information intensive given the level of student expertise and ultimately the teaching of some skills had to be eliminated in preference for basic and lower order skills which are critical in laying a foundation for the subsequent development of higher order skills.

However, the need to concentrate on basic and lower order skills has implications for the continued development of our programme. First year students only receive two hours of IL instruction within the foundation courses. Our challenge beyond the first year is how to create a sustainable product which reaches all intended students and covers all the content critical to producing graduates who possess the skills to be lifelong learners within the time frame of a three-year degree programme. Our experiences over the past two years have reinforced our belief that face-to-face instruction is the optimum approach for the Cave Hill situation. But, these other considerations highlight the fact that in order to effectively respond to these challenges utilizing the technology will be necessary. However, before introducing the technology, remedial training for many students in the use of the technology will have to be given. And, with the increasing number of part-time mature students entering the university, issues of available time, workload and family commitments cannot be ignored especially when the financial costs of the technological solutions are considered.

Conclusion

Significant strides have been made since the inception of the initiative and the experiences and lessons learnt have been invaluable in helping to lay a solid foundation on which to continue development at the campus level. However, over the next year more emphasis will have to be placed on identifying potential collaborative librarian/faculty relationships which can further assist in demonstrating by example the benefits to academic teaching and student research of teaching IL skills. Financial and human resource capacity will be the major challenge we face as we strive to take the programme to the next level. However, while a reality for developing countries this challenge is also an opportunity to unlock our creative potential in the design and development of developing world best practices.

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