Digital Toolbox for New Students

Brief Summary

This case study involved the development of an online resource for international taught students. The resource will help incoming students build up a repertoire of digital academic skills, and help them choose and use these in their future researching tasks.

Context and Background

The study was based on a series of interviews and surveys conducted over the past year with students as well as staff at the university. The focus of the research was the digital experience of international students in taught programmes across departments. The research also provided recommendations to the university as a whole to facilitate the integration of digital skills in academic practice.

The Challenge or Motive

My personal interest in the project stems from my experience as an international student at this university and others around the world. I’m curious about the digital learning approaches from different educational cultures. The ways individuals from particular cultural backgrounds approach the learning process affects how receptive they are to digital integration. I have experience in the British, Canadian, American, Spanish and Israeli education systems. Despite most of these being based in the Anglo-American education tradition, I found that attitudes towards digital learning varied immensely between the countries, at each of the institutional, educator and individual student levels. Ideally, the forthcoming resource will operate in an intercultural context to fill in possible gaps in students’ preparedness while also encouraging them to utilise their unique cultural perspectives to their advantage. Naturally, some of the struggles facing international students affect home students as well.

Like other students I have found interdisciplinarity to be an aspect of the academic experience lacking at the University of Exeter. Several of the other postgraduate students involved in the project raised this as an issue that can be addressed with digital skills and the opportunities for networking between disciplines that they provide.

Currently, digital academic skills provision is dispersed throughout the university’s skills providers and online resources. For example, the Academic Skills Development Team has not in the past provided digital skills assistance to students although it does have a remit for study skills more generally. On the whole, students are seeking help on an ad hoc basis, without awareness of the full range of support available for their studies, or of the diverse applications of digital tools that may be relevant. Therefore,
it was important that the resource was distinguished from existing online tutorials and skills guides by preparing students for their academic journeys in advance.

The Digital Literacy Agenda

The goal for the resource is to provide information to students on the different digital tools and resources available, their relative strengths and weaknesses, and how to successfully find and adopt them.

We found that international students were not confident in accessing and using audio-visual equipment or multimedia resources, despite the potential this has for creative research and visualisation of results. If data capture tools like this were promoted with video demonstrations, students could be encouraged to adopt them in their own research. Additionally, there is little information available for students for academic use of mobile devices. The Exeter CASCADE project is compiling a list of academic apps for research, organisation and data capture which will be featured in the resource and should help to address this need. If students begin to see these tools used for purposes beyond the personal, they will branch out and find their own academic uses for them as well, based on what is suitable for their own studies: creating their own digital scholar’s toolbox.

When looking for information on digital academic resources, students showed that they were most likely to ask a peer or search engine. Therefore, the presentation of the resource will be consistent with cascading skills from one student to another, in keeping with the Students as Change Agents approach. Those videos already existing on the library site will be used where relevant, as students have found them effective. In the areas where new tutorials are required, students rather than librarians will host the videos. Not only may this be a more accessible and engaging way of learning, it could provide incentives for students to explore using video in their own research.

The Project in Practice

The resource is still in development, and is expected to be completed before the start of the 2012/13 academic year. A link will be available from the CASCADE project website. New international students will receive an email one month prior to the start of their course inviting them to use the website in preparation for their studies. We are planning for the International Student Support Office to promote the resource during the academic year by providing links to the resource on its website and in its newsletters. Ideally, home students will be informed of the resource as well, however this has not yet been confirmed.

Benefits and Impacts

Several of the university’s departments have been receptive to the development of the resource as well as the recommendations. I have worked with staff in Student Experience, the International Office and Academic Skills Development in developing this case study, and the resulting recommendations have been fed back to them, as well as the Students’ Guild and library team. Their feedback from the results
has been very positive. Academic Skills Development is keen to implement the recommendation that they include digital skills help along with their other support. The team involved in developing the university’s forthcoming mobile phone app also has taken the recommendations into consideration, and the Head of Academic Policy and Standards said 'This is a really excellent piece of work... I think it has some powerful messages that we must heed'.

When interviewed, home and international students alike were interested in the idea of an online resource to assist in digital skills development. All students interviewed particularly favoured exposing students to the website pre-arrival, noting the enthusiasm incoming students would have for absorbing this information before starting their course.

When the resource is completed, one of the major benefits expected is that it will enhance interdisciplinarity. By exposing students to tools outside their fields, this will hopefully lead to the cascading of digital skills beyond their original settings.

Conclusions

A key finding of the research has been that digital skills must be honed as traditional research skills, not as a replacement. At the moment, the University’s study skills assistance and online material shows a clear divide between the provision of traditional and digital academic methods, favouring the former. This encourages students and staff to view digital skills as something to be developed in isolation rather than as an integrated, complementary part of traditional study and research skills.

It would be ideal to see the University as a whole communicate more between different types of skills provision. The University should consider integrating the sharing of digital skills into the roles of the Academic Skills Advisers. This could include providing help with using digital tools to assist in the effective studying and essay writing practices already provided, or providing training in referencing software use.

I’d also like to see the university increase interdepartmental communication. Events such as guest speakers and conferences should be advertised at a college level rather than departmental. This will improve interdisciplinarity by encouraging collaboration within colleges in planning events and will deliver different perspectives and broader subject matter to students, enhancing their academic experience.