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Information literacy: a matter of course

Elizabeth Tilley, English Faculty Librarian, University of Cambridge

Email: eat21@cam.ac.uk

Keywords

Information management, referencing, embedded teaching, information literacy, co-agency, United Kingdom.

Introduction

The ethos of all Quickstart training programmes at the English Faculty Library (EFL) at the University of Cambridge is one of continual change and refinement. Library staff have successfully implemented a system whereby the majority of first-year undergraduate students attend library training, providing opportunities to constantly improve our knowledge of both student and academic needs. This knowledge allows us to continue to develop information literacy (IL) training programmes which tackle recognised skills or needs of both these groups, but through which we incorporate IL skills. The course analysed below focuses on developing students' ability to manage information but 'switching the focus away from a specific tool or interface and onto the information needs that underlie it' (Secker and Coonan, 2011 p. 32). Evaluation by students of the course content suggests that our method of teaching is successful. Future training courses would hope to build in improved longitudinal evaluation.

Context

The University of Cambridge has many subject-specific libraries; EFL supplies collections and services for students studying English literature. Whilst the ability to focus on one subject seems an advantage, the granularity of information that the Library gains about the subject creates just as many issues for our training content. In Cambridge there is a collegiate system which means EFL staff contact one designated member of academic staff per year group of students from any given college and ask them to book their students into our training.

A recent change in curriculum content in the Faculty, alongside a recognition that students need more support, contributed to this teaching programme. Planned in conjunction with the then Director of Undergraduate Studies, who was responsible for directing and implementing the curriculum change, the Quickstart: Building Bibliographies training for first-year students was devised as part of a bigger project. The project attracted funding from the University's Teaching and Innovation Fund which was used for three interrelated strands focused on enhancing students' knowledge of, and ability to create, primary and secondary author bibliographies. These comprised creating an online literature timeline (EFL 2012), developing online interactive reading list bibliographies and providing backfill for staff to map out the teaching programme.

The course

Understanding what the academics want from their students, and what the students will find most useful, is crucial knowledge for engaging them with any information literacy courses; there is a very fine line between the courses being considered essential, as opposed to just helpful or even worse, detrimental. This is one reason why EFL still opts to give college academic staff the choice about booking their students into our courses. Academics feel strongly that students need to learn to read the text closely, critically evaluate what they read and write with their own 'voice' (Faculty of English, 2014). For the students, time management is high on the agenda, as teaching and the workload at Cambridge during term time is very intensive. The focus within the Building Bibliographies course was promoting time management skills for managing the referencing process within an academic-approved activity. Essentially the context of the session was managing information whilst searching for primary and secondary resources for a specified author. Many higher education institutions are recognising that embedding IL teaching in course modules is the way forward (HEA, 2014). Although our course is a stand-alone one we consider it to be embedded because:

1. College academics regard the courses as part and parcel of the Faculty offering.
2. Teaching about a tool (Zotero in this context) and the 'managing information' content is embedded. Library staff assume no knowledge of Zotero and during the course refer to it as 'a tool we'll use today to store the information we find'. It is simply used in the context of an activity that students are already familiar with, that of searching the catalogue for primary and secondary sources to create an author bibliography. The final task in the course is to create a formatted bibliography.

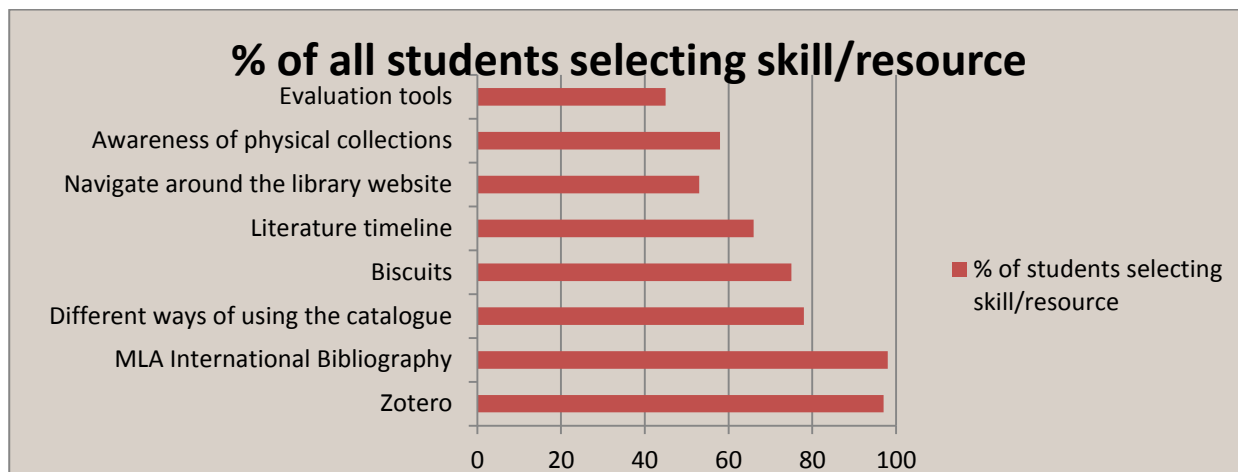
PhD students who have become 'information management converts' co-teach with library staff, which gains the course content credibility (Tilley, 2011). The PhD students help library staff to understand what will engage the students in terms of time management in the context of their concentrated work. For example, a PhD student suggested that students should consider using the Firefox browser with the plugin Zotero as their work browser; but for a Facebook break, switch to Chrome or Safari.

Evaluation

In January 2014, 43 per cent of the first year students (from a cohort of 210) attended the Quickstart: Building Bibliographies course. Survey results indicate that embedding this information management teaching is successful.

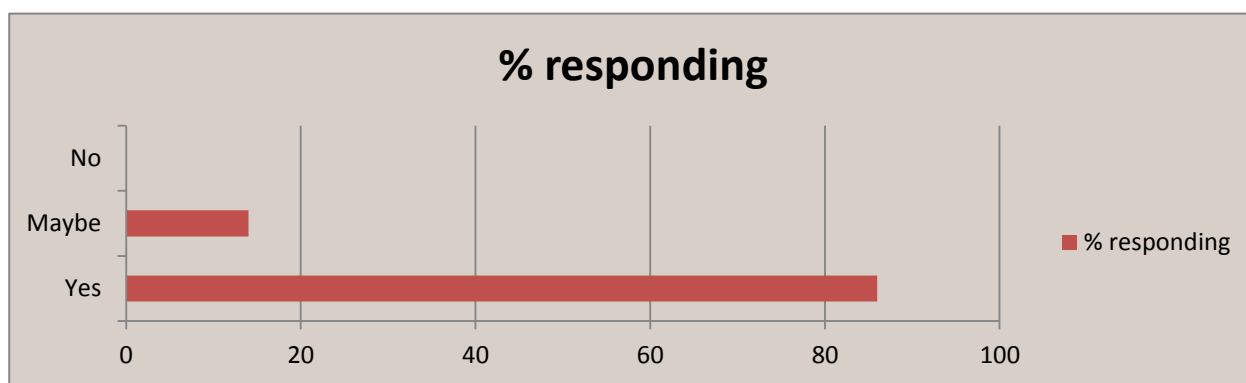
All the resources and skills are included in a post-session survey question: 'We covered different resources and skills in the session today. Tick those that you think are helpful to you at this stage'. Students can select as many resources/skills that they feel were useful. Figure 1 shows the aggregated results of all students attending the course.

Figure 1: Students self-selecting useful skills/resources



A subsequent specific question asked students: “Do you think you’ll use Zotero again in the future?” Figure 2 shows that there is a significant interest in using Zotero for formatting references in bibliographies.

Figure 2: Students’ response to future use of Zotero



The survey results demonstrate that students attending the course understand the usefulness of managing time, and the tools that are available to help with that, in the context of academic workflows.

Conclusions

EFL staff have agreed to continue using college academics to book sessions for their students, however we are faced with some reluctant academics, so further efforts need to be made to engage personally with this group. Increasing academics’ knowledge of the course content is vital to ensure that everyone thinks that the time and effort will be worth it. No matter how interesting and useful library staff think a course might be, we will not gain acceptance and attendance if we do not engage sufficiently with academic staff priorities for teaching and learning.

EFL staff will continue to ensure that a real Zotero user contributes to the course content and delivery. The success we have experienced is, in part, because we don’t announce what we are teaching, we embed and incorporate the use of Zotero as the norm. Staff have also discovered

that using Zotero is a tool that students appreciate learning about; they quickly recognise that library staff are helping them with the skills of referencing and managing information.

In the future longitudinal evaluation will be incorporated to assess the subsequent impact of the training, several months down the line. This will give the Library helpful data in proving the effectiveness of our training to academics, future students and senior management. On the basis of this project, EFL staff will also make use of the successful elements and use them to extend to other courses such as a Quickstart: Part 1 Dissertation course.

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